

Unscrambling Determinants of Islamic Retail Experiential Value (IREV) at Indian Muslim Food Retail Outlets: A Focus Group Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Retail experiences can represent either a hedonic or utilitarian value in the experience consumption. For Muslim customers, their perception, evaluation and emotions in experience consumption are influenced by Islamic Values through the centrality of faith. Therefore, retail food outlets need to deliver suitable concept anticipated by Muslim customers which are religiously conscientious. Based on the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) paradigm, this qualitative study aims to explore Muslim customers experience in food consumption. The focus group technique was conducted to produce an in-depth understanding of the topic, with ‘environmental stimuli’ and ‘customer emotions’ were the main themes being discussed in the context of Indian Muslim restaurant. There were two groups of respondents in this study; the Millennials and Gen Xs who resided in Klang Valley and this paper summarizes the main findings from this focus group analysis. Among others, it was found that the components of Islamic Values embedded in the Muslim customer’s spirituality have inspired Islamic Retail Experiential Value theory building.

Keywords: Emotional states, environmental stimuli, Muslim customers, retail experience

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INTRODUCTION

Islam is the predominant religion in Malaysia and Islamic values dictate Muslim customers into complying with the principles of *Halal* (lawful) and *Haram* (unlawful) in food consumption. Malaysia constitutes of diverse culture and multilingual society, thus, increasingly with the resurgence of greater

Islamic faith, the phenomenon of eating at Indian-Muslim restaurants or famously known as “Mamak” restaurants has gained hypersensitivity among Malaysian Muslims, as to whether it is safe and trustworthy according to *Sharia*’ law.

In a survey conducted by Ahmad, Abaidah, and Yahya (2013), they concluded that Malaysian Muslims had taken it for granted that all foods produced and marketed in Malaysia are *halal*. Therefore, to explore further the above assertion, this study was targeted at Malaysian Muslim urbanites in Klang Valley, as urbanization has encouraged the residents to practice dining out lifestyle (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). The researchers had selected Indian Muslim food outlets in the context of this study due to the business expansion, which was reported to reach 7500 premises in the whole country in Malaysia and is fast becoming a favourite eatery among Malaysians across race, gender and age (Bakar & Farinda, 2012). Another reason for this selection is, a prior research conducted by Shari, Khalique and Malek (2013) had highlighted the unethical business practices by Indian Muslim restaurant operators in some areas in northern Malaysia. They pointed out that, in order to attract Muslim customers, these restaurants portrayed the Islamic identity by using Islamic-signalled brand names, displaying Quranic verses and employing Muslim look-alike workforce. Furthermore, there were also incidences where these restaurants displayed fake *halal* logos and thus, did not meet the criteria of a *halal* compliant restaurant.

The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, is to explore Muslim customer experience through identifying their emotions towards environmental stimuli.

This study adapts the Stimuli-Organism-Response paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) as underpinning theory to investigate predictors of behaviour, and assumes emotion is dependent on stimuli. The S-O-R paradigm will explicate the relationship between environment stimuli, retail experience and emotional outcomes. The focus group technique was deployed to facilitate the research framework.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) theory (S-O-R paradigm) was used for environmental psychology studies. The idea was later extended to measure emotional states. They applied three dimensions, Pleasure, Arousal and Dominance (P-A-D) to represent the emotional effects and measured the effect of physical stimuli on a variety of behaviours. The physical stimuli encompassed all things that were generally understood in retail environment namely products, brands, logos, furniture, fittings and design layout. Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined stimuli as “cues” which ideally trigger positive cognition and emotional responses from the customer. When considering the relations, it begins with a customer who processes the stimuli, interpreting them as inputs in association with their knowledge, beliefs and values (Spena, Carida & Melia, 2012). The

proposition states that retailers could create experiences by developing an interplay between environmental stimuli and social interactions during service encounters.

Indeed, Ali and Amin (2014) acknowledged the importance of the environment stimuli in determining customer experiences in the travel and

hospitality industry. They asserted that customers who have higher perceptions of the physical stimuli are more likely to have positive emotions, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Figure 1 illustrates the relational bond between environmental stimuli, emotional states and behavioral intention under S-O-R theory.

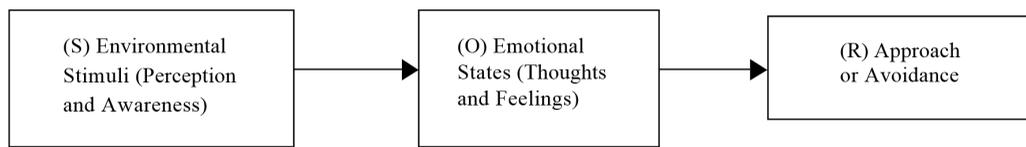


Figure 1. The Stimulus-Organism-Response

Source: (SOR) Paradigm (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974)

According to Sachdeva and Goel (2015), customer experience is a journey composed of variety of environmental components which can trigger customer emotionally, physically and intellectually. Knee (2002) concurred that retail customer experience consists of environmental factors, emotional dimensions involving five senses and functioning of the retail outlets.

Emotion is recognized as a complex state of feeling that results in physical and psychological changes that intelligently guide customer thinking and behaviour. In emotion theory (Izzard, 2009), emotions are driven by experiential or feeling components. The principles explained the sequence of events first involves a stimulus, followed by the thought which then leads to the experience of a physiological response. The spectrum of feelings is a medium of a consumer judgment where they

make a decision based on senses in their surroundings which immediately operating their emotions as a valuable signal (Pham, 2004). In a retail setting, environment act as a mechanism for interaction between a retailer and its customers (Same & Larimo, 2012), in where the environment could stimulate customer emotional experience.

Given that, retail customer experience is understood as customer's perception and interaction, through each touch point in the retail settings; experiential value could be an aggregation of interactive, relative, preferred, personalized and it could change as experiences accumulate. To conceptualize experience-based value, Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon (2001) developed a scale, expressing as a perceived, relativistic preference, implying a holistic assessment of the experience arising from interaction within a consumption setting. They typified experiential value

into four quadrants along two dimensions of value, the utilitarian (intrinsic) versus hedonic (extrinsic) values in consumption. The hedonic (intrinsic) value relates to experiential perspective anticipated from the feelings whereas utilitarian (extrinsic) value tends to serve the consumption needs. The Experiential Values Scale (EVS) for hedonic composed of Playfulness and Aesthetics while the utilitarian is composed of Consumer Return on Investment (CROI)

and Service Excellence.

In the typology that described the degree of individual participation, it indicates that a customer act as a viewer (active) or a receiver (participative) during the interaction in a manipulation of an environment. Subsequently, four distinct types of experiential values were shown as in Figure 2.

Despite the growing body of research in experiential value, this exploratory study

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Active Value</i>	<i>Reactive Value</i>
<i>Intrinsic (Hedonic)</i>	(i) Playfulness	(ii) Aesthetics
<i>Extrinsic (Utilitarian)</i>	(iii) Customer Return on Investment (CROI)	(iv) Service Excellence

Figure 2. Typology of Experiential Value Scale by Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon (2001)

is the initial phase of the research process to enhance the body of knowledge in understanding Muslim customer behaviour particularly in restaurant services and how Islamic Values determine retail experiential value. Moreover, at present, the current focus of experiential value literatures is centred on the conventional customer, whereas the assumption underlying the plausible theory is, Muslim consumers behaviour are established upon the Islamic Values dimensions This value can be explained through a link to God (Allah) commands and build through the Islamic faith, belief and practices Likewise, Sandiki (2011) writes that Islamic Values has been regarded as a common descriptor that explains and predicts the behaviour of Muslim customers.

Therefore, this study addresses the

gap in the literature by exploring Muslim customer cognitive and emotive in a restaurant retail setting. To provide a strong foundation, the researchers began by conducting focus group discussions to unscramble the determinants of Islamic Retail Experiential Value.

In this discussion, the panels represent Malaysian Muslim restaurant patrons, and they were given an opportunity to express their emotions and share experiences over the credibility, integrity and reputation of Indian Muslim restaurants in Malaysia as an Islamic restaurant.

METHODS

This study emphasized on two themes, which were restaurant environment stimuli and Muslim emotional states. In this context, the researchers explored the complexity

surrounding food services to give a better understanding of the theoretical framework and to bring meaning to a phenomenon (Descombe, 2010). According to Krueger (1998), a focus group is a technique to be used in the preliminary stages of a study to evaluate and obtain information. This exploratory investigation was carried out in October, 2015 and moderated by two facilitators to draw upon the feelings, beliefs, experiences, opinions and reactions in patronizing Indian Muslim restaurant (Mamak) in Malaysia. The panels were asked to share their experience to help to unravel some new points regarding the topic being studied. To begin the process, the researchers outlined the criteria for the eligibility of the participants as being Malaysian Muslims whose characteristics include regularly frequenting the Indian Muslim restaurants. The panels were recruited through screening sessions based on the likelihood of visiting more than three times in a month and recently visited in less than seven days before the discussion took

place. The respondents were segregated into two; Group A, the Millennials; those born between the years of 1981 and 2000 and Group B, the Gen X's; those born between the years of 1965 to 1980. It was reported that Millennials is a key customer segment for food service in term of market size, lifestyle and consumption habits, while the Gen Xs which is more towards family oriented (The Nielsen Global Generational Lifestyles, 2015). The participants were mainly residents from Shah Alam, Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley areas. Researchers noted that Millennials and Gen X's are having different motives to patronize the Indian Muslim Restaurants, as tabulated in Table 1.

The focus group sessions were conducted in a classroom environment, and panels were furnished with guideline scripts and materials related to this study. The main questions/issues posed to them were inspired by S-O-R theory as in Table 2.

Table 1
Focus group demographic profile and motives

Respondents Profiles	Group A: The Millennials (8 respondents)	Group B: Gen X's (9 Respondents)
Gender		
Male	3	4
Female	5	5
Occupation		
Professional	1	3
Semi- Skilled	4	5
Students	3	0
Others	0	1
Status		

Table 1 (continue)

Respondents Profiles	Group A: The Millennia's (8 respondents)	Group B: Gen X's (9 Respondents)
Single	6	2
Married	2	7
Motive	More likely for social gatherings, meeting friends and pleasure (Hedonic)	More likely for eating purposes (Utilitarian)
Number of visits in a month	3-10 times	3-5 times
Reasons to visit	Affordable, decent seating, and easy to access at any time	Moderate price and varieties of dishes

Table 2

Focus group open ended questions based on S-O-R theory

Stimuli (S)	(O) Emotional States	(R) Response
1) What do you screen first before you decide to patronize any Indian Muslim Restaurant?	1) Why Islamic Value becomes an important factor to you in deciding places to eat?	1) What are your responses when you feel positive after consuming food in your favourite restaurant ? restaurant?
2) What are the Islamic environmental attributes you perceived in an Indian Muslim restaurant ?	2) From your experience, describe your feeling when you patronize in an Islamic oriented restaurant.	2) Describe your future intentions in patronizing a restaurant that has fulfilled your expectations.

Each participant was given time to suggest and share their opinions, and this was followed by an open discussion. The focus group sessions were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed by the researchers as the panels' feedback could guide researchers in developing questionnaires.

PRESENTATIONS OF DATA FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The findings were focused into two themes; First, the environmental stimuli and second, the emotional states.

As the participants of this research had

individual belief and experiences, every opinion was clearly articulated and voices of every participant were diligently noted. At the end, Group A and Group B identified ten indicators of environmental stimuli in an Indian Muslim restaurant (Figure 3).

As exemplified in the histogram, majority of the respondent cited indicated *Halal* & certification as the prominent reason in patronizing Indian Muslim Restaurants in Malaysia.

To interpret it, *Halal* certification represents the compliance that the restaurant food comes from the legitimate sources, safe

Determinants of Islamic Retail Experiential Value at Food Retail Outlets

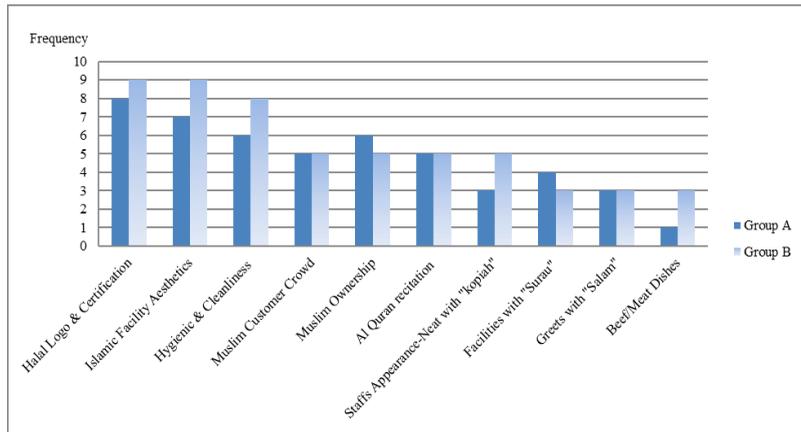


Figure 3. Histogram of environmental stimuli by focus group

and pure according to the *Sharia* law. This finding corresponded with a study made by Ibrahim and Othman (2013) indicated *Halal* is one of the most influential aspect in determining food service quality, customer loyalty and satisfaction. In addition, a research in Muslim preference towards food consumption conducted by Salleh, Suki and Sondoh (2012) has elucidated that Muslim customers rank their highest preference on the *Halal* logo, followed by hygienic handling, product safety, Islamic friendly outlet, Islamic friendly workforce, location, Muslim owned and Muslim crowd.

The second highest determinant was Islamic facility aesthetics .Facility aesthetics described as the architectural design, interior design, décor that reflect the overall attractiveness of the restaurant environment. Enhances the religious experience. Hence, the panels mentioned that the Indian Muslim restaurant name, signage, furniture and fittings represent the facility aesthetics features. According

to Ryu and Jang (2008), facility aesthetics was significant antecedent of customers' pleasure, arousal and influence behavioural intention. To align with Islam, Mohamed and Resay (2008) claimed that features such as Islamic signage, slogans, calligraphic and Islamic decoration are among the retail design that could stimulate Muslim to consume. Indeed, this claims and beliefs are also found in our study.

The third highest determinant ranked by the panels were cleanliness or hygiene. Hence, the respondents distinguished two types of cleanliness; one related to human workforce; and the second related to the restaurant environment such as equipment, utensils, furniture used in the dining area, kitchen and the toilets. From an Islamic standpoint, cleanliness is part of Muslim faith, and when the panels were questioned about hygiene or cleanliness, they had similar opinions that cleanliness is a critical point when patronizing a restaurant. The objective of hygiene and cleanliness is to ensure that the foods served in the

restaurant are clean, pure and not harmful to human health.

Further, the panels debated on the issue of the diversity of the workforce who serve at the Indian Muslim restaurant. This issue received attention as it was very subjective to differentiate the restaurant owner’s, the chef’s and the waiter’s religion. However, the respondents claimed that workers appearance with decent Islamic clothing would denote that the restaurant is an Islamic oriented restaurant. Other than that, the panels highlighted tangible and intangible stimuli in the restaurant such as the composition of Muslim customers, Muslim owned restaurant, appropriate entertainment, prayer area, Islamic greetings and type of dishes served which connotes the elements of Islamic Values in

restaurant retail setting.

To comprehend the essence of the discussion, the second theme discussed on the relational bond between environmental stimuli and emotional states. Table 3 retrieved statements quoted from Group A and B which enlightened the panels’ perception along four highest determinants of environmental stimuli and customer emotions in consuming at the Indian Muslim Restaurants.

Giving the above sentiments, the researchers initiated the potential construct of Islamic Retail Experiential Value theory was associated with elements of Islamic Values imbued in Muslim spirituality. It has been proven from the panels in-depth emotions as indication of their faith and beliefs. The sentiment of fear, guilt and

Table 3
Environmental stimuli based on focus group perception

Key descriptor	Group A and Group B responses
<i>Halal</i> logo and Certification	<p>“... <i>Halal</i> is a core factor that firstly come across my mind before deciding to eat at the Indian Muslim Restaurant. As a Muslim, I am concern whatever goes into my body must come from the right sources because it will affect my spirit and soul.”</p> <p>“..I frequently visit a restaurant that is familiar to me, my friends and family that display a genuine <i>Halal</i> logo. There will be no return if I feel doubt and uncertain, I will not recommend to others because it pay my trust.”</p> <p>“... I will seek for <i>Halal</i> logo first, then the Islamic atmosphere and Muslim workers, living in the urban area with mix ethnicity sometimes requires me to be extra careful when it comes to food intake because it influences my worship to Allah...”</p>
Facility Aesthetics	<p>“..My decision goes into the restaurant image, name, signage, decorations, facilities and the environment before I decide to enter and eat ..”</p> <p>tthevisit the restaurant...”</p>
Cleanliness	<p>“..Every restaurant must monitor their hygienic and cleanliness in food handling, cooking, processing, toilets etc. I will not come to a restaurant which does not meet my expectations...”</p>
Customer Crowd	<p>“.. I will look at the overall atmosphere, the scents, the smell, physical surroundings and whether the restaurant has many Muslim patrons...”</p>

hope expressed by members in the panel is the evidence of the spiritual characteristics as illustrated in Table 4.

At the end of the sessions, the panels voiced their concerns of a few Indian

Muslim restaurateurs in Malaysia who still practiced the Indian rituals and this lead to a question or somewhat ambiguous as to whether the food dished up is truly *Halal* or not.

Table 4
Environmental stimuli based on focus group perception

Group A & B Responses	Elements Of Spiritual Characteristics
<p>“... I rather not to buy at all if no choice available even though I feel very hungry. In Islam mentioned that non acceptance of 40 days supplication if we consume prohibited food and beverages... “</p> <p>“... As a Muslim I feel secure and I enjoyed the food with great pleasure when I confident the restaurant is <i>halal certified restaurant</i>...”</p> <p>“.. I will choose a restaurant which belongs to Muslim because I feel secure..” sesecure my religion.”</p>	<p>Perceived Feeling “Secure” and “Assurance”</p>
<p>“.. I was brought up as a Muslim and I feel guilty to Allah, if I consume something which is prohibited, because I have a knowledge about it...”</p> <p>“...”When I ate <i>Halal</i> food, I feel that I am close to Allah because I fulfil what is commanded, and I fear the consequences of consuming unlawful foods..”</p> <p>“.. I feel contented and proud as I made the right choice, if the food and services is good, absolutely I will return back...”</p> <p>“... I feel blessed, in my heart and mind when I eat at a restaurant which regulates the Islamic value elements...”</p>	<p>Perceived Feeling “Fear” or “Closed To God (Allah)” Perceived Feeling “Contented” and “Blessed”</p>
<p>“..”I came across an experience of eating at the Indian Muslim Restaurant whereby they hang the Quranic frames on the wall . Finally, I noticed, the owner of the premise is Non- Muslim and they have a mixed workforce. I feel doubtful of this restaurant, whether it is safe to declare the <i>Halalness</i>”.....</p> <p>“...”I am aware that the Indian Muslim restaurant must temporarily close during the Friday prayer,Eid celebration, and fully hired Muslim staffs and practice Islamic greetings .Besides, I concern on their contribution to Muslim charity association ...”</p>	<p>Perceived Conscious” and “Trust”</p>

THEORITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The focus group findings provide an insight into the determinants of Islamic Retail Experiential Value in the context of an Indian Muslim restaurant. In this study, the outcome revealed that restaurant environmental stimuli generate a variety of emotional states that signify the relativity of the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell,

1974).The focus group indicated that Islamic environmental stimuli ranging from *Halal* logo, facility aesthetics, cleanliness, ownership and customer crowd have a strong effect on the Muslim customer experience in patronizing an Indian Muslim restaurant.

The findings are consistent with prior studies done by Veira (2013) and those of

Cheung, Eckmen and Yang (2011) which found the direct effects of environmental stimuli positively related to emotions in retail environment.

Following the discussion, the result represented that the Muslim customer are highly spiritual conscientious in their decision to patronize and consume food which strictly follow the Islamic dietary law. Thus, this study has unscrambled the determinants of Islamic Retail Experiential Value by suggesting that emotional descriptors such as feelings of “security”, “conscious”, “trust”, “assurance” and “fear” are components of the Islamic value embedded in Muslim spirituality. Hence, spirituality is recognized as Muslim customer intelligence, knowledge and awareness which can be accounted as a salient predictor to Muslim customer experience. Drawing to their importance, the researchers postulate the significance of having spirituality determinant in constructing the Islamic Retail Experiential Value (IREV) theory framework. This new determinant will be integrated into the established Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001) experiential value scale as illustrated earlier.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study can be beneficial to Indian Muslim restaurant operators on the role of emotions in influencing Muslim customers to patronize their restaurant. Results suggests the Indian Muslim restaurant should take an effort to focus on environmental features such as creating an

Islamic tangible and intangible cues which could potentially could create experience based value. The fact is Muslims look for a restaurant that is *Halal* compliant and conforms to Islamic Values. Therefore, this study provides critical inputs for Indian Muslim restaurant owners in understanding how the environmental stimuli will impact both the emotions of the Muslim customer as well as their behavioural intention to patronize in the future.

CONCLUSION

The concept of Islamic Retail Experiential Value (IREV) is based upon the components and dimensions related to Islam. The value expressed is a deliberation from emotions comprised both affective and cognitive states that centre on the God (Allah) existence as the confession of faith. Apparently, this finding is corroborating with that of Tamaa and Voon (2014) on the role of spiritual components which have a strong influence on customer’s emotional experience. As a conclusion, the findings successfully unscrambled the determinants of IREV and thus provide a foundation for researchers to conduct the next phase of the quantitative method.

To this end, this study serves as a modification to Matwick, Malholtra and Ridgon (2001) typology in measuring customer experiential value as this study is driven by the need to establish a model on Islamic Retail Experiential Value (IREV) involving Muslim customers and restaurant setting.

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