Research article

The framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah, East Malaysia: An application of Fuzzy Delphi method

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ABSTRACT

The reality of socio-religious harmony in Sabah is undeniable. Some visible evidence, and its distinct social environment foster religious tolerance and encouraging people to accept others as they are. On what grounds does this harmony persist, given that situations in Malaysia show that interfaith disputes have never been silent? Examining this phenomenon considers the community, even attempting to disrupt Sabah’s long-established harmonious relations. Therefore, the study goal is to develop a framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah which is unique in its own diverse culture and religions. This study employs the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM), prioritizing expert consensus in determining the investigation results. The study has selected seventeen experts from various professional backgrounds: academicians, policymakers, community leaders, non-government (NGO), and religious leaders. The results have identified three constructs, nine elements, and 43 of the 62 expert-agreed-upon criteria, which were then displayed hierarchically as a model of socio-religious harmony framework in Sabah. The finding also reveals the top ten highest ranking criteria agreed upon by experts for considering variables of establishing socio-religious harmony in Sabah. Ultimately, the study gives a clear framework for future studies to measure a level of social harmony in Sabah, and significantly contribute as a guideline throughout Malaysia as a whole.

1. Introduction

Sabah, one of the Borneo Island’s multi-religious states in East Malaysia, is well-known for its distinct culture and religious diversity, which coexist peacefully. The fact that it manifests naturally in inter-religious relations in which the people are highly tolerant of others. Beginning with historical consideration of inter-religious relations in Sabah, it has a significant impact on the survival of peaceful coexistence. Syed Kechik, according to Mohamed (1971), was one of the first to write about the state of religious tolerance in Sabah. He stated that Sabah society had been known for its tolerant culture since time immemorial, hence it does not face problems related to relationships between religions. This situation is closely related to Sabihah’s (2007) viewpoint on the cross-relationship of community diversity in Sabah which is not based on ‘divide and rule’ as in the Peninsular (West Malaysia). Because of this policy, the polarization between Malays, Chinese, and Indians have obviously been characterized the socio-religious relationship of the people. In comparison to Sabah (East Malaysia), Pugh-Kitingan (2015) states that the relationship between religious communities in Sabah has been formed for a long time on friendly interactions, and this contributes a motivating force for harmony. Meanwhile, the people in Sabah speaks the Sabah Malay Dialect (Wong, 2012), which facilitates the easy-going interaction of different religious believers to communicate with each other wherever they are.

Accordingly, the inter-religious relations in Sabah are unlikely to give rise to any prejudice or provocation and are not easily swayed by controversial issues that raises religious difficult (Suraya, 2014). Thus, the social landscape of Sabah culture exemplifies the social virtues of effortlessly socializing and mingling around with others forming several dimensions of positive relationships, such as intermarriage (Suraya and Budi Anto, 2016), mixed-faith families, a burial in a comparable location, participation in interfaith activities, and the location of adjacent houses of worship (Mohd Nazmi et al., 2021). This situation is different from the inter-religious relations in other states in Malaysia.

In past studies, some researchers extensively discussed factors contributing to inter-religious harmony by emphasizing elements of peaceful coexistence. A study by Adesokan (2015) on peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims in Houston, Texas, United

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States America (USA) shows the implementation of religious freedom had contributed for societies to accommodate each other. While Saidu (2020) highlights the experience of harmony between Hindus and Muslims in Jembera Bali, Indonesia; and Razick et al. (2021) describe the interaction of Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka sharing the situation of living together as neighbors and colleagues. There are also several studies on inter-religious relation in Malaysia such as Muhammad Ridhuan et al. (2016, 2017) established index and instrument for socio-religious harmony, as well as developing a model of religious tolerance (Khadijah, 2017; Yusoff et al., 2018; Fazliah et al., 2019; Ahmad Tarmizi et al., 2019; Majid et al., 2020) and highlighted the concept of rastraanli lil ‘alamin as a framework of harmony in Malaysia (Mohd Nazmi et al., 2020). The most recent study is carried out by Aiedah and Ros (2021) explicated that halal dining could become a practical analysis tool to measure Malaysia’s religious tolerance and social cohesion. However, none of these studies focused on the inter-religious relations experienced by the people of Sabah which may differ from those previously discussed in Peninsular (West Malaysia).

In Sabah, the study of harmonious interfaith relations is not a new issue and has long attracted the attention of social science researchers. Among the sociological studies are Budi Anto (2008) explaining daily life interaction and living together are factors led to ethnic tolerance in Sabah. Meanwhile, Suraya (2014) and Suraya and Budi Anto (2016) highlight intermarriage and having families of different religions as contributing factors for peaceful coexistence in Sabah. In a different study, Mohd Nazmi et al. (2021) illuminated the model of religious solidarity in Sabah with several identifying forms such as unity in family relationships of different religions, and community acceptance of the position of nearby houses of worship as mosques and churches adjacent. Suraya et al. (2019) accentuate seasonal activities such as festivals celebrated by Sabah’s diverse religious groups whether they live in urban or interior areas, are among the pushed factors to social cohesion. In a similar discussion, Suraya et al. (2022a,b) pointed out how social interaction between Muslims and Christians in the studied areas of Kota Kinabalu and Keningau districts in Sabah turns into cultural understanding through family ties and neighbors/friends of other religions. However, these previous studies are insufficient and require a more diverse research approach by producing comprehensive and complex investigations.

Therefore, the research objective is to fill the gap in identifying the most critical criteria by developing a framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah employing FDM, which is determined based on expert consensus. This analysis explains the framework for socio-religious harmony in Sabah, which significantly contributes to future studies to measure inter-religious relations in Malaysia.

2. Problem statement

Issues related to religious conflict do exist in Malaysia. However, still under control. The conflict was triggered mainly by religious differences, religious sensitivities, and negative provocations against religion. The issue, which involves insults and ridicule against religion, is increasingly contagious on social media. The previous studies show that our society is becoming less sensitive to other religions and less respectful of differences. Some of these issues threaten the harmony of inter-religious relations. This problem may be due to a lack of understanding and misunderstanding of other religions. For example, the issues of religious sensitivity involving the word Allah (Wan Hassan et al., 2013; Amat et al., 2012; Mohd Roslan, 2011), insulting religions of Chinese, Indian, and Malay (Siti Khatijah and Fadzli Adam, 2017) and the teenage couple Alvin and Vivian who had ridiculed and insulted Muslims during Ramadan (Fazliah et al., 2019). The religious issues were seen to have a more significant influence on ethnic relations and have critical impact on Malaysian well being. These issues cause quarrels and disputes among people of different religions, which indirectly showing that religion could trigger disharmony and cause instability of the country (Siti Khatijah and Fadzli Adam, 2017). Nur Azuki (2011) underlines some identifying factors which cause religious strife and social imbalance between ethnicities driven by hatred and apprehension towards other religions and misunderstanding of religion due to lack of an unhealthy social environment. Most of the facts of the case involve individuals or groups who manipulate religious sentiments and act outside the rules of religious life.

Furthermore, the other issues involving inter-religious disputes in Malaysia as highlighted by Zaid et al. (2014) are child custody, mortuary claims, places of worship, hudud, the jurisdiction of the Civil Court and the Syariah Court, the Malay version of the Bible, religious conversion, and propagation of other religions. Mohd Anuar et al. (2018) also stated drastic changes before the 14th General Election of Malaysia (Pilihan Raya Umum) PRU14 in 2018, which prone to highlight ethno-religious sensitive issues. The election campaign mainly affects Muslims and non-Muslim relations, which arise many religious issues such as azan (The Islamic call for prayer), Muslim consumer-friendly laundry, and claims for the bodies of new Muslims. After the PRU14, the religious issues became more complex regarding the status of Islam as the official religion, the position of the monarchy, Malay privileges, and the role of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). Those issues indicate the provocative approaches by some parties in taking advantage of matters related to inter-religious relations (Mohd Anuar et al., 2018). The study conducted by Muhammad Faisal & Muhamad Ariff (2019) focuses on six issues on Muslims and non-Muslims in 1980–2005. Among the issues raised were the exclusive religion of Islam, freedom of religion, jurisdiction of the courts and construction of houses of worship. All these issues are considerably sensitive as they cause dissatisfaction among non-Muslims. As a result, the non-Muslims protested the government and set up organizations to voice their religious freedom rights. They formed the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST), the Inter-Religious Commission, the Article 11 Group, and the Hindu Rights Action Front (Hindraf) (Nur Farhana and Nur Syarihah, 2020). All these issues exhibit a vibrancy of problems that need immediate solutions.

Meanwhile, Sabah is no exception to those issues pertaining inter-religious relations. Although the issues that occur are not as critical as those that appear on the peninsular, the fact still needs to be considered not to be magnified and not prolonged. To have more understanding on how the people in Sabah dealing with the issue of inter-religious relation, this study elucidates specific research that produces a framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah based on the expert agreement of the Fuzzy Delphi method analysis. The results were significantly contributed as a yardstick to measure harmony in inter-religious relations in Sabah and a guideline to the other states in Malaysia.

3. Methodology

This study is a quantitative study that employs FDM to obtain expert consensus on the criteria on each element in developing a framework of socio-religious harmony in the Sabah inter-religious context. This method involves using fuzzy set theory, which has integrated with the classical Delphi method. A Likert scale chosen by an expert is converted to a fuzzy scale using fuzzy numbering consisting of binary terms numbering (0, 1). This fuzzy numbering integration will produce three values: the minimum, the most reasonable, and the maximum value to be selected by the expert.

3.1. Research instrument

This study uses a questionnaire as an instrument to obtain quantitative data on criteria developed based on constructs and elements of socio-religious harmony. The use of questionnaires fulfills the conditions for FDM, which involves using mathematical formulas to obtain expert agreement. The questionnaire distributed were bilingual, namely Malay and English, for the understanding of the expert evaluators.
3.2. Data collection and analysis process

The process of data collection and analysis is based on the implementation steps of FDM, as shown in Figure 1.

Accordingly, this research project has obtained permission from the Center for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language by approving research ethics involving human subjects. This matter is essential to ensure that implementation of the project is carried out with permission compatible with the standards of the administrator by the guidelines of the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. Meanwhile, this study also obtained the respondents’ consent to fill out the questionnaire. This is to ensure that the respondents agree and are ready to answer the questionnaire provided once their answers are used for research purposes. Fortunately, all respondents agreed to fill in the questionnaire provided.

Step 1. selection of experts

In this study, 17 experts were involved, nine Muslims and eight non-Muslims. They are selected using the purposive sampling method based on their expertise in various fields. Academicians, policymakers, community leaders, NGOs, and religious leaders (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist). According to Aziz et al. (2017), the experts should also have more than ten years of work experience in the same field. The selection of these experts is crucial to ensure that the selected experts can provide the correct views in the context of the study conducted. The selected experts are those among lecturers in the related fields. While the government sectors such as the Department of National Unity and National Integration (JPNIN), Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) Sabah, Department of Islamic Religious Affairs Sabah (JHEAINS), National Security Council (MKN), and the Mufti of Sabah. The community leaders are selected from Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) and non-governmental organizations, namely Pertubuhan Kadazan Dusun Murut Muslim SeMalaysia (KDMRS). The religious leaders also involved in this study are Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism in Sabah.

The expert information collected includes categories of areas of expertise, positions, level of education, and period of experience. Most of the experts in this study have 10–33 years of experience. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), specialists who have served between five to ten years can be categorized as specialists. The number of experts coincides with Jones and Twiss (1978), who stated that the number of experts for the Delphi study ranged from 10 to 50 experts. Also, Adler and Ziglo (1996) supported that the number of experts is 10–15 if the agreement and uniformity of experts are high. Table 1 shows the demographic information and experts involved in this study.

Step 2. Questionnaire development

Several methods were used to design the questionnaire during this process, including a literature review and interviews. Before constructing the questionnaire, a literature review will be conducted to discover the concepts and themes used in this study. As Skulmoski et al. (2007) state the development of questionnaire criteria can be done based on literature review, pilot studies, and experiences. Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) agree that the construction of criteria and content of a study should be done through a literature review within the scope. In addition, the interview method was also conducted with experts to list the relevant concepts and themes. Powell (2003) states that the Delphi method is a very flexible method of obtaining expert agreement. This is because the first round of Delphi is held to identify an issue with expert interviews. However, identifying and getting a subject can be done through open-ended questions. There are also other methods of obtaining related matters using questionnaires from literature highlights (Dullfield, 1993). In the design phase and determination of constructs, elements, and criteria of the questionnaire, the basis for the construction of the study is based on a combination of literature review mapping analysis and expert interviews in collecting data and related materials conducted in the phase one. A total of three constructs, nine elements, and 62 criteria were developed for the questionnaire to design and determine the socio-religious harmony framework in Sabah.

Table 1. Experts’ demographic.

| Expert Category | Position | Level of Education | Period of Experience |
|-----------------|----------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Policymaker     | Director of JPNIN Sabah | Master | 18 Years |
| Mufti of Sabah  | Master | 10 Years |
| Senior Syarie Prosecutor, JHEAINS | Doctor of Philosophy | |
| Community Leader | President of the Churches of Sabah | Bachelor | 14 Years |
| NGO             | Chairman of KDMRS | Master | 20 Years |
| Religious Leader | Imam Ar-Rahim Mosque, Keningau | Bachelor | 12 Years |
| Religious Leader | President of the Churches of Sabah | Bachelor | 14 Years |
| Religious Leader | Chief of Hindu Sangam Sabah | Bachelor | 33 Years |
| Religious Leader | Deputy Chairman of the Buddhist Missionary Society of Malaysia (BMSM) Sabah | Bachelor | 15 Years |
| Religious Leader | Representatives of the Church | Master | 23 Years |
| Religious Leader | St. Paul Catholic Church, Francis Xavier | Diploma | 16 Years |
| Academician     | Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, UMS | Bachelor | 19 Years |
| Academician     | Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UMS | Doctor of Philosophy | 10 Years |

Figure 1. Flowchart of FDM implementation for socio-religious harmony criteria evaluation. Adapted from Mohd Ridhuan et al. (2014).
available to fill in the questionnaire face to face due to the movement constraint order (MCO) of the Covid-19 pandemic hitting the country. Before distributing the questionnaires, the researchers contacted the experts to obtain their consent. Once the experts agreed, the researchers distributed the questionnaire form in hardcopy for the face-to-face and softcopy PDF format to those who could not face-to-face distributed via email and WhatsApp. Despite using two different distribution methods, they (experts) filled the questionnaire themselves without being guided because the questionnaire developed was a self-administered questionnaire.

**Step 4. Data analysis**

a. Fuzzy Delphi Scale

This process involves converting all linguistic variables to Fuzzy triangle numbering (Triangular Fuzzy Numbers). The Triangular Fuzzy Number is represented by the values of \( m_1 \), \( m_2 \), and \( m_3 \). The value of \( m_1 \) represents the minimum, \( m_2 \) means the moderate, and the value of \( m_3 \) refers to the maximum value. Next, the Triangular Fuzzy Number is used to generate a Fuzzy scale that uses a Likert scale to translate linguistic variables into Fuzzy numbers. The number of levels for the Fuzzy scale is in odd numbers. The higher the Fuzzy ranking, the more accurate the data obtained. Figure 2 shows the mean triangle graph against the Triangular value, i.e., the three values in the Triangular Fuzzy Number.

Figure 2 shows a graph of the mean triangle against Triangular with \( m_1 \) = minimum, \( m_2 \) = moderate, and \( m_3 \) = maximum. The Likert scale data obtained were analyzed using the Microsoft Excel program. All data is converted into a Triangular Fuzzy Number form based on a seven-point fuzzy scale, as stated in Table 2.

b. Data analysis

Data analysis is based on the numbering of Triangular Fuzzy Numbers, which aims to obtain the value of Threshold (d). According to Thomaidis et al. (2006), the process of identifying the value of Threshold (d) is critical to get a level of agreement among experts. To obtain expert agreement for each criterion, the first condition to be complied with is that the value of Threshold (d) is not more than or equal to 0.2, then it is considered that expert agreement has been reached (Cheng and Lin, 2002). The vertex method is used to calculate the distance between the rij averages (Cheng and Lin, 2002). The distances/spaces for each Fuzzy number \( m = (m_1, m_2, m_3) \) and \( n = (m_1, m_2, m_3) \) are calculated using the following formula:

\[
d(m, n) = \frac{1}{3} \left( (m_1 - n_1)^2 + (m_2 - n_2)^2 + (m_3 - n_3)^2 \right)
\]

Subsequently, the percentage value of expert agreement determines that the overall deal (group consensus) should exceed 75.0% for each criterion. Otherwise, the second round needs to be implemented (Chu and Hwang, 2008; Murry and Hammons, 1995). However, in this study, the second round was not conducted because the results of the expert evaluation were satisfactory.

![Figure 2. Schematic diagram of FDM threshold. Adapted from Mohd Ridhuan et al. (2014).](image)

**Table 2. Seven point of fuzzy scale (Mohd Ridhuan et al., 2013).**

| Scale               | Level of Consensus | Fuzzy Scale |
|---------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1                   | Extremely Strongly Disagree | (0.0,0.0,0.1) |
| 2                   | Strongly Disagree   | (0.0,0.1,0.3) |
| 3                   | Disagree            | (0.1,0.3,0.5) |
| 4                   | Moderately Agree    | (0.3,0.5,0.7) |
| 5                   | Agree               | (0.5,0.7,0.9) |
| 6                   | Strongly Agree      | (0.7,0.9,1.0) |
| 7                   | Extremely Strongly Agree | (0.9,1.0,1.0) |

c. Defuzzification process

This analysis process aims to obtain the Fuzzy score (A) value. To obtain a Fuzzy score value (A), it must be greater than or equal to the median value (\( \alpha \)-cut value) of 0.5 (Tang and Wu, 2010; Bodjanova, 2006). This process indicates that the element is accepted by expert consensus. According to the experts, another function, the value of the Fuzzy score (A), can determine the ranking and priority. The formula involved in obtaining the Fuzzy score value (A) is \( A_{\text{max}} = 1/4 \times (a_1 + 2a_2 + a_3) \). The value of \( \alpha \)-cut = the median value of ‘0’ and ‘1’, i.e., \( \alpha \)-cut = \( (0.1 + 1)/2 = 0.5 \). If the resulting value A is less than the value of \( \alpha \)-cut = 0.5, the criteria will be rejected because it does not indicate expert agreement. According to Bodjanova (2006) and Tang and Wu (2010), the \( \alpha \)-cut value should exceed 0.5.

4. **Result**

The findings are explained according to constructs, elements, and criteria compiled based on discussions with experts. Overall, all the criteria accepted for each construct and element meet the requirements and conditions to pass the expert consensus of more than 75%, the value of Threshold (d) < 0.2 and \( \alpha \)-cut is more than 0.5.

4.1. Construct 1: Attitude

Construct 1 is Attitude (A), with four elements and 31 criteria. The four elements include religious tolerance (10 criteria), social engagement (12 criteria), and harmony (9 criteria). The findings are explained according to constructs, elements, and criteria compiled based on discussions with experts. Overall, all the criteria accepted for each construct and element meet the requirements and conditions to pass the expert consensus of more than 75%, the value of Threshold (d) < 0.2 and \( \alpha \)-cut is more than 0.5.

**Table 3. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of religious tolerance.**

| Ranking | Criteria                        | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Sincerely give alms and donate to believers of different religions | A6           | 0.148               | 94.12%                                    | 0.896          |
| 2       | Do not blaspheme the Gods of other religions | A3           | 0.168               | 94.1%                                     | 0.886          |
| 3       | Maintain positive relationships with friends of different religions | A2           | 0.147               | 94.1%                                     | 0.884          |
| 4       | Respecting friends by refraining from eating impermissible foods and adhering to their religions | A4           | 0.162               | 100.00%                                   | 0.882          |
| 5       | Respecting universal values that can be applied in other religions | A8           | 0.196               | 88.24%                                    | 0.841          |
| 6       | Feeling at ease with establishing acquaintances from different religions | A1           | 0.212               | 88.2%                                     | 0.816          |
(5 criteria), religious sensitivity (10 criteria), and social interaction (6 criteria). The results of the Fuzzy Delphi analysis are displayed through a table on the accepted criteria only.

4.1.1. Element: religious tolerance

Table 3 shows the criteria for the element of religious tolerance arranged by ranking. Additionally, the threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are shown.

Table 3 shows the element of religious tolerance, which initially contained ten criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only six criteria were agreed to fulfill 75 percent consensus, and all defuzzification values reached \( \alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5 \). Table 3 shows the acceptance criteria based on expert agreement. Four items of the criteria were eliminated. Those items are (A5) “Disappointed when a friend of another religion refuses to consume food or drink prepared for them”; (A7) “Do not be dismayed if financial aid from a religious institution is prioritized primarily for its believers”; (A9) “Disturbed by calls to prayer from other religions’ house of worship”; and (A10) “Uncomfortable with the use of other religious symbols in public settings”. The eliminated items in the listed criteria which are not agreed upon by expert consensus indicate that they are tolerant on various religious practices of other religions. This is because they have not demonstrated unfavorable responses to what have traditionally been practiced and will have to be consistently implemented to fulfill religious obligations and show respect to religious boundaries.

4.1.2. Element: social engagement

Table 4 lists the criteria for the element of social engagement in descending order of importance (ranking). The threshold value (d), proportion of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are also displayed.

Table 4 shows the element of social engagement, which initially contained five criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only four criteria were agreed to fulfill 75 percent consensus, and all defuzzification values reached \( \alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5 \). Table 4 shows the acceptance criteria based on expert consensus. Only one criterion was rejected, namely criterion (A12) “Feeling awkward to participate in social events included prayer recitation”. The fact that only one component has been removed suggests that positive experts’ attitudes towards official event organized by government agencies will include prayer recitation. Generally, any occasion will begin with Islamic prayer recitation. For the experts, engaging in that social activity with adherents of other religions with their prayer recitation is not an issue.

4.1.3. Element: religious sensitivity

Table 5 shows the criteria for the element of religious sensitivity arranged by ranking. The threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are also displayed.

Table 5 shows the element of religious sensitivity, which initially contains ten criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only seven criteria were agreed that fulfill 75 percent consensus and all defuzzification values had reached \( \alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5 \). Table 5 shows the acceptance criteria based on expert consensus. There are three criteria that have been rejected: (A16) “Feeling angry with the issue of the word Allah which is hotly debated today”; (A19) “Not concerned with the issue of conversion involving my religion to another religion”; and (A20) “Not worried about the issue of religious conversion involving my religion to another religion”. All these religious sensitive issues are disagreed upon by the experts’ consensus, indicating that those issues really touch the feeling of the believers and should not be taken lightly to arise.

4.1.4. Element: social interaction

Table 6 shows the criteria for the element of social interaction arranged by ranking. The threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are also displayed.

Table 6 depicts the element of social interaction, which initially has six criteria. Following the expert consensus analysis, only three criteria were agreed upon that meet 75 percent of the consensus, and all defuzzification values had reached \( \alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5 \) and above. Three criteria have been rejected: (A26) “Choosing a partner from other religions does not matter if the partner is willing to convert to another religion”; (A27) “Accepting family members married to followers of other religions”; and (A31) “Accepting political leaders regardless of religion”. The three rejected items demonstrate that marrying a partner of another religion and electing political leaders from other religions are important.

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Table 4. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of social engagement.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Participate in activities to channel aid to followers of other religions | A14 | 0.192 | 88.24% | 0.835 |
| 2       | Never mind engaging in social activities that provide meal segregation according to my religion | A13 | 0.220 | 94.1% | 0.831 |
| 3       | Willing to participate in any social activity with people of different religions | A11 | 0.221 | 88.2% | 0.829 |
| 4       | Involved in harmony visit to other religions’ sites of worship | A15 | 0.275 | 82.35% | 0.790 |

Table 5. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of religious sensitivity.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | I am feeling unhappy with the religious provocations posed by any party | A22 | 0.144 | 100.00% | 0.892 |
| 2       | I am feeling concerned about the issue of seizing the remains of followers of other religions | A21 | 0.181 | 94.12% | 0.837 |
| 3       | I am feeling sensitive to the insults of other religions | A23 | 0.181 | 94.12% | 0.837 |
| 4       | I accept intermarriage which involves conversion from another religion | A25 | 0.198 | 94.12% | 0.833 |
| 5       | I agree with the proximity of another religious house of worship to where I live | A24 | 0.176 | 94.12% | 0.780 |
| 6       | I agree to the use of Malay language in Bible | A17 | 0.267 | 88.2% | 0.769 |
| 7       | I accept the spread of other religions in my community | A18 | 0.230 | 76.5% | 0.676 |
consideration. In comparison, living alongside a neighbor, employer, or family member of another religion is acceptable.

4.2. Construct 2: perception

Construct 2 is Perception (P) which has three elements and 19 criteria. The two elements include contributing factors to socio-religious harmony (8 criteria), the challenge to socio-religious harmony (3 criteria), and the indicators of socio-religious harmony (8 criteria). The Fuzzy Delphi analysis results are presented in a table based solely on the acceptable criteria.

4.2.1. Element: contributing factors to socio-religious harmony

Table 7 lists the criteria for the element of contributing factors to socio-religious harmony in descending order of importance. Furthermore, the threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are shown. Table 7 depicts the element of contributing factors of socio-religious harmony, which initially include eight criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only six criteria were agreed upon, with 75 percent consensus and all defuzzification values had reached \(\alpha – \text{cut} = 0.5\).

Table 7 shows the acceptance criteria based on expert consensus. Two criteria rejected, namely (P4) “The gap in economic status between indigenous people in Sabah is not too large”; and (P7) “Lack of media coverage featuring religious and ethnic issues”. Experts disagree on these two criteria, most likely because economic status and media coverage have little influence on the religious issue in Sabah.

4.2.2. Element: challenges to socio-religious harmony

Table 8 shows the criteria for the element of challenges to socio-religious harmony arranged by ranking. Also shown are the threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A). Table 8 shows the element of challenges to socio-religious harmony, which includes three criteria. Following the expert consensus analysis, all criteria were agreed to fulfill 75 percent consensus, and all defuzzification values have reached \(\alpha – \text{cut} = 0.5\).

4.2.3. Element: indicators of socio-religious harmony

Table 9 shows the criteria for the indicators of socio-religious harmony arranged by ranking. Additionally, the threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are shown.

### Table 6. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of social interaction.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Accept anyone as a neighbor, regardless of religion | A30 | 0.144 | 100.00% | 0.892 |
| 2       | Accepting employers irrespective of religion | 0.252 | 88.24% | 0.831 |
| 3       | Accommodate with varied religious family culture | A28 | 0.203 | 94.1% | 0.808 |

### Table 7. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of contributing factors to socio-religious harmony.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | High religious tolerance | P3 | 0.107 | 100.0% | 0.873 |
| 2       | Residential areas with a mix of religious and ethnic groups | P2 | 0.140 | 100.0% | 0.831 |
| 3       | Religious solidarity that loves peace | P6 | 0.206 | 88.24% | 0.812 |
| 4       | The spirit of shared territory under one state | P8 | 0.171 | 94.12% | 0.810 |
| 5       | Intermarriage is very common | P1 | 0.236 | 76.5% | 0.790 |
| 6       | Islam and Christianity share a religious tie | P5 | 0.281 | 82.35% | 0.696 |

### Table 8. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of challenges to socio-religious harmony.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Prejudice against followers of other religions should be avoided for harmony to be achieved | P10 | 0.100 | 100.00% | 0.888 |
| 2       | Religious provocation should be avoided since it raises tensions and disrupts religious harmony | P9 | 0.119 | 100.00% | 0.884 |
| 3       | Sabah is a peaceful state with no tense religious relations | P11 | 0.172 | 100.00% | 0.839 |

### Table 9. Accepted criteria position by ranking for the element of indicators of socio-religious harmony.

| Ranking | Criteria | No. Criteria | Threshold value (d) | Percentage of Experts Group Consensus (%) | Fuzzy Score (A) |
|---------|----------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1       | Social cohesion is achieved by regular contacts between members of different religions | P14 | 0.114 | 100.00% | 0.878 |
| 2       | Make friends with people of other religions | P17 | 0.114 | 100.00% | 0.878 |
| 3       | No conflict between religions | P19 | 0.107 | 100.00% | 0.873 |
| 4       | Organizing harmony activities between religions | P18 | 0.136 | 94.12% | 0.867 |
| 5       | Establish close relationships with neighbors of different religions | P16 | 0.136 | 94.12% | 0.867 |
| 6       | Accept a policy of social justice for all religions | P13 | 0.111 | 100.00% | 0.851 |
| 7       | The freedom to practice their respective religions/teachings | P12 | 0.157 | 94.12% | 0.835 |
| 8       | Organizing interfaith dialogue | P15 | 0.264 | 82.35% | 0.786 |
percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are displayed.

Table 9 shows the element of socio-religious harmony indicators, which contains eight criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, all criteria were agreed to meet 75 percent consensus, and all defuzzification values were set at $\alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5$. No criteria were rejected in this element.

### 4.3. Construct 3: experience

Experience (E) is the third construct, having two elements and 11 criteria. Religious conflict (8 criteria) and mutual understanding are the second element (4 criteria). The Fuzzy Delphi analysis results are presented in a table based solely on the acceptable criteria.

#### 4.3.1. Element: religious conflict

Table 10 shows the criteria for the religious conflict element arranged in order of importance. In addition, the threshold value (d), proportion of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are displayed.

Table 10 depicts the element of religious conflict, which has eight criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only three criteria were agreed upon, representing 75 percent consensus, and all defuzzification values have reached $\alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5$. Five criteria were rejected, namely (E1) “Never experienced tension in inter-religious relations since living in Sabah”; (E2) “Never witnessed religious conflict in Sabah”; (E6) “Adherents of other religions despise religion”; and (E7) “Other religions assaulted my religion”; (E8) “My religion is compared with those of other religions”. Those rejected criteria show that the experts had no prior experience with issues relating to religious tension, conflict and being assaulted by other religions, which endangers the harmony in Sabah. However, some experts had experiences on being insulted by other religion, and religious issues in Sabah are not publicized in mass media.

#### 4.3.2. Element: mutual understanding

Table 11 shows the criteria for mutual understanding element arranged by ranking. The threshold value (d), percentage of expert consensus groups (%), and fuzzy score (A) are also displayed.

Table 11 depicts the element of mutual understanding, which include four criteria. Following expert consensus analysis, only three approved criteria were agreed upon and fulfilled 75 percent consensus, with all defuzzification values reaching $\alpha - \text{cut} = 0.5$ and above. Criteria (E9) “Performing religious worship/rituals in the house of other religions” was rejected. The only one item on which the experts disagreed upon was that none of them had ever experienced performing other religious rituals, whether in the form of prayer or fasting.

### 5. Discussion

The findings show the results of expert consensus analysis using FDM. All criteria on construct and element have been identified based on the consensus of experienced and competent experts. The consensus of experts in various fields of dealing with society are taken into consideration to develop the framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah. The framework is designed based on the experts’ agreement or consensus on three constructs, nine elements, and 43 of the 62 criteria. All the criteria in the preceding tables satisfied the FDM analysis requirement of more than 75% consensus, threshold value (d) $< 0.2$, and $\alpha$-cut more than 0.5. The results of this FDM analysis are depicted in Figure 3 as a hierarchy model of a socio-religious harmony framework in Sabah.

Figure 3 shows the experts agreed upon hierarchy model of the Sabah socio-religious harmony framework. There are differences of the experts' views in determining the criteria on each element. However, the study's findings are still strong and significant in establishing elements and criteria of the targeted objective, which is to develop a framework for socio-religious harmony in Sabah. The study also illustrates the 10 highest criteria, which are shaded blue in Figure 3 and explained in Table 12. According to the findings of the study, these 10 criteria are the top priority of expert consensus in establishing a framework for socio-religious harmony in Sabah.

Table 12 shows the top 10 most preferred criteria among all experts. The top 10 criteria displayed are intended to summarize the overall criteria agreed upon by the experts. Arguably, these top 10 criteria are the most important elements to be highlighted and emphasized in the future discussions on religious harmony in Sabah. However, the development of the socio-religious harmony framework in Sabah is not only based on the study 10 criteria, as each construct shows that the consensus obtained from experts plays a vital role. This hierarchy model is developed based on three key constructs: attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. The establishment of this framework is consistent with prior findings on inter-religious and ethnic relations in Malaysia (Muhammad Ridhuan et al., 2016; Yusoff et al., 2018). Several studies on elements in the context of religious tolerance show that attitudes (Fazilah et al., 2019), perceptions (Ahmad Tarmizi et al., 2013), and experiences (Khadijah et al., 2018) are all strongly related. As a result, the study employs these three constructs to develop the framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah. The constructs are then discussed further by finding some connected elements.

Religious tolerance, social engagement, religious sensitivity, and social interaction are all elements of the attitude construct. Each element has its criteria that explain its details. Elements of religious tolerance include respect for the religion of other believers, honesty in giving, and feeling comfortable despite living with people of other religions. Such a tolerant response, according to Rothman (2008) and Kamaruzzaman (2010), is required for multi-religious societies to achieve mutual harmony. In the list of the ten highest criteria, this element recorded the highest criteria (refer to Table 12). This is more likely consistent to the
findings of a study conducted by Ahmad Tarmizi et al. (2013) which emphasize that religious tolerance in Sabah is high.

Furthermore, the element of social engagement consists of community participation in social events that involve mingling with people of different religions, such as participating in harmony visit to the other houses of worship. These criteria indicate that having shared social activities together in matters related to religious celebrations and daily life activities will help believers get to know each other better. They do not only know people's names, but also their lifestyles, which include the do's and don'ts of religious creeds. This will lead the believers to nurture love and regard others as part of their one big family, and with these values, they would prefer to the ‘middle path’ as a solution rather than becoming embroiled in a quarrel or dispute over a religious issue. This is best illustrated in the case of the word ‘Allah’ in the Malay translation article published in the Herald in 2010. The case has sparked debate and social discontent in Malaysian society. However, the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Sabah have handled the crisis in a mature and courteous manner. Although religious vandalism had occurred in a few churches and mosques in West Malaysia, no such incidents had been reported in Sabah (Suraya, 2014; Suraya et al., 2022a,b). It shows that the people of Sabah tend to resolve conflict peacefully rather than allowing them to fester for an extended period.

Religious sensitivity is another element that must be tackled with matured manner to curb problem arising threaten the socio-religious harmony. Nur Farhana and Nur Syarihah (2020) underline that the rise of religious sensitive issue could affect the harmony in Malaysia if it is not well handled. The most sensitive issues in Malaysia have been the issue of looting the remains of other religions, religious insults, provocations, religious conversion, construction of nearby houses of worship, Malay Bible, and propagation of other religions to the community that do not belong to that religion. Such issues are still under control and require proactive action at all levels of both parties, whether at the top level of religious leader or grass roots level (Siti Khatijah and Fadzli Adam, 2017; Mohd Anuar et al., 2018; Nur Farhana and Nur Syarihah, 2020). The findings of this study indicate that some of those sensitive issues such as the proximity of another religious house of worship to their living area is acceptable in Sabah and they do not hesitate with the use of other religious symbols in public settings.

Finally, the element of social interaction, as Khadijah Muda (2017) states that there is a need for Malaysians to be more open to daily socialization and inter-racial interaction. It is essentially more crucial in
Muslim-non-Muslim relation, as Suraya et al. (2013) underlines that daily life interaction would sustain amicable interfaith relations and flourish healthy setting living together. This study found that the people in Sabah are in regular contact as they often have mixed-faith families and live next to the neighbors regardless of religion. Therefore, the attitude towards understanding the ‘other’, those who are different from our religious belief and practice, as suggested by Nurhanisah Senin et al. (2019) in her study of al-Biruni’s work, is seen to be a remarkable early model of interfaith relation seeking to promote a harmonious coexistence within diverse cultural and religious society.

Another construct which is perception has also been taken into consideration to analyze the experts’ consensus for establishing framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah. Perception is significantly crucial to highlight variables related to socio-religious harmony in Sabah as it might be different from the other states in Malaysia. Accordingly, the perception construct contains several elements of contributing factors, challenges, and indicators of socio-religious harmony in Sabah. The findings show that, “Prejudice against followers of other religions should be avoided for harmony to be achieved (P10)” falls into the fourth of the top ten highest ranking as listed in Table 12. It is interesting to highlight that the indicators of socio-religious harmony in Sabah are displayed by the regular contacts between the people of different religions and befriend with the others regardless of any religion. The desire to build harmony is expressed not only through acquaintance, but also applied within the context of mixed-faith family. According to Suraya et al. (2013, 2019), family members of different religions maintain religious boundaries by preparing food according to religious law. In many circumstances, particularly during wedding ceremonies, halal food is served, so that those who attend the social activity can eat and join. To honor guests and welcome the participation of family members of different religions, halal and non-halal cuisine are served during celebrations. During festivals, halal and non-halal food are served to respect guests and to welcome the presence of family members of different religions. In short, religious differences are not only respected, but also compromised to establish a harmonious lifestyle in Sabah.

Overall, this study does not only support the existing studies. Nevertheless, the results were developed based on expert consensus. Yet, it examined the reality of the discussion as appropriate to the context of the study. Various research on socio-religious harmony in Malaysia has been discussed. However, this study found their own contextual framework when some differences in Sabah need to be emphasized, such as mixed-faith family, intermarriage, non-existence or absence of inter-religious conflict, daily life interaction and accepting others religious places of worship build in their neighborhood. This is in line with Frazer and Freidli (2015) who describe the indicators of socio-religious harmony are based on consensus interaction and conflict transformation. Similar findings underlined by Muhammad Ridhuan et al. (2016, 2017) and Yusoff et al. (2018), who highlighted these two factors in measuring the level of socio-religious harmony in Malaysia.

6. Conclusion

This study has identified the framework of socio-religious harmony in Sabah based on the expert consensus through FDM. Expert consensus plays a vital role in helping to define this framework because the results of the study are not only guided by a review of the literature but gain the support and views of experienced experts. The results have shown that the experts have agreed upon three constructs, nine elements, and 43 criteria. Indeed, this study highlights the socio-religious in Sabah as a state with its pattern of harmony and needs specific research on it. Although some of the results support the findings of previous studies, this study is still developed distinctively by examining some essential aspects of other states. The existence of this study also extends for future studies that measure the level of socio-religious harmony in Sabah. In addition, the implications of this study also identify priorities in maintaining and enhancing the level of socio-religious harmony in Sabah based on expert consensus particularly on contributing to the new theory and framework of socio-religious harmony by highlighting hierarchy model of noble values. Moreover, this study also contributes to be a foundation on drafting the policy of National Harmony Charter in Malaysia.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Mohd Nazmi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Suraya Sintang: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Assis Kamu: Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

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