

**ICONSPADU 2021****International Conference on Sustainable Practices, Development and Urbanisation****EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE TOLERANCE OF  
MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY IN MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract**

Malaysia is a country where people of diverse ethnicity and religion live together in a society for so long, establishing a unique multicultural identity. Nevertheless, the efforts to maintain the harmonious atmosphere is not easy, there are challenges especially in the Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) era, where the development in information and communication technology (ICT) platforms grows rapidly. Some of the digital media facilities offered are not utilised for their intended purpose, instead, they are now used as provocative instruments. Unfortunately, freedom of speech and expression are misinterpreted, leading to ethnic and religion slurs, as well as incitement to hatred. Thus, this study aims to analyse the effect of social media on tolerance in the multicultural society in Malaysia. The study used a survey design by adopting the quantitative method. The set of online questionnaires (Google Form) was distributed to 260 respondents, and the data obtained were subject to inferential analysis using SEM AMOS. The study findings concluded significant impact of social media on tolerance in a multicultural society ( $\beta_2 = 0.568$ ). Thus, all parties need to work together to create a harmonious social ecosystem, while practising self-control in their interaction between communities, especially in the cyberspace.

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*Keywords:* Communication, harmony, multicultural, social media, tolerance



## 1. Introduction

Social interaction between multicultural communities, such as the one in Malaysia, is often in a strained state. The nature of human beings as the beings of conflict (*homo conflictus*) results in a long-lasting disagreement, competition, and clash of opinions between each other (Novri, 2014). In the context of a multicultural society in Malaysia, conflict is certainly inevitable. However, effective conflict management can help to produce positive outcome by mobilising great ideas and actions to gain a better quality of life. This in a way helps to steer clear of unfavourable conflicts such as hostility, hatred, stereotyping, collision, and violence (Mohd Anuar et al., 2018). The nature of multicultural relation in Malaysia shows that ethnicity and religion are not the main factors that can spark a conflict between communities. On the other hand, there are factors such as socioeconomic imbalance and the weakness of the government to come up with an inclusive policy to address the issues stemming from some parties that manipulate some issues related to ethnic and religious for the sake of provoking conflict and tension in the society (Chamil, 2007).

Advancement of today's technology makes room for a higher level of freedom of speech. This does affect the level of perception and participation of general public in the current affairs. All government policies are heavily discussed in many arenas, including on social media. In fact, this is a sign of people awareness of the current changes and developments. Nevertheless, the lack of control and integrity values contributes to the spread of negative perceptions, which have the potential to trigger negative sentiment among the citizens. Extreme attitude and provocative approaches in dealing with such issues have become a threat to the integrity and harmony of the multicultural society in Malaysia. Abuse of social media for such unethical purposes requires serious attention. This is because the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia is the key to social wellbeing and economic prosperity.

### 1.1. Social Media in Digital Era

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 has contributed to the rapid development in information and communication technology (ICT). The advance of many online applications and social media platforms has had positive effects on human life. However, this development implicitly causes negative impacts on the virtual citizens, especially the misuse of facilities to conduct activities that violate the ethics of consumerism and civil law. Among them are cyberbullying, dissemination of false information, defamation and misleading information, as well as online transaction fraud. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cases of online abuse have increased due to the people's reliance on the internet to communicate and carry out business following the Movement Control Order (MCO) enforced by the government. The MCO, which was introduced on 18 March 2020, has initiated a new norm among the Malaysians, including the use of social media and online applications for various purposes and needs. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported a drastic increase in demand for broadband since the implementation of the MCO as business activities, learning, conferences, and meetings are conducted at home during this period. Compliance with the MCO implemented saw the increase in internet traffic flow by 23.5% nationwide during the first week of MCO, which then further increased by 8.6% in the second week (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2020).

Social media is an open space that enable anyone to leave their comments. Users can provide their insights into a broad range of issues, either the trivial matters, entertainment and sports, to serious issues such as matters related to politics, economics and religion. There are users who do not observe the ethics in communication and etiquette of making conversation. They are free to comment without manners and regard on other users' account even if those who are criticised are strangers to the point of tarnishing the victim's dignity and reputation. Likewise, with too much information, users tend to easily receive and spread false information, slander, and gossip on a widespread basis. Such action leads to consequences and to the detriment of other people's name. These findings are consistent with the media effects model which states that media potentially influences an individual's tendencies and behaviours (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). It is also in line with the online disinhibition effect that states in digital ecosystems, individuals generally tend to express feelings and perform any activity independently without tight control (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Suler, 2004). This situation has indirectly encouraged aggressive behaviour towards others (Espelage et al., 2013).

## **1.2. Social Media and Its Effect on Societal Tolerance**

The General Conference of UNESCO in 1995 deems the values of tolerance as portraying true respect, acceptance and understanding of the cultural diversity worldwide, be it in the form of self-expression and personal acts of an individual (Declaration of Principles of Tolerance, 2020). Weldon (2003) defines the concept of tolerance in a multicultural society as 'to tolerate the content of that expression and the willingness to actually embrace the cultural and ethnic differences.' For Walzer (1997), tolerance involves a high level of acceptance, a desire to know, celebrate differences of opinion and respect the diversity that exists in the society. Thus, ethnic tolerance refers to an individual's acceptance of other ethnicities as well as the ability to work and live together as a society (Budi Anto et al., 2020). This tolerance can be realised through a variety of means such as initiating close relationships, acceptance as a family member, or via non-family relationships that include social, economic, and political interactions.

Melnichuk (2018) states that the effectiveness of tolerance is influenced by two aspects, namely patience in relationships and peace in action. Harsh reactions as well as rejecting the value of diversity can be deemed as discrimination. This kind of discrimination can get worse, such as xenophobia (fear and disgust of anything different) or radicalism (violent reaction towards something different). Lektorsky (1997) explains that intolerant personality traits are characterised by rejection of different cultures, traditions, values, behavioural and communicative models. It is also portrayed through the acts of disrespect for the habits and beliefs of others. This act is beyond the bounds of justice because religious, racial, and gender diversity is a universal norm that needs to be respected by everyone on the earth.

Such values of tolerance are not only practised in the real world, but also adapted on digital platforms. Social medias such as Facebook, Whatsapp, and Twitter have become the most influential communication medium nowadays. Communication and information sharing occur in a broad scale with no geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the lack of consumer civic awareness and self-control can lead to unethical behaviour. A study by Wasserman (2018) found that the use of internet by individuals with limited intellectual capability would put them at risk of indecent behaviour. Lu and Yu (2018) in turn

concluded that the poor security control on the internet and the absence of responsible moderators for social media content do affect social harmony among the public. Sometimes, the fast and free access cause some users to lose their judgment and engage in unethical behaviour such as cyberbullying, hate speech, sedition, and racist provocation. There are also those who attempt to uphold the value of tolerance in the wrong context by making fun of sensitive issues and regard such act as entertainment to gain popularity on the social media. Thus, all parties are responsible to ensure social media remains as a platform to foster understanding and unity, instead of leading to division and squabble.

### 1.3. Multicultural Society: The Reality in Malaysia

Current technological developments have witnessed increased access to the use of digital media in society. Indeed, social media has a positive impact, however from another angle, the abuse of freedom by certain parties who touch on sensitive and provocative issues involving race and religion has created tension in the society, besides triggering the digital conflict. Looking at the statistics of this country in 2020, three of the four major religions in Malaysia reflect a certain ethnic dominance that exceeds 90% – Islam (Malays: 90.1%), Buddhism, (Chinese: 97.8%), and Hinduism (Indians: 98.7%). Christianity is more prominent in Sabah and Sarawak, which is dominated by other Bumiputera races such as Iban and Kadasan-Dusun, contributing to 64.7% of the total Christians in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Such interconnection makes it easier to manipulate sensitive issues involving race and religion, which are fuelled by certain parties to push their agendas without contemplating the resulting conflicts and tensions that may arise.

In Malaysia, the level of tension between ethnicities and religions shall be measured via the Societal Stress Index (SSI). SSI is an indicator used by the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN) to observe the level of social tension in Malaysia, which is portrayed by the acts that stem from or triggered by violence, riots, demonstrations, protests, attacks, fights, and issues reported on the social media and mass media, putting unity in jeopardy. SSI helps JPNIN to understand the situation in the country and its long-term impact on ethnic relations, stability, and prosperity of the nation. The monitoring effort carried out by JPNIN through SSI will be communicated to the government so that intervention measure can be taken to defuse the tension.

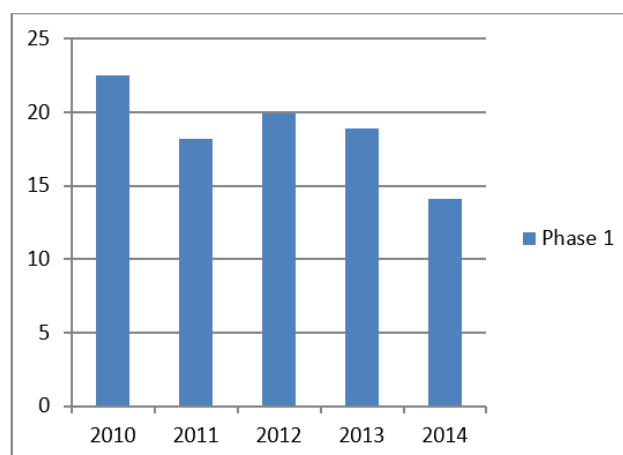
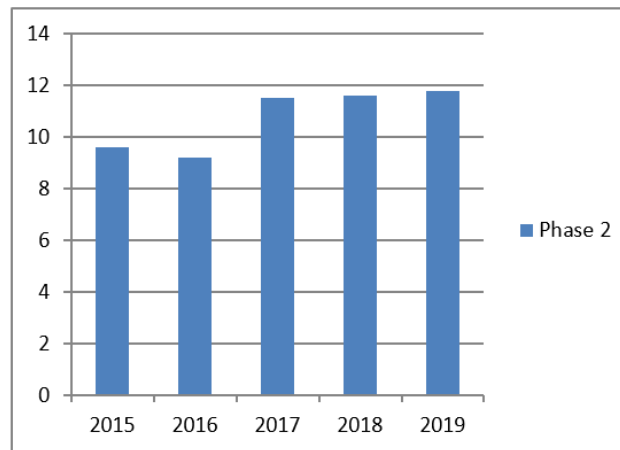


Figure 1. Societal Stress Index (Phase 1)



**Figure 2.** Societal Stress Index (Phase 2)

Based on the JPNIN report, there is a significant decline from the Phase 1 (2010-2014) to the Phase 2 (2015-2019). The first phase showed a high rate with the average SSI of 22 but the rate decreased in the second phase, with an average of 12.7. However, the decline is not the true reflection of harmonious relationship between people of different races and religions. This is because the indicator used by JPNIN emphasises on the incidents due racial tension such as riots and demonstrations, without considering the strain that exists on social media. That is why JPNIN has planned to improve the index in the future so that the sensitive issues discussed on the social media sites can be incorporated in the index.

According to the 2020 Global Peace Index Report, Malaysia is ranked 20th in the world out of 160 countries, with the drop of 4 places from the previous year's position. From another perspective, Malaysia is ranked in the 5th position in the Asia Pacific region and 2nd in the Southeast Asian region, losing to Singapore. Looking at the country's achievements from 2011 to 2020, it turns out that Malaysia's best performance is being the 16th back in 2019. Of the three domains outlined, the country's achievements are significantly influenced by internal conflict and political instability. The uniqueness of Malaysia lies on its identity as a nation with multicultural society. The works to maintain peace and harmony are not an easy feat, especially with the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, when most of social interactions have transformed to the digital ones. However, in conjunction with 6 decades of independence, proper initiatives shall be mobilised to address the digital conflict between ethnicities and religions in Malaysia for the purpose to improve the current peace index of this country. In fact, the aim is to create a more secure, peaceful, and stable society despite the global challenges.

## 2. Problem Statement

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 has brought massive changes to the digital world, as well as leaving a great impact on the social interaction pattern in the society. Based on the statistics of the Global Internet Use in 2019, 26.4 million people or 80.7% of Malaysians out of the total 32.7 million population are internet users. The use of internet is focused on the latest social medias such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Whatsapp. Nevertheless, the advances in technology and internet access that increase

steadily somehow contribute to unhealthy symptoms among netizens of the digital space. The symptoms include espionage and cyberbullying, the spread of defamation and fake news, comments that are deemed vulgar and hate speech, besides inciting racial and religious sentiments. A study conducted by UiTM and MCMC found that almost 80% of the contents on social media nowadays sound racist.

This has prompted the government to introduce the Religious and Racial Hate Act to put an end to the ongoing insults which are now rampant against race and religion (Berita Harian, 2018). In the meantime, the government is in the midst of granting the full authority to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to delete any posts pertaining to false information, defamation, and racism on social media (Astro Awani, 2019). This action is an initiative taken to address the growing abuse of social media. The economic downturn that takes place due to the COVID-19 pandemic and political turmoil in the country at the end of February 2020 have set the country's political temperature to rise. The popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become a medium of debate and provocation on current issues, especially those related to race and religion.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) reported 266 investigation papers were opened in the first six months of 2020, some of them are pertaining to the sedition offences and spread of fake or seditious news. Out of the total, 172 cases are still under investigation, while those being charged in 30 other cases have been prosecuted in court, 12 have been issued with warning notices, 13 cases have been brought to trials and for 17 cases, the defendants pleaded guilty (Harian Metro, 2020). According to the Minister of Home Affairs, Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin, there is a drastic increase of cases compared to the last three years, with only 78 cases (2019), 31 cases (2018), and 9 cases (2017). These cases seem to spark anxiety and unrest among the public, especially when it comes to the sensitive issues with regards to the royal institutions, race, religion, position of privileges and rights protected by the Federal Constitution. Based on the issues that are highlighted, this requires a proper draft with the initiative to create a harmonious digital ecosystem, so that it remains as a civilised social interaction platform for the multicultural society in Malaysia. Indeed, this is crucial to ensure the concept of 'Unity in Diversity' as has been proposed by the government becomes a reality.

### **3. Research Questions**

This study focuses on the impact of social media on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. Thus, the research question of this study related to:

- a) What is the pattern of relationships between multicultural societies in Malaysia?
- b) To what extent does social media, especially in the cyber platforms affect tolerance of the multicultural society in Malaysia?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to identify the impact of social media on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia. To be specific this research based on the social media's perspective to gain some vital evidence on actualised affordances. The study concludes that social media is a major communication platform and has the potential to influence the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia.

## **5. Research Methods**

### **5.1. Research Design**

The research is the quantitative survey type of research. The link to the online survey was distributed through social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Email. By using social media platforms, it easy to reach the public as the study is focused on public response.

### **5.2. Sampling Technique**

The study used a convenient sampling technique which was nonprobability sampling. According to Lavrakas (2008), in non-probability sampling, the population may not be well denned, and the non-probability sampling is often divided into three categories which are purposive, convenience, and quota sampling. The study used a convenience sampling technique where the target respondents were among the youths in various category, which were workers in government and private sector, self-employed, housewives, students, and also unemployed. The total number of respondents for the survey was 260.

### **5.3. Research Measurement**

The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions included with the demographic section. The questionnaire was related to the research objectives of the research. The questions were used ordinal, nominal, and scale to measure the data. The data were key-in in the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS). The questions were reliable and valid which makes it the respondents were easy to understand and answer the questions.

### **5.4. Data Analysis**

The method used for data analysis was through Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) software version 23. The data analysis procedure was included creating the survey stage, pilot test, and data transferring. The survey or questionnaire was created with the questions that were related to the research objectives of the research. The questionnaire was distributed to the first 40 respondents in order to identify the reliability of the research. The survey was continued to complete the data of 260 responses and the data collected transferred to SPSS software for analysis and finding purposes. Structural Equation Modelling was used to evaluate the structural model. The structural model test involves calculating the path coefficients, which show the strength of the connections between the dependent and independent variables, as well as calculating the R-square value, which represents the amount of variation explained by the independent variables. The path coefficients in the SEM model represent standardized regression coefficients. The structural model reflecting the assumed linear, causal relationships among the constructs was tested with the data collected from the validated measures.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics are presented in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	111	42.7
	Female	149	57.3
Age	15 - 25	219	84.2
	26 - 35	22	8.5
	36 - 45	12	4.6
	> 45	7	2.7
Race	Malay	45	17.3
	Chinese	75	28.8
	Indian	49	18.8
	Sabah ethnic	63	24.2
	Sarawak ethnic	24	9.3
	Indigenous people	4	1.6
Religion	Buddha	62	23.8
	Hindu	39	15.0
	Islam	47	18.1
	Christian	108	41.5
	Sikh	11	.4
	Tao	1	.4
	Irreligion	2	.8
Marital Status	Married	37	14.2
	Single	223	85.8
Education	PMR/PT3	6	2.3
	SPM/STPM/Sijil/Diploma	174	66.9
	Degree	77	29.6
	Master/PhD	3	1.2
Residence area	Urban	177	68.1
	Rural	83	31.9
Interaction with different races	Rare	82	31.5
	Frequent	173	66.5
	Never	5	1.9

Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic profile of the sample. 260 respondents participated in the survey, with 111 of them males and 149 females. 84.2 percent of the respondents, or 219 of them, are between the age of 15-25, 8.5 per cent of the respondents, or 22 of them, are between 26-35, 4.6 per cent of the respondents, or 12 of them, are between 36-45, and the remaining 2.7 per cent of the students, 7 of them, are aged between above 45 years. 28.8 percent or 75 of the respondents are Chinese followed by ethnic Sabah with 24.2 percent or 63 of them. The survey revealed that more than 40% of the respondents



are Christian. Most of the respondents are single. have been educated to college or higher education level: 2.6% are STPM, 3.6% are Matriculation, 2.6% are pre-diploma, and 59.8% diploma holders, while 32% have bachelor's degrees. In addition, 66.5% of the respondents interact with individuals of different races/religions, and 94.2% have not read, heard, or know anything about another religion.

## 6.2. The Impact of Social Media on Tolerance in The Society

Positive interaction between individuals in a multicultural society helps to reduce prejudice and increase a sense of togetherness (Ahmad et al., 2018). According to Langer (1978), the diversity of social interactions facilitates active thinking and stimulates the intellectual development of an individual. In a complex social structure, having the experience to interact with strangers and getting to know community members from different backgrounds are good steps to build tolerance. Social media is an influential platform that can serve as a great communication tool to realise this goal. However, according to Fasil (2013), there are two social media elements that can affect tolerance level, namely Information Overload (IO) and Error in Perception (EP). Thus, this study focuses on the effect of these two elements on the tolerance (TOL) of multicultural society in Malaysia. Figure 1 shows the results of the analysis. The square multiple correlations for the structural equations index indicate that 53% of the variation in the dependent variable is explained by the variation in the independent variables.

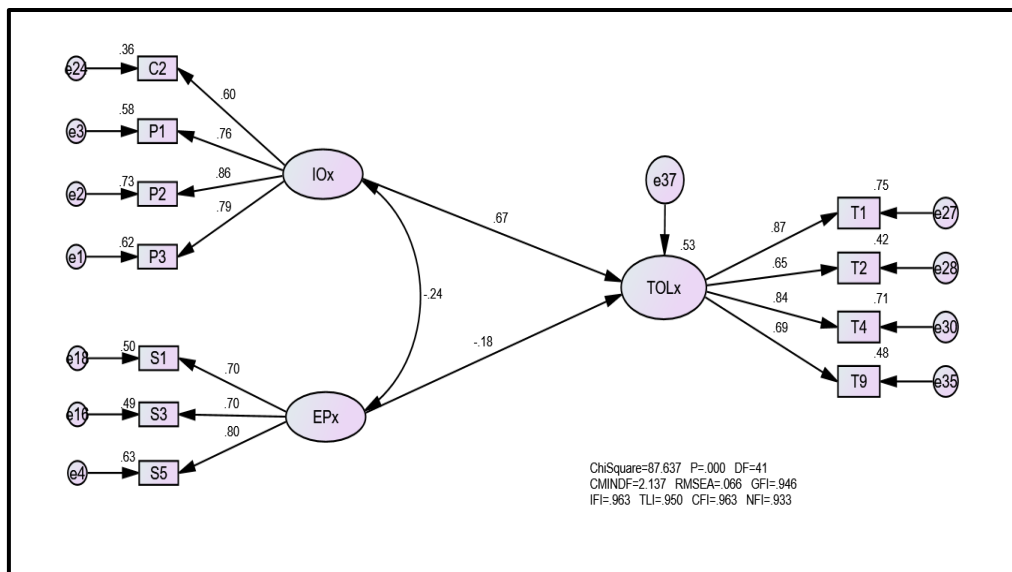


Figure 3. Anova Analysis

Properties of the causal paths (standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), standard error, p-value, and hypotheses result) are shown in Table 2. Anova analysis are the following (table 2):

Table 2. Result Of Hypotheses Test

	Path	$\beta$	S.E.	P	Result
H1	TOLx <--- IOx	-.150	.054	.006	Supported
H2	TOLx <--- EPx	.568	.059	***	Supported

Notes: Path = Relationship between independent variable on dependent variable;  
 $\beta$  = Standardized regression coefficient; S.E. = Standard error; p = Level of significance

The effect of information overload on the tolerance of multicultural society in Malaysia was significant at 0.05 level ( $\beta_1 = -0.150$ ), as presented in Table 2 and Figure 1. Aspect error in perception also had significant influence on the tolerance of multicultural society ( $\beta_2 = 0.568$ ). Thus, this study found that there was a significant effect of social media on the tolerance of multicultural society. This finding is in line with the Contact Theory by Allport (1954), who highlighted negative stereotyping and prejudice in a multicultural society stem from poor communication, lack of knowledge and overload of false information associated with other individuals. Thus, an effective method to combat conflict can be implemented by encouraging ongoing interaction in a harmonious manner besides practising self-control and self-preservation to avoid any unethical behaviour from taking place (Schlossberg, 1984).

In short, to nurture a positive racial integration, every individual in a multicultural society needs to be civilised in social interaction with others. According to the Theory of Beliefs, discrimination and racial stereotyping have something to do with prejudice and negative preconception between multicultural communities (Rokeach & Mezei, 1966). Religious, cultural, racial, and gender differences are exploited to create division rather than unity (Hamilton, 2007). In fact, Malaysia is an accomplished country with a good track record in maintaining peace in a diverse society. Every human being has a special place regardless of ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender. Thus, the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and unity must be inculcated in every individual so that those of diverse backgrounds can embrace the differences and coexist on the good terms (Abdullah, 2009).

## **7. Conclusion**

The use of social media is deemed crucial for each member of the society, especially in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era. Yet, such unethical practices would expose the users to abuse of social media for the purposes that violate social norms and the rule of law. The great relationship established in the multicultural society of Malaysia shall always be maintained so that everyone can enjoy social harmony in the community. This requires cooperation of all parties in its entirety to foster integration process for nation development. The willingness to share and adhere to admirable virtues and norms shall be deeply ingrained in every human being to reach a compromise across racial and religious boundaries. Thus, the ethical use of social media plays an important role in translating the value of diversity that has long existed in Malaysia in a solid and integrated manner. Any threats that are deemed to ruin the foundation of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding must be eradicated without delay, either via campaigns and dialogues or law enforcement to retain the stability and harmony of the multicultural society in Malaysia regardless of ethnicities and religious beliefs.

## **Acknowledgments**

This paper is one of the research output made for fulfilling the TEJA Research Grant requirement under the project entitled, 'Cross-Cultural Practices in a Pluralistic Society in Melaka' numbered GDT2021/1-4.

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