



Towards a Conceptual Framework for Analysing Social Cohesion Through Everyday Food Spaces: Mamak Restaurants in Malaysia

(Restoran Mamak di Malaysia: Ke Arah Pembentukan Kerangka Konseptual bagi Analisis Kesepaduan Sosial melalui Ruang Makanan Harian)

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a conceptual framework for analysing how social cohesion in Malaysia is produced, negotiated, and experienced through everyday food spaces, using Mamak restaurants as an analytic lens. Malaysia's colonial legacy of ethnicisation has long complicated the pursuit of national unity within its diverse society. Yet social cohesion has been sustained through bargaining, consensus-seeking, and accommodation among ethnic communities. Existing studies of social cohesion are often framed from macro, authority-defined perspective, overlooking how cohesion is enacted through everyday practices embedded in ordinary and informal spaces. Addressing this gap, the paper proposes an everyday-defined approach to social cohesion through three interrelated dimensions: (i) the spatial distribution and characteristics of Mamak restaurants; (ii) the cultural transformation of Mamak cuisine into a shared Malaysian symbol; and (iii) the spatial practices that position Mamak restaurants as representational spaces of Malaysian-ness. Drawing from ethnographic insights from Kuala Lumpur, this paper examines how everyday spatial and food practices produce and express social meanings. This paper contributes theoretically by advancing food space as an analytic lens for social cohesion and developing a conceptual framework of everyday cohesion; methodologically by integrating ethnography with spatial mapping; and practically by underscoring the value of accessible and inclusive everyday food spaces in sustaining cohesion within diverse societies.

Key words: Social cohesion; everyday practices; food spaces; Mamak restaurants; Malaysia.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membangunkan satu kerangka konseptual untuk menganalisa bagaimana kesepaduan sosial di Malaysia dihasilkan, dirundingkan dan dialami melalui ruang makanan seharian, dengan restoran Mamak digunakan sebagai lensa analitik. Legasi penjajahan berasaskan pengkelompokan etnik telah merumitkan pembinaan perpaduan nasional dalam masyarakat berbilang kaum di Malaysia. Namun, kesepaduan sosial terus dipelihara melalui proses tawar-menawar, pencarian konsensus, dan sikap bertolak ansur diantara pelbagai komuniti etnik di negara ini. Kajian-kajian sedia ada lazimnya membingkai kesepaduan sosial daripada perspektif makro yang ditentukan autoriti, sekali gus mengabaikan bagaimana kesepaduan dilaksanakan melalui amalan seharian dalam ruang santai dan tidak formal. Bagi menangani jurang ini, artikel ini mencadangkan pendekatan kesepaduan sosial yang ditakrifkan secara seharian melalui tiga dimensi saling berkaitan: (i) taburan dan ciri spatial restoran Mamak; (ii) transformasi budaya masakan Mamak sebagai simbol ke-Malaysiaan yang dikongsi bersama; dan (iii) amalan spatial yang memposisikan restoran Mamak sebagai ruang representasi ke-Malaysiaan. Berasaskan dapatan etnografi di Kuala Lumpur, artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana amalan ruang dan makanan seharian menghasilkan serta menzahirkan makna sosial. Artikel ini menyumbang secara teori dengan mengangkat ruang makanan



sebagai lensa analisis kesepaduan sosial dan membangunkan kerangka konseptual kesepaduan seharian; secara metodologi melalui penggabungan etnografi dan pemetaan spatial; serta secara praktikal dengan menegaskan kepentingan ruang makanan seharian yang mudah diakses dan inklusif dalam mengekalkan kesepaduan dalam masyarakat berbilang kaum.

Kata kunci: Kesepaduan sosial; amalan seharian; ruang makanan; restoran Mamak; Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The predicament of ethnicization, a legacy of Malaysia's colonial past, constitutes a persistent and significant concern within Malaysian society, as it remains pervasive and continues to shape social, economic, and political relations in Malaysia today (Ali 2015; Embong 2018; Holst 2012; Shamsul 2008). Ethnicization has given rise to divisive spaces across many aspects of Malaysian everyday life, posing significant challenges to national unity and the integration of its diverse social fabric, one of the key agendas of the country's nation-building efforts. To maintain ethnic harmony and promote social integration, the Malaysian government has undertaken extensive efforts to ensure peace and sustained economic development. These include the 1971 New Economic Policy and its subsequent 1991 National Development Policy, which aimed to foster national unity by eradicating inter-ethnic resentment arising from socio-economic disparities. The 1971 National Cultural Policy likewise sought to promote cultural assimilation and the development of a national culture based on three key elements: indigenous culture, suitable elements from other non-Malays cultures, and Islamic culture. In addition, nation building campaigns such as *Bangsa Malaysia* (United Malaysian Nation) and *OneMalaysia* were introduced to strengthen national unity, enhance quality of life, and nurture a shared national identity (Harun 2010; Saad 2012). Despite these efforts, the nation's multi-ethnic composition and the associated differences in culture, religion, language and identity have rendered the political project of nation building an arduous struggle and it remains work in progress (Harun 2010; Mohamed 2002; Shamsul 2011).

In the discourse on managing ethnic relations within the context of nation building in Malaysia, various perspectives exist. While some describe Malaysia as an "ethnically divided or fractured society" (Embong 2007:12) or characterise it as one marked by "divides and dissent" (Embong 2018:238), others view the country through the lens of "unity in diversity" or as existing in a state of "stable tension" (Shamsul 2010:7). The concept of social cohesion, as conceptualised by National Distinguished Professor Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of the National University of Malaysia, has gained attention as a way of describing the ongoing, work-in-progress nature of national unity (Musa & Jalil 2013). Shamsul (2011) posits that Malaysia has enjoyed relative peace, stability and prosperity over the years through constant bargaining, consensus seeking and cooperation among its ethnic communities, resulting in a state of social cohesion. He further proposes that social cohesion can serve as a discursive tool



for framing nation building and social integration in the Malaysian context. Shamsul argues that the social imagination of unity as uniformity, often characterised by one race, one religion, and one language, is a utopian goal that is difficult to achieve. Instead, social cohesion is a more pertinent and cherished feature in multicultural societies, regarded as a crucial element of nation building and a prerequisite for achieving national unity.

The study of social cohesion is ubiquitous in social policy and political science, particularly in the multi-cultural Western nations such as those in Europe, Canada, and Australia, yet it is often examined at the macro level using quantitative methods that focus on social, economic and political indicators. International organisations and state agencies, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Council of Europe, the Canadian Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion, and the Scanlon Foundation in Australia, have developed various frameworks for measuring social cohesion. By contrast, empirical research at the community level, grounded in the everyday practices and routines of individuals, remains relatively limited, even though such micro-level investigations are crucial for understanding how integration and cohesion are experienced in daily life. Aruqaj (2023) critiques the macro-level approach, arguing that aggregated macro-indices often fail to capture the social realities at the community level. Since integration and social cohesion constitute a dynamic phenomenon that continually shapes the spaces of everyday life, and the negotiation of differences often occurs locally through everyday interactions and experience, endeavours to measure and promote them cannot solely be dependent on national policies and strategies (Amin 2002; Dukes & Musterd 2012).

Similarly, studies of social cohesion in Malaysia have predominantly adopted macro-level, authority-defined approaches, measuring directly or indirectly through indices such as the National Unity Index and the Quality of Life Index. Beyond these macro-level analyses, other academic research has also mirrored this orientation by focusing on the evaluation of nation-building initiatives, primarily through government-led projects in education (Abu Bakar 2023; Jamil & Santhiram 2012; Kaur et al. 2017; Ong et al. 2014; Selvadurai et al. 2015) and community development programmes (Abdullah et al. 2017), hence reinforcing an authority-defined perspective. While these studies provide valuable insights into government-driven strategies, they risk overlooking how social cohesion is experienced, negotiated, and reproduced in everyday arenas. From an everyday-defined perspective, a growing number of studies have begun to explore social cohesion within the contexts of business and economic activities (Abdullah et al. 2018; Hassan et al. 2018; Mak Din et al. 2019) and popular culture, such as food (Olmedo & Shamsul 2016) and music consumption (Johan & Hamzah 2019). However, current research has yet to fully examine how social cohesion manifests in everyday or micro-level practices, where differences are negotiated in ordinary and mundane settings.

Building on these perspectives, this study addresses the gap by shifting the analysis of social cohesion in Malaysia from a macro, authority-defined paradigm to a micro, everyday-defined perspective. It examines the everyday practices of individuals and communities within food spaces, with particular attention to how modalities of social cohesion are manifested through routine interactions and spatial practices of eating out in Malaysia's iconic *Mamak* restaurants. Food spaces provide a critical lens for this analysis, as these everyday practices



reveal the integral role of food in both unifying and segregating individuals and groups within a society. Such practices not only foster community cohesion but also define group identity and demarcate social boundaries, offering valuable insights into the micro-level processes that shape social relations. This study specifically explores how *Mamak* restaurants embody accessibility and inclusion, function as spaces of interaction, negotiation, and identity formation, and whether these practices can inform the development of a conceptual framework for understanding social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies from an everyday perspective.

Hence, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose a framework for understanding everyday social cohesion through food spaces. Using *Mamak* restaurants as an empirical field, the framework develops three analytical axes to investigate:

1. The spatial distribution and characteristics of Mamak restaurants, to understand their role in fostering accessibility and inclusivity.
2. The transformation of *Mamak* cuisine and its possible contribution to the development of a shared Malaysian food identity.
3. The spatial practices of *Mamak* restaurants in producing a representational space of *Malaysian-ness*.

By synthesising these axes, this paper argues that *Mamak* restaurants can be conceptualised as everyday spaces of cohesion, where the challenges, negotiations and accommodations that shape the dynamics of social cohesion within the nation's diverse social fabric can be observed and analysed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SOCIAL COHESION: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The concept of social cohesion has a long-standing history in social psychology, sociology, and political philosophy (Chan et al. 2006; Friedkin 2004; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). Its intellectual origins trace back to Emile Durkheim, the founder of the French school of sociology (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Jenson 1998; Pahl 1991), who highlighted concerns that traditional morality was being disrupted and social cohesion weakened in modern societies. The decline of the traditional moral values and erosion of social ties resulted from technological evolution, industrialization, urbanization, and increased social and geographic mobility (Canadian Policy Research Sub-committee on Social Cohesion 1997; Jenson 1998; Pahl 1991). In subsequent decades, globalization and large-scale immigration further introduced diversity and pluralism into societies (Beauvais & Jenson 2002; Dukes & Musterd 2012; Markus 2014; Spoonley et al. 2005). Social cohesion, in a more contemporary context, is also challenged by economic restructuring; global population movement, rising ethno-cultural diversity, revolutions in information and communication technologies, and changing social relationship (Beauvais & Jenson 2002; Chan et al. 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). These transformations have manifested in growing inequalities, unemployment and crime, social and ethnic fractionalization, and even violent conflict (Jenson 1998; Lockwood 1999; Easterly et



al. 2006; Langer et al. 2017). Social cohesion has since emerged as a core concept in both policy and academic discourses, particularly in efforts to understand the impacts presented by these social changes on social cohesion and to develop policies and strategies that create conditions conducive to strengthening it.

SOCIAL COHESION IN POLICY DOMAIN

The policy discourse on social cohesion is largely problem driven and led by policymakers and social policy analysts. The concerns with social cohesion among them attributed to the realization of the significance of social cohesion as the possible antecedent of societal development, economic growth, and policy reform (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Chan et al. 2006; Easterly et al. 2006). Easterly et al. (2006) state that social cohesion's analytical power aids to advance policymakers' understanding and decision making in economic and social development processes, while Berger-Schmitt (2000) posits that social cohesion is essential for public administration to implement reforms as the people need to have confidence and trust in the government in generating long-term benefits to compensate short-term losses. In addition to that, Chan et al. (2006) suggest that politicians and policymakers have promoted social cohesion as a new form of governance to overcome social cleavages, and it is significance in developing the economy of a country.

Additionally, international organizations such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and trans-national entities like European Union have adopted the concept of social cohesion to address issues arising from economic, social and technological changes (Chan et al. 2006; Jenson 1998; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has taken the lead since 1980 in advocating the concept of social cohesion as a social investment to balance and sustain economic restructuring among its member states and within the policy communities. Similarly, in response to the growing population mobility and diversity after the establishment of the Union, European Union, through the Council of Europe, also announced in 1990s that social cohesion is the goal to strive for in social development (Chan et al 2006; Jenson 2010). In addition to the international and trans-national agencies, socio-political institutions in Canada, France, Australia and United Kingdom have also included the concept of social cohesion in their social policy to promote multi-culturalism (Chan et al 2006; Markus 2014), and to foster new identity (Woolley 2003).

SOCIAL COHESION IN ACADEMIC DOMAIN

The academic discourse of social cohesion can be divided into two broad categories, namely based on the theoretical traditions and causation patterns. There are three main traditional theoretical discourses of social cohesion. Different schools of thought conceptualize social cohesion based on their underlying ideologies, leading to distinct interpretations of social order and, consequently, varying constitutive elements of social cohesion (Bernard 1999; Green et al. 2006; Jenson 2002; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). Broadly, Green et al. (2006) label these



theoretical traditions as liberal, republican, and social democratic, while Jenson (1998) refers to them as classical liberalism, social cohesion, and democracy theories.

In the liberal discourse, active civil society is emphasized more than the state. Market liberals argue that societal collective action is the accumulated sum of individual's actions and behaviours, which precede society's shared value and common identity. An active civil society with elevated level of civic association is more effective in maintaining social order. In contrast, the republican or social cohesion discourse emphasizes the state over civil society. They posit that society is an integrated system with a set of shared values that stress on solidarity and common identity. Through its institutions, the state has a duty to advance social cohesion by ensuring welfare, social protection, and equitable redistribution. The social democratic discourse is like the republican perspective but places more emphasis on equality and equity is more profound (Bernard 1999; Green et al. 2006; Jenson 1998; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017).

Contemporary work led by sociologist and political scientists on the interpretation of social order and social cohesion has been influenced by these three theoretical traditions. These traditions help to situate the work of social cohesion both theoretically and empirically. According to Jenson (1998), while certain theoretical perspectives view social cohesion as rooted in shared values and commitment to a community, others highlight on institutional processes and conflicting interest more than values. The choice of theoretical tradition underpins the decision of how one would advance the social cohesion agenda in their respective context and studies.

In addition to conceptualizing social cohesion based on the three main theoretical traditions, patterns of causation can also be used to analyse social cohesion, functioning either as a cause or a consequence of other aspects of political, economic, and social life. The condition of social cohesion can be regarded as a dependent variable, typically understood as the result of other factors; for example, diversity and economic polarization are often perceived as threats to social cohesion. On the other hand, social cohesion can be viewed as an independent variable that generates outcomes; for instance, it has been shown to contribute to positive economic results (Beauvais & Jenson 2002). Among these, the relationships between social cohesion, economic growth, and societal diversity have received scholarly attention, reflecting their importance in understanding how social cohesion supports broader societal and developmental outcomes.

There is a substantial body of studies on social cohesion and its relationship to economic growth. In addressing the significance of quality public institutions in devising and implementing pro-growth policies, Easterly et al. (2006) stress the centrality of social cohesion required in the developmental and policy reforms of a country. Constitutive elements of social cohesion, including income inequality and ethnic fractionalization, can undermine institutional quality, which subsequently hampers economic growth. Social cohesion generates confidence and trust in government to implement reforms to achieve sustainable growth and long-term gains. Relatedly, Ritzen (2000) also highlights that social cohesion is vital in managing the effectiveness of state's policy in response to the changes of global economy. McCracken (1998) also suggests that economic performance is positively correlated to social cohesion. Social cohesion, on the one hand, improves especially when economic gains are equitably shared and



social programmes are put in place to assist individuals in regaining their position in society; on the other hand, evidence also suggests that social cohesion positively impacts macroeconomic performance.

Cross-national immigration has increased societal diversity, particularly in developed countries (Cheong et al., 2007; Dukes & Musterd, 2011; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011; Putnam, 2007; van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Ethno-racial diversity is often perceived as a potential threat to social cohesion. Putnam (2007) finds that ethnically diverse environments in the United States are associated with lower social trust and weaker bonds within and between communities. While diversity may bring long-term cultural, economic, and developmental benefits, it tends to impede social capital in the short to medium term. Subsequent research, however, provides limited evidence that diversity erodes social cohesion (Evers, 2014; Gijssberts et al., 2011; Letki, 2008; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011; van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Ethnic heterogeneity may impinge on local cohesion while reducing interethnic contact and trust, yet these local effects do not spill over to broader prosocial behaviours, and socioeconomic deprivation, rather than diversity itself, remains the principal factor undermining cohesion (Letki, 2008; Sturgis et al., 2017). Despite these short-term challenges, diversity can become an asset in successful immigrant societies by fostering emergent solidarity and more encompassing identities, which in turn encourage creativity and innovation, support stronger economic growth, and sustain a younger workforce. To fully realise these benefits, governments must implement immigration policies and social programmes that facilitate the economic and social integration of new immigrants (Berger-Schmitt, 2000; Dukes & Musterd, 2012; Letki, 2008; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011).

SOCIAL COHESION: THE MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Diversity is a feature of Malaysian society, both past and present. The long term historical and sociological development has no doubt played a significant role in framing the social structure of Malaysia, one of an ethnic heterogeneous society. While ethnic heterogeneity and division is a legacy left by the colonial capitalism, the dichotomy of *Bumiputera* (“son of the soil”) and non-*Bumiputera* or the newly evolved Muslim and non-Muslim–centric ideologies (Brown 2009; Hoffstaedter 2013), implementation of preferential policies or of policies of positive discrimination namely the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 to 1990 and subsequently replaced by the National Development Policy in 1991 (Ali 2015; Jomo 2004; Sriskandarajah 2005), and the vernacular school system (Saad 2012) have been perceived to have further reinforced the polarization of ethnic situations in Malaysia. Hence, maintaining a socially cohesive country remains a paramount task and an important political agenda of the government as it safeguards the continuous and multidimensional development in Malaysia. The discourse of social cohesion, spearheaded largely by the Malaysian government through top-down approaches, is embedded within the endeavour of nation building where racial harmony, social integration and national unity take the centre stage.

Despite nation building projects such as *Rukun Negara* (National Ideology), *Bangsa Malaysia* (United Malaysian Nation), and One Malaysia campaign, challenges persist in many



areas. Despite the challenges, Shamsul (2010) posits that Malaysia has reached a state of social cohesion, a pre-requisite for unity, though the much-desired national unity has not been attained since the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1971. Shamsul (2015) in his study of conceptualizing diversity in Malaysia states that social cohesion in Malaysia is achieved through negotiation with an accommodating spirit to yield consensus, compromise, and tolerance. Social cohesion is defined as a “situation where there is peace, stability, prosperity and well-being in a society” and is based on the following five pre-requisites: high level of materialism indicated by medium to high quality of living index, access to facilities that sustain quality of living and social mobility, stable and peaceful social structure, organic and positive interaction between multi-ethnic groups, and positive endeavours to promote involvement in mainstream activities (Shamsul 2015:8)

Social cohesion is believed to be crucial for Malaysia to continue to enjoy its positive economic and societal development, there is no specific measurement of social cohesion in Malaysia yet. However, a national unity index is currently available. The project to develop a national unity index is spearheaded by the Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister Department and the Institute of Ethnic Studies at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). According to the Ministry of National Unity, the National Unity Index (IPNas) is a comprehensive measurement tool at the national level, designed to explain community dynamics in Malaysia and serve as an indicator of the level of national unity in Malaysia. In addition, the Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) formulated the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) under the Prime Minister department is served indirectly as an indicator for the well-being of Malaysian society. The main objective of the MQLI it to assess the impacts of socioeconomic development policies and programmes in Malaysia.

Shamsul (2011) posits that although Malaysia has enjoyed peace and stability over the last few decades, the unity that has been attained is still “work in progress” and the need to monitor the progress is crucial. In addition to using statistical tools, he suggests that social research and development should be implemented to provide in-depth analysis to strengthen our understanding of Malaysia’s social health, both short and long-term. This integrated approach helps to ensure that efforts to enhance social cohesion are rooted in a thorough understanding of the complex social fabric of Malaysia.

SOCIAL COHESION: DEFINITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

Despite its prevalence across research and policy literature, there is neither agreed definition nor an agreed set of dimensions for measurement of social cohesion (Berman & Phillips 2004; Chan et al. 2006; Green et al. 2009; Jensen 2010; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016; Fonseca et al. 2019; Aruqaj 2023), except the consensus that social cohesion is a desirable attribute of a society and the decline of this attribute (Jenson 1998; Schniefer & van der Noll 2017). Defining and measuring social cohesion is not a simple undertaking due to the contested notion of social cohesion at two levels (Berman & Phillip 2004). Firstly, the contestation of what constitute social cohesion as suggested by the different theoretical traditions and secondly, the criticism over social cohesion as a quasi-concept by Bernard (1999) as it is a complex and of a multi-



dimensional construct (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Chan et al. 2006; Green et al. 2009; Jenson 2010; Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & an der Noll 2017).

Across the literature, different schools of thought and institutions emphasize dimension of social cohesion according to their theoretical traditions, causal assumptions, and ideological orientations. Nevertheless, core dimensions of social cohesion remain relatively consistent. As summarised in Table 1 and Table 2, the key dimensions identified in the various conceptualizations and frameworks of social cohesion largely correspond to components of social capital, including the strength of social relations, shared values and common identity, sense of belonging to a community, as well as mutual respect and trust among members of a society; and institutional features such as redistributive mechanism to foster equalities and social inclusion, quality of life, civic and political participation, as well as conflict resolution.



Table 1. Conceptualizing of social cohesion from a western perspective: Summary of definitions and dimensions: Policy domain

AGENCY/AUTHOR	DEFINITION	DIMENSIONS / INDICATORS	
Maxwell (1996:13)	A process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.		
Government of Canada's Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion (1997:3)	The ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians.	Conditions favourable for inclusive social cohesion • Economic conditions • Life chances • Quality of life	Elements of socially cohesive activity • Willing to cooperate • Participation
Jenson (1998:16)		• Belonging-Isolation • Inclusion-exclusion • Participative-non-involvement • Legitimacy-Illegitimacy • Recognition-Rejection	
The Council of Europe (2004:3)	The capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation	Inequality dimension	Social capital dimension



Berger-Schmitt (2000:4)
for European System of
Social Indicator

Scanlon-Monash Index
of Social Cohesion

Reduction of disparities, inequalities and social
exclusion

Strengthening of social relations,
interactions and ties

- Belonging
- Social justice and equity
- Participation
- Worth
- Acceptance, rejection and legitimacy

Table 2. Conceptualizing social cohesion from a western perspective: Summary of definitions and dimensions: Academic domain

AGENCY/AUTHOR	DEFINITION	DIMENSIONS / INDICATORS
Lockwood (1999:69)	“Strength or weakness of primary social relationship, of which those of kin, friends and neighbours”	Decline in civic community indicated by decreasing voluntary association membership, increased crime rate and family disorganization



Kearns & Forrest
(2000:996)

A cohesive society ‘hangs together’; all the component parts somehow fit in and contribute to society’s collective project and well-being; and conflicts between societal goals and groups, and disruptive behaviours, are largely absent or minimal.

- Common values and a civic culture
- Social order and social control
- Social solidarity and wealth disparities
- Social networks and social capital
- Place attachment and identity

Chan et al.
(2006:290,294)

A state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.

Horizontal (cohesion within civil society)

Vertical (state-citizen cohesion)

Dimensions

Subjective Component

(people’s state of mind)

- General trust with fellow citizens
- Willing to cooperate and help
- Sense of belonging or identity
- Trust in public figures
- Confidence in political and social institution

Objective component

(behavioural manifestation)

- Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
- Voluntarism and donation
- Absence of inter-group cleavage
- Political participation

Easterly et al.

Direct measures

Indirect measures



(2006:4-8)	The nature and extent of social economic divisions within society.	• Membership rates of participation and civic participation • Measures of trust	• Income distribution measures • Ethnic heterogeneity (ethnolinguistic fractionalization) measures
...continuation			
Green et al. (2009:19)	The property by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion.	Administrative data • Inequality • Wage regulation • Employment protection • State involvement • Welfare state • Ethno-racial diversity • Crime / disorder	Survey to be continued... • Value diversity • Active civic participation • Passive participation in nationwide organization • Freedom vs. equality • Merit vs equality • Ethnocultural vs civic identities • Ethnic tolerance • Social hierarchy • Gender equality
Schiefer & van der Noll (2016:586)	“A descriptive attribute of a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness.” (Schiefer, 2016:592)	Ideational • Social relations • Attachment/belonging • Orientation towards the common goods • Shared values	Relational • Inequality • Objective and subjective of quality of life
			Distributive



SOCIAL COHESION: RESEARCH GAP

An extensive review of the literature on social cohesion reveals a discernible lack of consensus on its definition and measurement, except that it is widely regarded as a valued quality of a society or community and a concept encompassing multiple constructs and dimensions (Schiefer & van der Noll 2016; Friedkin 2004; Jenson 2002). Consequently, scholars, research organizations and policy institutions have endeavoured to elucidate the concept, making considerable progress in identifying its definition, dimensions, and possible indicators, often with the objective of developing conceptual frameworks suitable for empirical analysis and policy application.

Theoretical Perspectives and Ambiguity. Despite these advances, the concept of social cohesion remains theoretically ambiguous. This ambiguity arises because different frameworks emphasize distinct constructs and dimensions, influencing what is examined, how it is measured, and how findings are interpreted, hence leading to different policy recommendations. Furthermore, social cohesion is often linked or overlapped with conceptually similar constructs such as social integration, social capital, social exclusion, and quality of life, reflecting its conceptual interconnections and further contributing to this theoretical complexity.

From an epistemological standpoint, discourses in social cohesion, both historically and in contemporary contexts, frequently emerge in response to social transformations perceived as threats to social fabric, traditional morality and social order. These transformations are often engendered by phenomena such as globalization, immigration, industrialization, and capitalism. Within this paradigm, studies tend to examine the causal relationships between social, economic, political, and technological changes and the condition of social cohesion. Consequently, social cohesion is frequently treated as an outcome of broader societal processes such as diversity and economic restructuring due to globalized market and technological advancement. In studies that analyse social cohesion as an outcome, social solidarity and shared values are often regarded as the core elements through which social cohesion is both expressed and maintained. These dimensions help explain how social change influences the strength and quality of social ties and how cohesion manifests in different social contexts. Conversely, social cohesion can also be conceptualized as a precursor contributing to positive economic performance and societal well-being. Studies that adopt this perspective are primarily concerned with the adverse impacts that a lack of social cohesion might have on socio-economic conditions and seek to identify strategies to address these issues.

The Predominance of Macro-Level Approaches to Social Cohesion. The abundance of social cohesion studies in the Western context has generated a wide ranging of valuable conceptualizations and measurement approaches. However, these studies predominantly focus on macro level, systemic analyses, encompassing social, economic, and political dimensions and often adopting a quantitative approach in its measurement. For example, within the European Union, the dimensions and indicators of social cohesion are part of a larger research framework of the European System of Social Indicators (EUSI), with studies conducted for the



entire European Union community. Analyses and comparisons of various indicators between countries were made not only on social cohesion but also quality of life and sustainability (Berger-Schmitt 2000). Similarly, the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, a longitudinal national survey conducted annually in Australia since 2007, provides data to assess the country's immigration programme and its social impact on cultural diversity and social cohesion (Markus 2014). In Malaysia, the formulation of the Malaysian Quality of Life Index and the National Unity Index aims to make statistical data available at the national level to evaluate and monitor societal well-being.

While these macro-level approaches have yielded important insights, they have inevitably overlooked the practices and interactions through which cohesion is produced and experienced in everyday life. This highlights the need to consider analytical levels beyond the macro scale, particularly those that capture the lived experience of individuals and communities.

Social Cohesion: Research Gap in Malaysia. Studies of social cohesion in Malaysia reflect both the outcome-oriented and precursor-oriented approaches. On one hand, social cohesion is interpreted as an outcome of ethnic diversity, revealing how a multi-ethnic society maintains harmonious ethnic relations. On the other hand, it is simultaneously framed as a precursor to national unity, representing a crucial foundation for nation building (Shamsul 2015; Ong et al. 2016). This dual framing illustrates that social cohesion is simultaneously a product of Malaysia's ethnically heterogeneous reality and a prerequisite for national progress. Consequently, fostering social cohesion among diverse communities is regarded as essential for building a stable and prosperous nation. Scholars and policymakers view a socially cohesive society as vital for Malaysia's progress and harmony, hence, efforts to strengthen national integration, bridge social divides, and promote a collective national identity have become increasingly pivotal.

A review of Malaysian studies on social cohesion indicates that existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level dimensions and formal institutional frameworks. Beyond the National Unity Index and Malaysia Quality of Life Index, numerous studies examine policies and roles of education in promoting inclusion, integration, and social cohesion (Jamil & Santhiram 2012; Kaur et al. 2017; Ong et al. 2014); analyse challenges in maintaining social cohesion from a Malaysian legal perspective (Musa & Jalil 2015); explore the impacts of business networking on social cohesion (Hassan et al. 2018); and evaluate the progress of governmental programme, such as the Neighbourhood Watch initiative under *Rukun Tetangga* (Abdullah et al. 2017). To a lesser extent, meso-level studies have examined social cohesion within community settings, including investigations of its correlation with neighbourhood crime rates (Marzbali et al., 2014) and analyses of its relationship with public spaces, social integration, and community cohesion (Bajunid et al. 2018; Tang & Khan 2012; Uiang et al. 2015). While these studies attempt to elucidate the complex issue of social cohesion in different Malaysian societal settings and contribute valuable insights to devise public programmes, shared public spaces and housing communities which are conducive for social interaction, integration and cohesion, they largely remain macro-centred or institution-focused, leaving micro- and meso-level everyday practices relatively underexplored. In particular, the



potential of everyday food spaces, such as Mamak restaurants, to illuminate the lived modalities of social cohesion remains largely unexamined.

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

Analysing social cohesion through the lens of food is an under-researched subject area. Despite Malaysia prides itself as a food paradise, linking food and social cohesion in research is relatively new and unexplored except the Malaysian *Mamakization* project initiated by Olmedo and Shamsul (2016). *Mamak* stalls are posited as “great good place” characterized by their inclusivity and locality, hence a potential space, at the everyday-defined level, for social cohesion (Olmedo & Shamsul 2016). Similarly, Duruz and Khoo (2014) also see *Mamak* restaurants as potential sites for public sphere in Habermas’ term and Oldenburg’s great good place. *Mamak* restaurants offer *halal* cuisine and can be found easily on the streets of Malaysian urban cities, undoubtedly can be deemed as a cosmopolitan space where diverse cultures or groups can come together and mingle.

Mamak restaurants may, at first glance, appear to be ordinary places for satisfying ones’ physiological and social needs. However, upon closer examination, they function as microcosms of Malaysian urban plurality and as spaces embedded with dynamic processes of socio-cultural diversity and politics. They offer a lens through which to apprehend the country’s complex social fabric, as their omnipresence provides insight into how various sociological forces converge in an everyday setting where food, ethnic politics and identity intersect. As everyday shared spaces, *Mamak* restaurants bring together individuals from diverse social classes and ethnic backgrounds, creating opportunities for interaction across societal divides. Moreover, the act of consuming food of the ‘Other’ represents a powerful symbol in the contestation of individual and collective identity, frequently reflecting the porosity of ethnic boundaries. Consequently, *Mamak* restaurants, emerge as possible sites for the everyday negotiations of identity, where boundaries of ethnicity may shift and be re-constructed. The adaptation, struggles, and persistence witnessed in *Mamak* restaurants mirror a broader trajectory of social transformation within Malaysian society.

The *Mamakization* project, conducted by Olmedo and Shamsul (2016), analyses social cohesion through the social practice of eating out in Malaysia’s iconic *Mamak* stalls, focusing on an economic dimension using the alternative food network, and a sociological dimension based on the in-alienated social transaction. According to their empirical findings, they conclude that three social functions generated by the role of *Mamak* restaurants can serve as a prerequisite for social cohesion. The three social functions comprise social solidarity, economic sustenance and identity maintenance. Extending from the *Mamakization* project, this study seeks to advance the analysis of social cohesion by examining three interrelated analytical axes, spatial distribution, cuisine transformation, and spatial practices, that together shed light on how social cohesion is spatially produced and experienced. These axes are analytically mapped onto the broader dimensions of social cohesion, particularly those related to distributive aspect



and social capital, as these are especially relevant to understanding social cohesion from an everyday perspective.

First, instead of using statistical or aggregated data to reflect measure social, political and economic disparities and inequalities, the (in)equality or distributive dimension in this study is conceptualize through the lens of spatial distribution and characteristics of *Mamak* restaurants as a spatial representation of social access and inclusion. In doing so, it highlights the significance of the accessibility and inclusivity of food spaces that may function as everyday arenas for building or reflecting social cohesion. As the empirical field of this study, the distribution and characteristics of *Mamak* restaurants will be inventoried and categorised into various ideal types to reveal their spatial pattern and temporal changes over time. The categorization will be based on the business model including features such as size, location, menu selection, décor, and ambience, as well as other operational related features.

Second, the social capital dimension is analysed through its ideational and relational aspects. The ideational aspect is closely tied to sense of identification and belonging that individuals feel with the broader national community. The analysis examines on the possible transformation of an ethnic minority cuisine from being perceived as “Others” to becoming part of “Ours.” Such a shift denotes a transitional process in which ethnic boundaries are blurred, contributing to the construction of national belonging through the emergence of a shared Malaysian food identity. Specifically, the de-ethnicization of *Mamak* cuisine offers a lens to explore how a food culture rooted in a strong Indian Muslim identity can evolve to reflect a collective Malaysian identity. This process highlights how food can serve as a medium for fostering collective belonging, while also illustrating the porosity of ethnic boundaries within Malaysia’s multi-ethnic context.

The relational aspect, on the other hand, focuses on the social connections and ties among members of society through their interactions within the food space. Analysing spatial practices reveals how individuals engage in the everyday negotiation of social life through what they do, where they do it, what they consume, and with whom they interact, as well as how they cultivate a sense of belonging and attachment to place. To understand how social cohesion is produced and negotiated in *Mamak* restaurants. and how Malaysians experience and inhabit these spaces, the third research objective of this study draws on spatial theories, particularly Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the *production of space* and Michel de Certeau’s concept of space as a *practiced place*. Lefebvre (1991) conceives space not an inert nor a passive backdrop, but as a social product constituted through complex social actions. His spatial triad, comprising perceived, conceived and lived dimensions, offer a dialectical understanding of how space is simultaneously material, abstract and experiential. In Lefebvre’s framework, space is actively produced and reproduced through the interplay between institutional design, spatial practices and imagination. While Lefebvre elucidates the macro processes of spatial production, de Certeau (1985) focuses on the micro-level of everyday life, and highlighting how individuals and communities negotiate, appropriate, and reinterpret the spaces structured by dominant systems. Through everyday practices such as walking or eating, he argues, people tactically assign alternative meanings to the spaces they lived.



Combining the perspectives of Lefebvre and de Certeau helps to provides a more holistic understanding of how food spaces operate as both products and producers of social relations. In the context of this study, *Mamak* restaurants can be read through Lefebvre's framework as socio-spatial formations shaped by historical, economic, and cultural processes in Malaysia's multi-ethnic landscape, while de Certeau's insights illuminate how everyday practices of eating, interaction, and sociability within these restaurants continually reconfigure and re-signify them. This synthesis enables an examination of social cohesion not as a fixed spatial or cultural condition, but as an ongoing, negotiated process enacted through the everyday practices of ordinary people. *Mamak* restaurants are thus not only perceived as inclusive food space but also function as social arenas through which social relations between space and people can be analysed. This includes how different communities enact shared identity or maintain ethnic boundaries, strengthen social ties or remain fragmented, and cultivate a sense of belonging and trust with other members of society or otherwise. This perspective also highlights how social relations are simultaneously produced by the space through practices such as commensality and, in turn, shape the space itself. Examining these practices clarifies the interplay between spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation in producing a representational space that embodies Malaysian-ness.

In summary, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study and Table 3 illustrates how the analytical axes are mapped onto the conceptual dimensions of social cohesion to understand *Mamak* restaurants as everyday spaces of social cohesion.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysing social cohesion in *Mamak* restaurants.

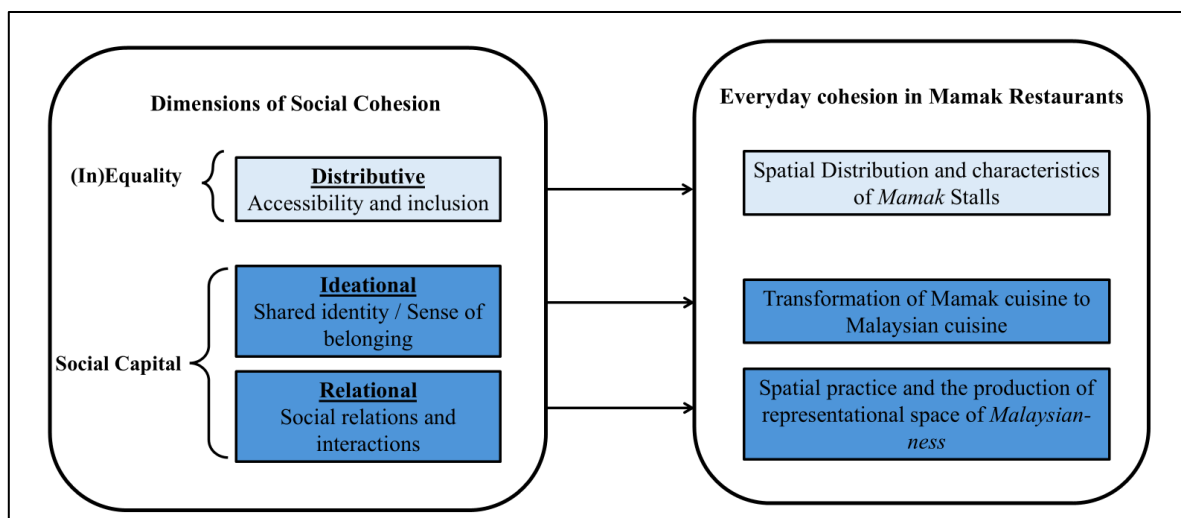




Table 3. Mapping of dimension of social cohesion and analytical axes for this study

Dimension of Social Cohesion	Mapping of Analytical Axis	Conceptualization and Focus
(In)equality Dimension) – Distributive (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Spatial Distribution and Characteristics of <i>Mamak</i> Restaurants	This dimension is conceptualized through the lens of spatial distribution and characteristics of <i>Mamak</i> restaurants as a spatial representation of social access and inclusion. The study inventories and categorizes <i>Mamak</i> restaurants based on features like size, location, menu selection, décor, and operational features to reveal their spatial pattern and temporal changes over time. This approach highlights the significance of the accessibility and inclusivity of these food spaces.
Social Capital - Ideational Dimension (Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Transformation of <i>Mamak</i> Cuisine	This aspect is closely tied to the sense of identification and belonging that individuals feel with the broader national community. Analysis focuses on the de-ethnicization of <i>Mamak</i> cuisine, the transitional process where an ethnic minority cuisine shifts from being perceived as “Others” to becoming part of “Ours”. This shift contributes to the construction of national belonging through the emergence of a shared Malaysian food identity, illustrating the porosity of ethnic boundaries.
Social Capital - Relational Dimension (Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Spatial Practices of <i>Mamak</i> Restaurants	This dimension focuses on the social connections and ties among members of society through their interactions within the food space. The relational aspect focuses on the dynamic micro-level interactions within the spaces. By using spatial theories (Lefebvre and de Certeau), the framework views <i>Mamak</i> restaurants not as static backdrops but as “practiced places” where social relations like trust, fragmentation, or shared identity, are actively negotiated through eating and socializing. This perspective clarifies how social relations are simultaneously produced by the space and, in turn, shape the space itself.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATION

This study presents significance in the aspects of theoretical, methodological, and practical. Each of these aspects contributes to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in the study of social cohesion within multi-ethnic societies through everyday practices.

From a theoretical perspective, while social cohesion has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, the proliferation of varied definitions has resulted in inconsistencies in its conceptualization and measurement. This study seeks to address the gap in existing literature concerning the absence of conceptual framework and empirical evidence for analysing of social cohesion through the lens of everyday food space. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by analysing social cohesion through three interconnected dimensions: the spatial distribution of Mamak restaurants, the transformation of the cuisine, and the spatial



practices they embody. Focusing on these, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how social cohesion is produced, negotiated and experienced in the everyday food space.

From a methodological standpoint, while existing scholarship on social cohesion often emphasizes policy-driven and macro-level data, this study focuses on meso- and micro-level insights derived from everyday practices within an ethnic food space. It adopts a qualitative approach, including ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, to examine the spatial distribution and practices of Mamak restaurants. This methodological choice enables the researcher to capture the richness and complexity of everyday practices and routine interactions occurred in the *Mamak* restaurants, facilitating an empirically grounded understanding of social cohesion at both the community and individual levels. In doing so, it offers insights on how to bridge the gap between macro-level aggregated indices and the lived realities observed at the meso- and micro-levels.

From a practical perspective, the availability of accessible and inclusive spaces is crucial for nurturing social cohesion in Malaysia. This study seeks to shed light on the significance of accessible and inclusive food spaces in fostering social cohesion. Malaysian neighbourhoods have historically been ethnically configured, tracing back to the colonial times when British administration segregated the ethnic communities into different locality based on their economic roles that were intrinsically linked to their ethnic background. Although urbanization and modernization have gradually led to a more ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, particularly in urban areas, the legacy of ethnic configuration remains evident and continues to be a significant aspect of Malaysian social landscape. Hence, the creation and maintenance of accessible and inclusive spaces that facilitate participation and interaction among different ethnic groups is crucial in strengthening community ties and fostering social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

Pursuing a socially cohesive society within multi-ethnic Malaysia is a complex endeavour; equally challenging is the task of analysing and measuring social cohesion. Nevertheless, it is imperative for institutional actors including those in government, academia, and civil society to remain attuned to the evolving dynamics of nation building. Social cohesion is regarded as prerequisite for national unity and is closely linked to a nation's development and prosperity. Although the narratives and efforts to manage ethnic relations and pursue national unity remain as important tasks at the authority-defined level, much of the contestation and negotiation of difference occur at the local level, through everyday experiences and spatial practices, thus justifying the focus of this study. While this study may not be able to measure all indicators of social cohesion, it has identified and encapsulated key dimensions relevant to understanding the concept in the Malaysian everyday context. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a conceptual framework for analysing social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society, through the lens of everyday food spaces. This framework not only highlights the significance of everyday



spaces in shaping social relations but also offers a grounded approach to examining social cohesion beyond the authority-defined narratives.

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