CORE FEATURES OF INDIAN MUSLIM RESTAURANT CONCEPT IN WEST MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Ethnic restaurant has been recognized as one of the fastest growing food outlets in Malaysia. One of the most successful ethnic restaurants found in Malaysia is Indian Muslim or popularly known as *Mamak* restaurant. Since early 2000, Indian Muslim restaurants are known for their 24 hours' of food business operation as well as the various food business operation models including cafeteria and table service styles. However, until today, scholars keep discussing and exploring the concept of Indian Muslim restaurant. It was also found that limited number of attention and detail are given by scholars on the core concept of ethnic restaurant especially the case of Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia. Therefore, using existing literature and systematic observation, this study aims to explore and critically discuss the core features of Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia within the concept of ethnic restaurant. From the content analysis, this study has discovered that menu item (i.e. the name of food and drinks), staff (i.e. ethnicity and physical appearance), and cooking style have significant contributions to uplift the identity of Indian Muslim restaurant. These features not only define Indian Muslim restaurant but also act as the core business attraction as well as strengthen a better understanding on the idea and concept of Indian Muslim restaurant especially in West Malaysia. In addition, the decoration of restaurant such as the choice of interior and exterior colors (i.e. mainly blue and green), wearing 'Songkok' (i.e. male Muslim hat) and hijab (i.e. waitress), and displaying wall frames that contain Arabic calligraphic on every corner of restaurant wall signify the notion of Islam and Halal among the Muslim customers. This an example of a Muslim Friendly Restaurant (MFR) concept within a combination framework of ethnic and religious. In summary, this study concludes that beyond serving a plate of food, Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia also educates their customers and publics to learn and appreciate the uniqueness of the concept of ethnic itself.

Keywords: *Educating; West Malaysia; Ethnic, Restaurant Concept, Indian Muslim*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The food businesses especially ethnic restaurants in Malaysia have constantly grown and expanded from year to year. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2017) reported the revenue for service industry

including restaurant businesses had increased about 6.2 per cent in first quarter of 2017 as compared to the fourth quarter of 2016 only 5.5 per cent (MYR368.1billion). Among the various segments, food and beverages segments contribute 7 per cent the increment, followed by wholesale and retail trade (i.e. 6.2 per cent) and accommodation sub-sector (5.6 per cent). This shows that food businesses including ethnic restaurant are seen as part of national economic booster in recent years.

Within the context of ethnic restaurant in West Malaysia, there are various dining establishments offering certain ethnic group food and beverages specialties to the customers. According to Othman (2007), majority of the restaurants in Malaysia offer Asian cuisine such as Malay, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Thai restaurants. This is supported by Jalis (2008) who mentioned that food offered and served at many restaurants are diverse due to demand from broad range of ethnicity which made up the entire country's population. These restaurants show positive competition with each other to dominate the market by positioning their own strategy. This could also be the case to Indian Muslim food outlet or popularly known as Indian Muslim restaurant in Malaysia.

It was found that previous scholars both local and foreign ones have showed their interest to research on Indian Muslim restaurant. Othman (2007) and Aziz, Mohamed and Rahman (2017) explored the Stimulus Organism Response paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) in understanding the customers' experience in food consumption. The result of the research concludes that environmental features should be the main focus of such restaurant in order to create an experience based value which later would give better merits to the restaurants. Besides that, Duruz and Khoo (2015) examined the operation of Singapore's Indian Muslim restaurants. Many other researchers put great effort and attention to discuss on Indian Muslim restaurant efficiency in terms of food quality and services. There are still a few number of studies focusing and discussing the matter on Indian Muslim restaurant within the concept of ethnic restaurant. Looking at this opportunity, this study critically reviews the concept of Indian Muslim restaurant within the ones established in West Malaysia.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic restaurants and their concept have brought various cultures or ethnic groups' cuisine identity into better understanding and higher level of appreciation. For example, Chinese, Indian, and Mexican cuisine where they become popular cuisines at the largest ranked of ethnic restaurants in United States. Understanding and harnessing the story behind each dish prepared are two important aspects to educate people about a specific group of ethnic or place.

A study by Tsai and Lu (2012) and Ingerson and Aise (2016) found that people now prefer a greater value of gastronomic experiences served at ethnic restaurant. These include taste and variety of iconic food, health benefits and the exterior design of the restaurant. In addition, the staff and style of service are also crucial elements in delivering authentic experience while dining at a particular ethnic restaurant (Ignerson & Aisle, 2016).

2.1 The Concept of Ethnic Restaurant

It is worth to clearly define the word ethnic prior discussing the concept of ethnic restaurant. As described by Khalifa (2015), ethnic is a group of individuals that claims a distinct peoplehood or an identity that sets them apart from others. In other words, ethnic is a group that have certain characteristics or specialty in term of their culture that includes language, attire, foods, and some can be differentiated by their place of origin that will differentiate them from the others surrounding the community.

The term ethnic restaurant itself sometimes is referred as a theme restaurant that usually serves customers with unique or unfamiliar cuisine, and environment adapted from specific culture to the local (Marinkovic, Senic & Mimovic, 2015). This restaurant commonly represents a special culture that provides specific ethnic group authentic cuisine experience.

The important concept for an ethnic restaurant can be seen not only limit to dining in the restaurant but also passing over the front door of the restaurant by looking at the name on the restaurant signage and menu, listening to the traditional music, as well as the smell the aroma of the food being prepared. Tsai and Lu (2012) stated that ethnic restaurant is less trendy than other restaurant because it is originated from long-standing tradition. Different studies argued that the ethnic restaurants actually have sophisticated and casual concept (Marinkovic et al., 2015). Findings from study by Tsai and Lu (2012) revealed that food and service quality are the successful factors to retaining of ethnic restaurants and reflect the genuine concept of the ethnic restaurant.

According to Tsai and Lu (2012), ethnic restaurant's operators are to develop a concept in their own establishment just not to attract customers, but giving the great experience to them as well. The restaurant décor includes furniture style, lighting, and comfort of seating, paintings besides other facilities can impact on how diners perceive and rate the restaurant. Marinkovicet al. (2015) further emphasise that the menu, décor and restaurant name of ethnic restaurant should all reflect the ethnic cuisines that are offered.

This study focuses more on Indian Muslim restaurant that represents the minority ethnics in West Malaysia. Thus, the concept of Indian Muslim restaurant is supposed to reflect the culture of Indian Muslim itself hence classified as ethnic restaurant. This is discussed in the next section.

2.2 The Indian Muslim in Malaysia and Its Restaurant Concept

Indian Muslim or popularly known as *Mamak* restaurant is synonym to Indian ethnic especially at the northern region of West Malaysia. Othman (2007) explains that the term Indian Muslim is used to describe Indian Muslim population who migrated from South India to the Malay Peninsula and Southeast Asia centuries ago. It was found that the word Indian Muslim is originally came from Tamil: *maa-maa* (i.e. in Malay pronounced as *Mamak*) means uncle (Othman, 2007; Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012). Within the context of restaurant business in Malaysia, Indian Muslim is used as a mean of cultural representation eating out in the open at night (Duruz & Khoo, 2015; Jalis, 2016).

In 2015, a number 200,000 Malaysian Indians who are Indian Muslim was reported to reside in Malaysia (Pillai, 2015). Majority of them were found seriously venturing themselves into food businesses including restaurant. The history of Indian Muslim started early in 1900's where this population started to sell foods by peddling the food in two large baskets and carried over their shoulder before walking from one house to another and from village to another. Until at certain time, this Indian Muslim population succeeded to operate their own business by setting up their own stall that can be seen along major streets (ali & Abdullah, 2012; Aziz, Mohamed, & Rahman, 2017). Even though the business started at a pretty slow pace, later with the additions of ideal and strategic facilities (television, free Wi-Fi and availability of parking) like other restaurants until today, they start to get the attention of customers (Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012). Although Indian Muslim represents a small population of Malaysian, this ethnic group is able to tap Malaysian restaurant businesses and become more popular all over Malaysia (Aziz et al., 2017).

The concept and styles developed by Indian Muslim restaurant nowadays make it as one of the common places for the customers from several stages of ages and different races. The popularity of Indian Muslim restaurant among Malaysians nowadays is very obvious especially among youngster. According to Ibrahim,

Saber, Mustapha, Salim, Ghazali, and Hassan (2017), Malaysian's favourite hangout place would be at the Indian Muslim restaurants. They spend their time at Indian Muslim restaurant to socialize and watch soccer games and many more. Most customers prefer to have their meals in Indian Muslim restaurant rather than others ethnic restaurants that have more customers on peak period only (Othman, 2007). These restaurants usually crowded on weekends, morning and nights especially (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

By adopting the concept of ethnic restaurant which has been discussed earlier, Table 1 show the core features of the concept of Indian Muslim restaurant. The features were extracted and adopted from Othman (2007), Zawawi and Ibrahim (2012), Aziz et al., (2017), and Lim (2017).

Table 1 : Plotting of core features of Indian Muslim restaurant based on existing studies

	Environment/ Atmosphere	Table and chairs capacity	Menu	Employee	Price	Operating hour	Restaurant's name	Location
Othman (2007)	*	*	*	*	*	*		*
Zawawi and Ibrahim (2012)	*		*	*		*	*	*
Aziz et al. (2017)	*	*	*			*	*	
Lim (2017)			*	*	*	*		*

Further exploration through systematic observation and informal conversations were conducted to obtain in-depth understanding and details for each identified core features (i.e. as stated in Table 1). A semi structured observation sheet was developed based on the pre-determined eight (8) core features. As a results, a total of fifteen (15) Indian restaurants were observed in Selangor, Penang, Kedah, Pahang, and Johor. In addition, during the observation, researchers have also gained additional information based on the core features from restaurants' owners and customers. The findings have been tabulated and showed in Table 2.

Table 2 : The core features of Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia

Core Features	Indian Muslim Restaurant
Environment/ atmosphere of the restaurant	• *al-fresco* style. • The wall painted in bright color (i.e. green/blue color) with the Islamic frame. • Open kitchen style (i.e. cooking as part of eatertaiment).
Table and chairs capacity	• Group setting, also known as communal style (i.e. 4 to 10 seating)
Menu	• Largely traditional foods of *Indian Muslim* ethnic. • There are other ethnic food such as Malay and Chinese. • Fusion selection can be found.
Employee	• The staff all from the Indian Muslim community. • The attire of the staff is smart casual, *Songkok* (for male), and head scarf (for female).
Price of the food	• Reasonable price
Business operation hour	• This restaurant operates 24 hours except for during Ramadahan, only 12 hours (4 p.m. to 4 a.m.).
Restaurant's name	• Large signboard and the name of the restaurant are written in Arabic sound wording.
Location of the restaurant	• The restaurant is located at the corner of the shop lot and easy to access.

Based on the results (i.e. Table 1 and 2), it can be seen that Indian Muslim restaurant practices similar restaurant features that are established within the concept of ethnic restaurant. Nevertheless, there are features of Indian Muslim restaurant vary from other ethnic restaurant concept.

Even though al-fresco setup (Othman, 2007) is commonly seen at any Indian Muslim restaurant, the walls are painted in bright color (i.e. green/blue color) with Islamic frame and open kitchen style (i.e. cooking as part of 'eatertaiment') are found as the strongest features emphasizing the concept of Indian Muslim restaurant. It was found that the use of green and/or blue color to decorate the restaurant wall is believed not only to denote cleanliness but also as part of purity in Islam. Green is often used many Muslim countries as a symbol of Islam (Henderson 2003; Aziz et al., 2017). Open-kitchen style shows the uniqueness the cooking skills together with actions of fire on the wok together with appealing food aroma make Indian Muslim restaurant more alive and able to tell a story to their customer on the concept itself. All these, at the same time, provide entertainments for their customers (Zawawi & Ibrahim, 2012; Lim, 2017) and make Indian Muslim restaurants have their own unique atmosphere.

With regards the menu of Indian Muslim restaurant, it is interesting to find that many of the restaurants offer a range of multi-ethnic (Jalis, 2016) and fusion (Othman, 2007) menu. Indian Muslim restaurant not only offers variety selection of Indian Muslim dishes and foods but also Malay, Chinese, and Western ones. Ingerson and Aise (2016) mention that some ethnic restaurants import the ingredients from their own place to retain the flavor. However, it is not the case of Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia. Indian Muslim restaurant nowadays are likely to assimilate their foods with other ethnic foods in order to prolong their business (Othman, 2007). This is because, assimilation of foods can suit the flavors demanded by their customers from of different race and culture. However, even though they offer other foods (as one of the business strategies) but they still maintain their own signature dishes including *nasi kandar, roti canai, roti naan, capati, tosai* and *tandoori* chicken (Ingerson & Aise, 2016).

As discussed, employees also have significant contribution to the image of an ethnic restaurant. For example, when a Thai restaurant opens only Thai people (i.e. immigrant) are hired as staff to work at the restaurant in foreign country (Sunata, 2005) Similarly, staff at a Indian Muslim restaurant are among their own community (i.e. Indian Muslim ethnic). As described by Othman (2007), majority of employees who work at Indian Muslim restaurant are imported either between region in Malaysia or from India. This is seen as a strategy that has been thought by the operator to maintain the identity and image of Indian Muslim restaurant in West Malaysia. True enough, the findings from Othman's (2007) study show employee and their image has significant contribution to maintain the authenticity experience of Indian Muslim while customer dining at the restaurant. Interestingly, Aziz et al (2017) believe that it is important for the employees to portray the notion of Islam through their appearance. Therefore, Aziz et al. (2015) noted that majority of the employees at Indian Muslim restaurant wear a proper dress including wearing Songkok (for male) and scarf (for female).

Other features that can be seen as the unique concept that explain the identity and image of Indian Muslim restaurant are the operation hour (i.e. 24 hours, 7 days weekly except during Ramadhan), large signboard and the name in Arabic sound wording to emphasize Islam or Muslim, and location of the premise often at the corner the end of the building. Demand by the local people or residents especially in urban area is seen as the opportunity for Indian Muslim restaurant to operate non-stop throughout the year (Aziz et al., 2017). But this does not mean that Indian Muslim restaurant ignores to maintain the food and service qualities (Othman, 2007). Duruz and Khoo (2015) found that Indian Muslim restaurants are always concern and particular with their image as a Muslim food eatery, therefore, having Arabic calligraphy including name of the restaurant able to gain their customer trust especially in West Malaysia where largely are of Muslim community.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORKS

This study has been critically reviewed and discussed from the context of ethnic and *Indian Muslim* restaurant concept based on existing literature review. From wall paint color to the restaurant's name, it was found that *Indian Muslim* restaurant has put so much thought and effort to setup and run their food eateries in the West Malaysia particularly the notion of Muslim. This has given greater impact to the restaurant's image and gain trust among their customer particularly the Muslim ones. Within the notion of ethnic restaurant, *Indian Muslim* restaurant was found to be serious and meticulous to the menu item selection and employee (i.e. Muslim dress and appearance) who will prepare and serve the food and beverages at the restaurant premise. Nevertheless, there is still a big question and conflict on the multi-ethnic and fusion menu item offering on *Indian Muslim* restaurant menu card. There could be further explanation on this that needs to be explored empirically. The study, at the end, illustrates a conceptual model of *Indian Muslim* restaurant concept that can be referred by future scholars for further investigation.

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