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EXAMINING HOW RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, POLITICAL VIEWS, MEDIA CONSUMPTION, AND GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION INFLUENCE SOCIAL TOLERANCE LEVELS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the multifaceted relationships between religious affiliation, political ideology, media consumption patterns, geographic location, and social tolerance levels in contemporary society. Using a quantitative approach with SPSS analysis of survey data from 2,847 participants across diverse demographic groups, this research investigates how these four key variables independently and collectively influence attitudes toward social diversity, minority rights, and cultural pluralism. The findings reveal significant correlations between conservative religious affiliations and lower tolerance scores ($r = -.342$, $p < .001$), while liberal political orientations demonstrate positive associations with tolerance measures ($r = .418$, $p < .001$). Media consumption patterns show differential effects, with social media usage correlating with decreased tolerance ($r = -.289$, $p < .001$) and traditional news media showing positive correlations ($r = .267$, $p < .001$). Geographic analysis reveals substantial urban-rural divides, with metropolitan areas demonstrating significantly higher tolerance scores ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.87$) compared to rural regions ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.12$). Multiple regression analysis indicates that these four variables collectively explain 47.3% of the variance in social tolerance scores ($R^2 = .473$, $F(4,2842) = 637.45$, $p < .001$). These findings contribute to understanding the complex determinants of social cohesion and have implications for policy development, educational initiatives, and community building efforts in increasingly diverse societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Social tolerance serves as a fundamental cornerstone of democratic societies, embodying the essential willingness to accept and respect a wide array of viewpoints, lifestyles, and cultural practices that may diverge from one's personal beliefs and values. As globalization, migration, and cultural diversity continue to rise, it has become increasingly critical to understand the factors influencing tolerance levels, as they play a vital role in maintaining social cohesion and preventing potential intergroup conflict. Tolerance extends beyond mere passive acceptance; it encompasses an active respect for differences and includes the robust protection of minority rights within pluralistic frameworks (Welzel & Inglehart, 2005).

Contemporary research in social psychology and political science has identified several key variables that contribute to variations in tolerance levels across individuals and communities. Among the most significant predictors are religious affiliation, political ideology, media consumption patterns, and geographic location. These variables interact through complex psychological, social, and structural mechanisms that significantly shape individual worldviews and intergroup attitudes. For instance, religious beliefs can offer inclusive frameworks that emphasize universal humanity and common moral values while simultaneously harboring exclusive doctrines that create rigid in-group/out-group distinctions (Allport & Ross, 1967). Different political ideologies present competing visions for social organization, fundamentally differing in their approaches to diversity, inclusion, and societal change (Jost et al., 2003).

The media landscape has transformed dramatically in recent decades, transitioning from traditional gatekeeping mechanisms to fragmented information ecosystems characterized by echo chambers. These echo chambers can not only reinforce existing biases but also present opportunities for individuals to encounter diverse perspectives that challenge their preconceived notions (Prior, 2007). Furthermore, geographic location remains a powerful predictor of social attitudes. Urban-rural divides often reflect varied lived experiences, economic infrastructures, and cultural norms that significantly influence the levels of tolerance individuals exhibit (Florida, 2017). The interplay among these variables leads to intricate patterns of influence that necessitate sophisticated analytical approaches for comprehensive understanding.

This research addresses critical gaps in the existing literature by examining these four key variables—religious affiliation, political views, media consumption, and geographic location—simultaneously within a comprehensive analytical framework. While previous studies have frequently centered on isolated predictors or limited combinations of factors, this investigation offers a holistic assessment of how these elements interact to shape social tolerance. The findings not only contribute to the theoretical understanding of tolerance formation but also provide practical insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to foster inclusive societies. By illuminating the complex web of influences on social tolerance, this research underscores the importance of multifaceted strategies for enhancing social cohesion in diverse communities.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive research on individual factors influencing social tolerance, significant gaps remain in understanding how religious affiliation, political ideology, media consumption patterns, and geographic location operate collectively to shape tolerance levels in contemporary society. Most

existing studies examine these variables in isolation or focus on limited combinations, failing to capture the complex interactions that occur when multiple influences converge. This fragmented approach limits our ability to develop comprehensive theories of tolerance formation and design effective interventions to promote social cohesion in diverse communities.

The rapid evolution of media landscapes and increasing political polarization have created new challenges for understanding tolerance dynamics. Traditional models developed in earlier media environments may not adequately account for the effects of social media algorithms, selective exposure patterns, and the proliferation of partisan information sources. Similarly, the persistent urban-rural divide in many democratic societies reflects deeper structural and cultural differences that intersect with religious and political identities in complex ways. Without systematic examination of these interconnected influences, researchers and practitioners lack the theoretical foundation necessary to address declining tolerance levels observed in many democratic contexts.

Furthermore, methodological limitations in previous research have constrained our understanding of causal relationships and effect sizes among key variables. Many studies rely on correlational analyses without controlling for confounding variables or examining mediating mechanisms. The absence of comprehensive multivariate models that simultaneously account for demographic, ideological, and contextual factors limits the generalizability and practical utility of existing findings. This research addresses these limitations through rigorous quantitative analysis that examines direct, indirect, and interactive effects among the four primary variables of interest while controlling for relevant demographic characteristics.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question: To what extent do religious affiliation, political views, media consumption patterns, and geographic location independently and collectively predict social tolerance levels among adults in diverse communities?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. How do different religious affiliations correlate with varying levels of social tolerance?
2. What is the relationship between political ideology and tolerance toward diverse groups?
3. How do different media consumption patterns influence social tolerance attitudes?
4. What geographic variations exist in social tolerance levels, and how do they interact with other variables?
5. Which combination of variables provides the strongest predictive model for social tolerance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social psychology, sociology, politics, and communication studies are some of the fields that provide theoretical groundwork for comprehending social tolerance. The essential framework for comprehending how, under ideal circumstances, intergroup contact might lessen prejudice and raise tolerance was laid forth by Allport (1954) and expanded upon by succeeding scholars: contact theory. Intergroup contact reduces bias, according to a meta-analysis of 515 studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). The impact sizes vary depending on the contact conditions and group characteristics. This theoretical groundwork implies that media exposure and geographical location may affect media tolerance by influencing opportunities for direct and indirect intergroup communication.

Multiple factors, including denominational traits and personal religiosity orientations, contribute to the complicated patterns of religious influences on tolerance. There is a correlation between lower levels of prejudice and intrinsic religiosity, defined as religion practiced for its own sake, as opposed to extrinsic religiosity, defined as religion practiced to further other objectives, according to Allport and Ross's (1967) influential distinction between the two types of religious orientations. Conservative evangelical organisations tend to exhibit lower levels of tolerance than liberal Protestant denominations and non-religious individuals, however, there are still notable variances across denominations (Beatty & Walter, 1984). While religious dogma has the potential to establish exclusive limits, new evidence from the work of Putnam and Campbell (2010) reveals that religious social capital can foster tolerance via greater civic engagement. Both the affiliational and behavioural elements of religious influence must be carefully measured due to their dual nature.

One of the most robust indicators of social tolerance is political ideology; research consistently links liberal leanings to more tolerance in a variety of contexts. Motivated social cognition theory by Jost et al. (2003) provides an explanation for these variations by highlighting the diverse psychological demands for security, structure, and threat management. According to Hadet (2012), conservative ideology places an emphasis on tradition, hierarchy, and in-group loyalty, whereas liberal ideology places an emphasis on equality, change, and universal rights. Despite methodological and domain-specific variations in effect magnitude, empirical research shows that ideological disparities exist across cultures (Napier & Jost, 2008). Institutional exposure, peer pressure, and familial influences all play a role in the political socialisation processes that begin in infancy and continue into adulthood, moulding these ideological orientations.

As information environments have grown more complex and dispersed, media consumption habits have assumed a more central role in predicting societal opinions. According to the principle of selective exposure (Festinger, 1957), people are more likely to seek out information that supports their current worldview and less likely to seek out information that challenges it. As people increasingly choose their information settings, Prior's (2007) study on media choice shows how more options might make people more polarised. Algorithmic filtering and homophilic network architecture on social media platforms might make these impacts worse (Pariser, 2011). Nevertheless, not all media effects are negative. For example, according to Schiappa et al. (2005), exposure to varied viewpoints in the news might promote tolerance, while entertainment media that showcase good interactions across groups can decrease prejudice. Rather than total consumption, the most important variable seems to be the diversity of media exposure.

There are a number of ways in which a region's demographics, economy, cultural norms, and opportunities for intergroup contact affect levels of tolerance. Florida (2017) found that there are persistent patterns connecting diversity, economic development, and social attitudes in their examination of metropolitan tolerance levels. Distinct value systems, economic priorities, and social networks are only a few of the factors that contribute to rural-urban divides (Cramer, 2016). Long-term adaptation processes can promote tolerance through persistent intergroup contact, according to Putnam's (2007) research on diversity's benefits. However, short-term gains in variety may impair social capital. These patterns are being reshaped by trends in urbanisation and geographic migration, which have ramifications for social cohesion and political coalitions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine relationships between religious affiliation, political views, media consumption patterns, geographic location, and social tolerance levels. The research utilized a stratified random sampling approach to ensure representative coverage across demographic and geographic categories. Data collection occurred over a six-month period from January to June 2024, using both online and telephone survey methods to maximize response rates and demographic diversity.

Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 847 adults aged 18-75 residing in diverse geographic regions across Malaysia. Stratified sampling ensured proportional representation across key demographic variables, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, income, and geographic region. The sample characteristics were: 52.3% female, 47.7% male; age distribution roughly normal with M = 42.7 years (SD = 14.2); racial composition of 68.4% Malay, 13.2% Chinese, 11.8% Indian, 4.1% Others 2.5% other/multiracial; educational attainment ranging from less than high school (8.7%) to graduate degrees (22.1%); and geographic distribution across metropolitan (54.3%), suburban (28.9%), and rural (16.8%) areas.

Measures

Social tolerance was assessed using the Social Tolerance Scale (STS), a validated 24-item instrument measuring attitudes toward various outgroups, including racial/ethnic minorities, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and political dissidents. Items utilized 7-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with higher scores indicating greater tolerance ($\alpha = .89$). Religious affiliation was measured through self-identification categories including Protestant denominations, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, other religions, and no religious affiliation, supplemented by religiosity measures assessing service attendance and importance of religion. Political ideology was assessed using the 7-point liberal-conservative scale plus specific policy attitude batteries covering social and economic issues. Media consumption patterns were measured through detailed questions about news sources, social media usage, entertainment preferences, and information-seeking behaviors. Geographic location was coded using metropolitan statistical area classifications and population density measures.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29.0. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, and assumption testing for multivariate procedures. The primary analytical approach utilized hierarchical multiple regression to examine individual and collective effects of predictor variables on social tolerance scores. Model 1 included demographic control variables (age, gender, race, education, income). Model 2 added religious affiliation and religiosity measures. Model 3 incorporated political ideology variables. Model 4 added media consumption patterns. Model 5 included geographic location variables. Additional analyses examined interaction effects and mediation pathways using Hayes' PROCESS macro. Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's conventions, and statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that religious affiliation, political views, media consumption, and geographic location collectively explain 47.3% of the variance in social tolerance scores, representing a large effect size according to Cohen's conventions. The demographic control variables in Model 1 accounted for 15.2% of variance, with education emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .245$, $p < .001$). The addition of religious variables in Model 2 substantially increased explained variance by 11.5%, with religious conservatism showing a strong negative association with tolerance ($\beta = -.298$, $p < .001$). Frequency of religious service attendance also demonstrated significant negative relationships with tolerance scores ($\beta = -.156$, $p < .001$), suggesting that both doctrinal content and social reinforcement mechanisms contribute to religious effects on tolerance.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social Tolerance	3.82	1.15	-				
2. Religious Conservatism	3.24	1.67	-.342**	-			
3. Political Liberalism	3.98	1.89	.418**	-.521**	-		
4. Media Diversity	4.12	1.34	.267**	-.234**	.312**	-	
5. Urban Location	0.54	0.5	.298**	-.289**	.367**	.198**	-

This correlation table presents the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the five key variables examined in the social tolerance study. The descriptive statistics reveal that participants scored moderately on most measures, with Social Tolerance averaging 3.82 on what appears to be a 7-point scale, slightly below the theoretical midpoint. Religious Conservatism averaged 3.24, indicating the sample was somewhat less religiously conservative overall, while Political Liberalism scored 3.98, suggesting a slightly liberal-leaning sample. Media Diversity averaged 4.12, indicating participants consumed relatively diverse information sources, and Urban Location averaged 0.54, meaning 54% of participants resided in urban areas. The standard deviations show that Political Liberalism had the greatest variability (SD = 1.89), reflecting substantial ideological diversity in the sample, while the other variables showed moderate to low variability around their respective means.

The correlation matrix reveals several significant relationships that support the study's theoretical framework. The strongest correlation appears between Political Liberalism and Religious Conservatism ($r = -.521$, $p < .01$), indicating a strong negative association where increases in religious conservatism correspond with decreases in political liberalism. Social Tolerance shows its strongest positive correlation with Political Liberalism ($r = .418$, $p < .01$) and its strongest negative correlation with Religious Conservatism ($r = -.342$, $p < .01$), suggesting that politically liberal and less religiously conservative individuals tend to exhibit higher tolerance levels. Additionally, Urban Location demonstrates meaningful positive correlations with both Political Liberalism ($r = .367$, $p < .01$) and Social Tolerance ($r = .298$, $p < .01$), while showing negative associations with Religious Conservatism ($r = -.289$, $p < .01$). Media Diversity also correlates positively with Political Liberalism ($r = .312$, $p < .01$) and Social Tolerance ($r = .267$, $p < .01$), indicating that exposure to diverse information sources is associated with more liberal political views and higher tolerance levels. All correlations are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, suggesting these relationships are robust and unlikely to have occurred by chance, supporting the theoretical model that these variables form a coherent pattern of ideological and attitudinal clustering.

Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Social Tolerance

Model	Variables	β	t	R^2	ΔR^2	F
1	Demographics			0.152	0.152	127.45**
	Age	-0.089	-4.23**			
	Gender (Female)	0.067	3.14**			
	Education	0.245	11.67**			
	Income	0.123	5.89**			
2	+ Religious Variables			0.267	0.115	183.22**
	Religious Conservatism	-0.298	-14.67**			
	Service Attendance	-0.156	-7.23**			
	+ Political Variables			0.389	0.122	231.45**
	Political Liberalism	0.334	16.78**			
	Social Liberalism	0.167	8.94**			
4	+ Media Variables			0.441	0.052	219.67**
	Media Diversity	0.189	9.87**			
	Social Media Use	-0.134	-7.12**			
5	+ Geographic Variables			0.473	0.032	206.89**
	Urban Location	0.156	8.23**			
	Population Density	0.089	4.67**			

Note: N = 847. **p < .01. Final model: R^2 = .473, F (12, 2834) = 206.89, p < .001.

Political ideology variables added in Model 3 provided the largest incremental contribution, increasing explained variance by 12.2%. Political liberalism emerged as the strongest overall predictor of social tolerance (β = .334, p < .001), while social liberalism on issues like LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality showed additional predictive power (β = .167, p < .001). These findings support theoretical expectations about ideological differences in tolerance, with liberal orientations consistently associated with greater acceptance of diversity. The substantial effect sizes suggest that political worldviews represent fundamental organizing principles that shape attitudes across multiple tolerance domains.

Media consumption patterns, added in Model 4, contributed an additional 5.2% of explained variance. Media diversity scores, measuring exposure to varied news sources and perspectives, showed positive associations with tolerance (β = .189, p < .001). Conversely, heavy social media usage demonstrated negative relationships with tolerance (β = -.134, p < .001), consistent with concerns about echo chambers and polarization in social media environments. Traditional news media consumption showed weaker but positive correlations with tolerance, suggesting that professional journalism's editorial standards and diverse coverage may promote a more nuanced understanding of social issues compared to algorithm-driven social media feeds.

Geographic location variables, included in the final Model 5, added 3.2% additional explained variance. Urban residence showed strong positive associations with tolerance (β = .156, p < .001), while population density provided additional predictive power (β = .089, p < .001). These geographic effects remained significant even after controlling for demographic, religious, political, and media variables, suggesting that contextual factors beyond individual characteristics influence tolerance levels. The urban-rural divide appears to reflect deeper cultural and structural differences that shape social attitudes independently of individual predispositions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings provide strong empirical support for the multifaceted nature of social tolerance, demonstrating that religious, political, media, and geographic factors each contribute unique explanatory power beyond demographic characteristics. The large overall effect size ($R^2 = .473$) suggests that these four domains capture fundamental dimensions of social experience that shape tolerance attitudes. Political ideology emerged as the strongest predictor, consistent with motivated social cognition theory's emphasis on ideological worldviews as organizing frameworks for social attitudes. Liberal political orientations appear to promote tolerance through emphasis on equality, individual rights, and social change, while conservative orientations prioritize tradition, order, and in-group loyalty.

Religious effects on tolerance demonstrate the complex dual nature of religious influence identified in previous research. Conservative religious affiliations and high religious involvement both predicted lower tolerance, suggesting that doctrinal content emphasizing moral boundaries and institutional socialization processes both contribute to exclusionary attitudes. However, the effect sizes, while significant, were moderate rather than extreme, indicating that religious individuals are not uniformly intolerant. These findings support Allport's distinction between different forms of religiosity, with quest-oriented and intrinsically motivated religious approaches potentially promoting greater tolerance than dogmatic or extrinsically motivated religious involvement.

Media consumption effects reveal important implications for contemporary information environments. The positive association between media diversity and tolerance suggests that exposure to varied perspectives promotes understanding and acceptance of difference. However, the negative correlation with social media usage raises concerns about polarization and echo chamber effects in digital environments. These findings align with research on selective exposure and confirmation bias, suggesting that algorithm-driven content curation may reinforce existing prejudices rather than challenging them. The implications for democratic discourse and social cohesion are significant, particularly as social media becomes increasingly central to political and social communication.

Geographic influences on tolerance reflect enduring urban-rural divides that persist despite demographic and individual-level controls. These effects likely operate through multiple mechanisms, including differential contact opportunities, economic structures, cultural norms, and institutional environments. Urban areas provide greater diversity and intergroup contact opportunities while fostering cultural norms that value cosmopolitanism and change. Rural areas may prioritize community cohesion and traditional values while offering fewer opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact. Understanding these geographic patterns is crucial for addressing regional polarization and developing place-sensitive approaches to promoting tolerance.

Further Research

Future research should examine longitudinal relationships between these variables to establish causal directions and developmental processes. Cross-sectional designs cannot determine whether political ideology influences media consumption patterns and tolerance attitudes, or whether media exposure shapes political development and tolerance levels. Longitudinal panel studies tracking individuals over time could illuminate these causal pathways and identify critical periods for tolerance development (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Additionally, experimental research manipulating media exposure conditions could test causal hypotheses about media effects on tolerance attitudes (Williams et al., 2024).

Investigation of interaction effects and mediating mechanisms represents another important research direction. The current study examined main effects but did not fully explore how variables might interact or operate through indirect pathways. For example, religious conservatism might influence tolerance primarily through its effects on political ideology, or geographic location might moderate the relationship between media consumption and tolerance (Davis & Anderson, 2023). Advanced statistical modeling approaches, including structural equation modeling and multilevel analysis, could illuminate these complex relationships.

Cross-cultural validation of these findings represents a critical need for establishing generalizability across different national and cultural contexts. The current study focused on the United States, but tolerance dynamics may operate differently in societies with different religious traditions, political systems, media environments, and demographic compositions (Martinez & Chen, 2024). Comparative research across democratic societies could identify universal versus culture-specific patterns while informing theory development about tolerance formation processes (Thompson et al., 2023).

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review, and overlooked the whole article's write-up. Authors 2, 3 wrote the research methodology and did the data entry. Authors 4, 5, 6 carried out the statistical analysis and interpretation of the results.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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