



## EXPLORING YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF (IN)TOLERANCE IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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### Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** This paper aims to explore how youth perceive the meaning of social, cultural, and religious tolerance in the United Arab Emirates as a multicultural, multi-ethnic society.

**Methodology:** Data were collected using a survey conducted with 400 participants from different nationalities living and studying in UAE universities representing over 40 different nationalities.

**Main Findings:** The study reveals that the roots of tolerance have historically been embedded in the UAE through various societal, geographic, religious, and economic factors. Findings revealed that 70.5 % of the sample expressed the belief that the UAE is a relatively tolerant society, whereas 29.5% believe that more efforts need to be made to instill values of tolerance, inclusion and acceptance. Surprisingly, more than half the respondents (53.5%) stated that they were unaware of the existence of a Ministry of Tolerance in the UAE.

**Implications:** The topic of tolerance and intolerance has been a research area of interest in several countries but rarely raised in the Arab region. Many misconceptions have surrounded the meaning of tolerance especially in a region that has witnessed several social and political turbulences.

**Originality/Novelty of the study:** Limited or no studies have been conducted towards understanding and conceptualizing tolerance in the Middle East and Gulf Cooperation Council societies. Since 2019 was announced as the Year of Tolerance, it was significant to investigate this nationwide initiative and its impact on the 200 different nationalities living in the UAE.

**Keywords:** *Tolerance, Multiculturalism, Inclusion, Youth, Year of Tolerance, United Arab Emirates.*

### INTRODUCTION

Tolerance is a crucial attribute that has emerged with the rise of multiculturalism around the world and is a broad term that can be applied to many different aspects. Tolerance entails recognizing the universal human rights and fundamental freedom of others. The literal and lexical meaning of tolerance means to bear, to endure, or to put up with something. Tolerance comes from the Latin *tolerantia* which means a voluntary transfer of suffering, passive patience and reflects flexibility, softness of the heart and broadmindedness (Vinogradov, Kortunov & Kachalov, 2017). People are naturally diverse but only tolerance can ensure the survival of mixed communities in every part of the globe. According to Voght (1997), tolerance entails putting up with something one does not like, often to get along better with others. However short and condensed this definition of tolerance might be, it reflects the essential characteristics of tolerance that most contemporary social scientists agree upon. When discussing tolerance, there must be an aspect of dislike, disagreement or disapproval. The term tolerance presupposes opposition or disagreement (Sullivan, Piereson & Marcus, 1982). If no such objection exists, we no longer speak of tolerance but of indifference or plain sympathy (Voght, 1997). Tolerance is only required when dislike, disagreement or disapproval exists; thus, it is closely connected to differences between people. The other side of tolerance is intolerance. Intolerance originates from the belief that one's own actions and way of life are superior to or better than that of others. Tolerance and intolerance are not only characteristics of social relations between citizens (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) but also characteristics of entire societies or regimes.

Furthermore, tolerance does not refer to any difference, but differences people consider important (Voght, 1997). The paradoxical nature of tolerance becomes clear when we approach tolerance as an attitude.

Previous studies on religious tolerance have concluded that elements and derivatives of tolerance are found in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism (Morgan, 2007). El Fadl (2002) explains the concept of tolerance in Arabic, which refers to the term *al-tasamuh*. Islam highly values *al-tasamuh* but states that being tolerant does not mean accepting something that is against the teachings of the religion.

The United Arab Emirates is a very diverse, multicultural, Muslim country that encompasses around 200 different nationalities across its seven emirates. According to the UAE National Population Statistics (2019), the total population of the UAE is roughly 9.48 million with many expatriates residing in the cosmopolitan city of Dubai and in the capital Abu Dhabi. Emiratis constitute around 20% of the total population, thereby making the UAE home to one of the world's highest



percentage of immigrants. Indians and Pakistanis form the largest expatriate groups in the country, constituting 28% and 12% of the total population, respectively.

Going back to the past roots and origins helps us understand many features of societies. It helps us understand the nature of people as well as the value system they adopt and the views they hold of themselves and others. Religion has undoubtedly been the primary source of identity and knowledge in all societies, civilizations, and cultures throughout history.

However, the national identity of any country comes from several sources. Besides religion, there are historical experiences, the influence of geographic location, the nature of the economic activity, the pattern of social relations and additional factors that are essential for gaining an understanding of a society at any place and time.

If we apply this general framework to the UAE, to understand tolerance as a key feature of its national character, we should address several key questions. One of the most pressing questions is as follows: why is the UAE embracing and calling for tolerance? Is it a coincidence that more than 200 nationalities with various cultures, ideologies, religions, ethnicities, and beliefs co-exist on its soil? Moreover, why is the UAE the only Gulf country to have been visited by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar when they signed the Human Fraternity Document in 2019?

Is it also a mere coincidence that UAE humanitarian Aid has reached various countries around the world irrespective of religions, ethnicities, and ideological considerations?

To answer these questions, we need to delve into the roots of tolerance within the UAE society, which reaches far back in history and spans multiple elements and sources. Geography played a role and so did the economic activity specific to the UAE, while the nature of social relations and interactions with different religions and belief systems also had an impact. The role of leadership and the adoption of its directions and values was also critical as well as a range of other considerations that together constitute a central frame of reference to understand how tolerance evolved in the UAE.

Because of its geographic location and trade ties with various countries from the East and the West, the UAE has long been in constant contact with people from all over the world. Consequently, the UAE society acquired the features of open societies that tolerate and co-exist with one another regardless of differences and believe in diversity as a natural and positive aspect of life.

Besides geographic location, one of the factors that helped consolidate tolerance in UAE society was the nature of the pre-oil economic activity, which was primarily based on fishing, raising livestock and pearling. These activities contributed to strengthening cooperation and solidarity within the society as well as promoting tolerance and acceptance among people. ([Heard-Bey, 2001](#))

UAE society first experienced diversity in beliefs, denominations, and religions a long time ago. This was clearly evidenced by the archeological excavations on Sir Bani Yas Island in 1992 ([De Kock, 2014](#)). The discoveries revealed that the island was home to the oldest Christian church and monastery in the area dating back to the period between the 7th and 8th centuries AD. This might explain UAE citizens' ability to accept diversity and their tendency towards moderation, centrism and acceptance. The discovery of the monastery brought conclusive evidence of the co-existence that has long prevailed here between Christians and Muslims ([Hellyer, 2001](#)). It is a co-existence also embodied in the words and deeds of the founding father of the UAE, the late Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan and the UAE leadership over many years.

There is no doubt that certain mechanisms employed in the past to settle disputes among the traditional tribal society were also essential in enhancing the values of tolerance in Emirati culture. These dispute resolution strategies included the use of mediation, compromise and wisdom.

The country being a mosaic of cultures, there is bound to be a percentage of (in)tolerance among the people. This spurred the leaders of the UAE to establish the Ministry of Tolerance in February 2016 with the aim of reinforcing cooperation and assisting individuals to understand the interethnic relationships and the services that could be rendered to the community and the country. To further cement this approach, 2019 was named by the UAE government as the Year of Tolerance. This year-long initiative aimed to promote the country as a beacon of tolerance where different nationalities can live and work peacefully.

The announcement aimed to highlight the UAE as a global capital for tolerance and its approach, since its establishment, to be a bridge of communication between peoples of different cultures in a respectful environment that rejects extremism and emphasizes the acceptance of the other.

**The Year of Tolerance Focuses on Seven Main Pillars ([World Tolerance Summit, 2019](#)):**

- *Tolerance in the Community*
- *Tolerance in Education*



- *Tolerance and Culture*
- *Tolerance at the Workplace*
- *Tolerance in the Media*
- *Tolerance in Policies and Legislation*
- *UAE Model of Tolerance*

This solidifies the nation's quest to become a global capital for tolerance. UAE leadership has long been committed to its ongoing and future projects designed to promote dialogue between cultures and civilizations, thereby sustaining its efforts to inspire neighboring countries to embrace tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

With youth being the social drive in any nation, it is important to explore how different youth living and studying inside the UAE have adapted to this diverse society along with exploring their perspectives on the application of social, cultural, and religious (in) tolerance in the UAE.

Limited research has been conducted towards understanding and conceptualizing tolerance in Middle Eastern and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) societies. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the following aspects:

- How do youth perceive and define tolerant behaviour?
- What are the major factors and contributors that affect youth's behaviour in a multicultural society?
- How does tolerance play a role in the youth's acceptance or treatment of other cultures/races/ethnicities around them?
- How do youth evaluate the goals and initiatives of the UAE Year of Tolerance?
- What are the issues/cases of intolerance and how are they addressed in the UAE?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining Tolerance

Multiculturalism is interpreted as cultural diversity and is used to describe a society's composition consisting of different religious, racial, linguistic, and cultural diversities. (Roshwald, 2007). Tolerance is an attitude of putting effort into willingly understanding others to establish a harmonious relationship in the pattern of community life.

In a recent report by Khan (2015), he described how tolerance is deeply rooted in the UAE culture, highlighting the UAE's model of tolerance and multicultural co-existence for several decades. The increasing number of expatriates in the UAE with various cultural and religious backgrounds ultimately gave birth to a multicultural society that demands every citizen to accept differences and maintain harmony in their daily life.

From the religious perspective, the three monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam commonly assert that their beliefs are essential for salvation and happiness. Tolerance is one of their most significant dimensions. Instilled through knowledge, the openness of communication, and freedom of thought, tolerance is also considered a moral value that should be present within every individual. UNESCO defines tolerance as "The respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human" (UNESCO Declaration, 1965).

Over the years, the definition of tolerance has evolved and transformed having the United Nations acknowledging November 16<sup>th</sup> as the International Day of Tolerance. Voght (1997) adopted the definition of tolerance as "intentional self-restraint in the face of something one dislikes, objects to, finds threatening, or otherwise has a negative attitude towards". Spinthourakis (2007, p.3) counteracts this definition by claiming, "Tolerance isn't benign indifference towards cultural and social differences among individuals, but rather active acceptance of cultural diversity coupled with a willingness to defend this value". Tolerance was considered a form of compromise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because it brought peace and secured co-existence. It pushes us to put our own beliefs to the side to maintain social stability (McKinnon & Castiglione, 2009). Tilaar (2004) explains some of the existing multicultural values, providing the following indicators: learning to live in differences, building mutual trust, maintaining mutual understanding, upholding mutual respect, openness in thinking, appreciation, and interdependency, conflict resolution and post-violence reconciliation.

Sahal, Musadad, and Akhyar (2018) suggested that tolerance entails appreciating and respecting differences that exist between individuals and groups because they are united and bound with mutual interests. They also define tolerance as "harmony in difference" and believe that the acceptance of rich diversity, openness, communication, freedom of thought and knowledge can also be considered a form of tolerance in the modern-day.



Four core values are essential to the general understanding of multicultural values. First is the appreciation of the reality of cultural plurality in society. Second is the recognition of human dignity and human rights. The third is the development of world community responsibility. Fourth is the development of human responsibility towards planet earth. Moreover, these values help ensure human rights, respect and acceptance of people's alternative lifestyles in society (Sherpa, 2019).

Sahal et al. (2018) previously identified the characteristics of a tolerant attitude as follows:

- a) Acknowledge the rights of every one: It is a mental attitude recognizing every human being's right to determine their own attitude, conduct and destiny.
- b) Respecting the beliefs of others: This is a crucial aspect of tolerant behaviour as imposing ones' own beliefs on others interferes with their freedom to choose and practice their beliefs and faiths.
- c) Agreement in disagreement (agreeing indifference): Differences do not necessarily lead to the opposition as it exists in this world.
- d) Understanding each other.

In an era with increasing cross-border interactions (Buckley & Ghauri, 2004), tolerance is a significant concern and might have far-reaching implications for societal peace. This raises specific attention to the agency of young people and the youth's cultural practice and how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine global, transnational, and local cultures.

A recent paper by Hourani (2015) titled "Folktales, Children's Literature and National Identity in the United Arab Emirates" highlights the function of ancient Arabic folktales as a catalyst to modify behaviour and as a vehicle for promoting acceptable and desirable social attitudes by instilling the values of tolerance and acceptance in the UAE society. For the youth growing up in a multi-ethnic society, the diversity in friends itself makes a significant impact.

### **UAE and Arab Youth**

Youth in the UAE account for one of the largest demographics, thereby making it important to understand how they have assimilated and socially adapted to the spirit of tolerance. The estimated 2019 population of the UAE is 9.89 million and according to the Dubai Statistics Center, youth (aged between 19–35) account for the largest demographics in Dubai (approximately 1.35 million), thereby making them key players in promoting and practicing (in)tolerance in this society considering its multicultural nature.

Some research has shown that young people are being subjected to a negative form of pedagogy that shapes them to be culturally and religiously intolerant (Van der Walt, 2016). However, in a world where societies are becoming more and more diverse, tolerance is likely to flourish when the human rights of all groups are respected. The UAE was one of the first countries in the Arab region to realize the importance of promoting peace and harmony among its citizens and expatriates. According to the UAE statistics center, the largest groups of non-UAE nationals are South Asian (59.5%; mainly Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani), Egyptian (10.2%), Filipino (6.1%) and western expatriates (8.5%) in the city of Dubai.

Over the past decade, the UAE has developed a global reputation for its robust and diversified society and economy which encourages a "can do" attitude among its residents and is respectful of religious and cultural diversity. In a recent survey titled "Inside the hearts and minds of Arab Youth" (Asda'a, 2016), respondents were asked, "Which of the following phrases do you associate most strongly with the UAE?"; 19% answered "Respects cultural traditions" and 12% answered "Welcome and friendly to expats".

Previous results from a similar survey conducted by Russell, Coughlin, El Walily and Al Amri (2005) revealed that "Accepting social and economic change and being tolerant of others who are different were the least frequently rated as very important", thereby indicating the continuous efforts of the UAE leadership to instill the spirit of tolerance to successfully maintain political, economic and social stability.

### **Ethnic Diversity and Multiculturalism**

The UAE is a very diverse country where people of various nationalities reside. While attempting to find other examples of research in the field of tolerance in a diverse society, the researcher came across significant research conducted in Malaysia in 2018 (Farahana & Norhasniah, 2018) to determine the level of ethnic tolerance among students in Malaysian public universities. The study involved 378 respondents from three public research universities represented by three major ethnicities, the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The findings revealed that in general, the level of tolerance among the students was satisfactorily high. The Malay students were found to have the tolerance level of 83%, followed by the Indians with 71.4%, and the Chinese with 67.5%.



[Arreaga \(2017, p.20\)](#) discussed how “the globe has seen spiking rates of globalization and multiculturalism” and that “The overlying critique is that multiculturalism should not simply be treated as the co-existence of cultural values, but as assimilation”.

Intolerance or lack of acceptance of other cultures is also a possibility in any context. Many of the critiques against multiculturalism are rooted in many sources such as religion or politics. This is not to say that these should be written off as bigotry or close-mindedness, but what is definite is that none of it is inherent. There is no gene that makes people uncomfortable in multi-ethnic settings; thus, educational institutions can encourage a foundation for pro-multiculturalism. A country like UAE has people from multiple ethnic backgrounds and so the concept of a TCK (Third Culture Kid) is very prevalent. ([Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2010](#))

[Korol, Gonçalves, and Cabral \(2016\)](#) also explored the impact of multicultural personality on the tolerance of diversity in a sample of Portuguese university students, showing that the sample could be described as open (tolerant) to those from other nationalities. Their findings suggested that multicultural personality factors such as emotional stability, open-mindedness, cultural empathy, flexibility, and social initiative play a significant role in promoting and encouraging tolerance towards different nationalities and cultures.

In this sense, multiculturalism requires all cultures to be open, self-critical, and interactive in their relations with each other. Furthermore, multiculturalism is perceived as being related to the principles of accommodating diversity to ensure interconnectedness. Education also plays a significant role in multiculturalism. Multicultural education is a strategy that can be applied to all educational aspects by utilizing the different cultural aspects in a student body such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender and race. Multicultural education that has emerged today involves the integration of different cultural views adhered to by every citizen so that it can eliminate or change the stigma of racism or ethnocentrism into the integration of all levels of society. It can be stated that multiculturalism aims to celebrate differences by including multi-religious teaching, ritual performances and ethnic promotions that are considered the principal aspects of education. This helps academic institutions shape their students into democratic, humanist and pluralist citizens of the world ([Sahal et al., 2018](#)). According to the [UAE Ministry of Education \(2015\)](#) statistics, the UAE has over 511 international schools and universities. These institutions can instill the value of tolerance and cultivate generations to interact, learn and develop positive attitudes towards one another in any setting.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory examines the relationship of an individual within a group to explain when and why people identify with and behave as part of a group ([Zeugner-Roth, Zabkar & Diamantopoulos, 2015](#)). According to the social identity theory, people’s self-image consists of an individual and a group component, that is, personal identity and a so-called social identity. According to [Tajfel and Turner \(1986\)](#), social identity is that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of membership of a social group or groups along with the emotional significance attached to that membership.

Social identity theory further proposes that people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, thereby boosting their self-esteem, and this positive identity derives essentially from favorable comparisons made between one’s own group (in-group) and other groups (out-groups) ([Hogg, 2006](#)).

Having a specific social identity implies being one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group’s perspectives. The basis of social identity resides in the uniformity of perception and action among group members. This theory significantly relates to the current research as it helps identify the different nationalities and the rigidity of their social identity to discuss (in) tolerance among youth belonging to different ethnic backgrounds. This includes determining whether the individual is tolerant because of the social structure they belong to, because of their personal identity or due to other factors.

### **Cultural Identity Theory**

According to [Lustig and Koester \(2010\)](#), cultural identity refers to “one’s sense of belonging to a certain culture or ethnic group” (p. 142). This is a process of feeling that one belongs to a certain cultural group based on traditions, language, religion, thinking patterns, and so on.

[Myron Lustig \(2013\)](#) developed the cultural identity theory to explain the link between identification with a culture and a person’s sense of self. It indicates that identification with a culture increases an individuals’ self-esteem and helps define self-concept. This theory also describes that by understanding their cultural identity, one can have a better comprehension of oneself and the reasons behind the way they react to situations.



The cultural identity theory relates to this research as it helps analyze the results and determine whether such an identity forms a barrier to tolerance in society. It also helps understand whether living in a multicultural environment helps make an individual more flexible with their cultural identity and beliefs or if they prefer to hold on to their ideology rigidly. Therefore, this theory helps examine whether tolerance and a strong sense of cultural identity can co-exist.

### Sampling

[Cohen, Manion, and Morrison \(2011\)](#) suggest that the quality of research depends on “the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted” (p. 97). For this exploratory study, random sampling was adopted because the objective was to obtain a sample representative of the youth based on this context. A random sample of 400 university students studying in the UAE aged between 18 and 25 was drawn from the Canadian University, Dubai. The sample comprised people of different nationalities and various socio-cultural backgrounds.

### METHODOLOGY

The research utilized a quantitative method and data were collected through a questionnaire comprising open- and closed-ended questions. A pilot study was conducted on a sample of 40 students to test the reliability of the questionnaire for the actual survey. Questions that were seemingly vague or misunderstood were adjusted accordingly. Additionally, the theoretical framework and the existing literature guided the development of this instrument. By using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software, the reliability test was validated, and the Alpha Cronbach value showed satisfactory results for this research (Alpha =.805). Developed by Lee Cronbach in 1951, Cronbach’s alpha tests whether multiple-question Likert scale surveys are reliable. It measures the internal consistency of the latent variables that are very difficult to measure in real life.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical transparency and commitment should be observed throughout all stages of research. Therefore, I obtained the consent of participants, assuring them that their participation was voluntary and free from pressure. Prior to conducting the research, and ethics review was sought from the Research Ethics Committee in the Canadian University, Dubai to ensure ethical practice.

### RESULTS

#### Part 1: Sample Demographics

The survey was divided into five sections; the first described the sample demographics and the latter were dedicated to a specific dimension of (in)tolerance.

**Table 1:** Sample distribution according to gender

Gender	<i>N</i>	%
Male	142	35.5%
Female	258	64.5%
Total	400	100%

**Table 2:** Sample distribution according to age

Age	<i>N</i>	%
Under 18	50	12.5%
Between 18-22	288	72%
Above 23	62	15.5%
Total	400	100%

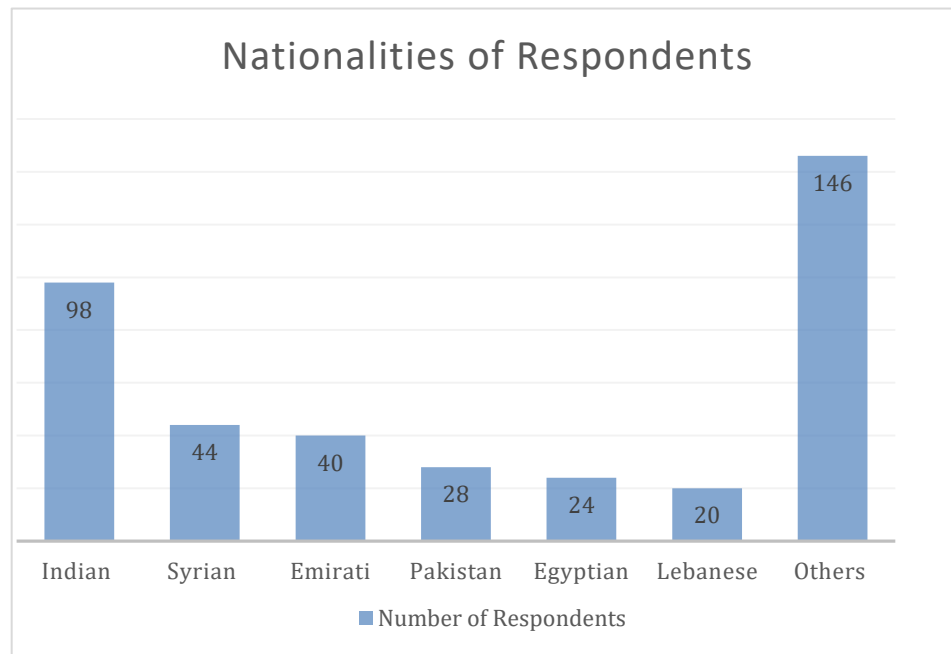
As evident from Tables 1 and 2, the dominant age frame of the sample was between 18 to 22 years (72%) with females constituting the largest percentage of 64.5%.

**Table 3:** Sample distribution according to Emirate

Emirate	<i>N</i>	%
Dubai	298	74.5%
Sharjah	66	16.5%
Ajman	18	4.5%

Abu Dhabi	16	4%
Umm Al Quwain	2	0.5%
Total	400	100%

Furthermore, most of the youths who answered the survey lived in Dubai (74.5%) whereas the second largest group lived in Sharjah (16.5%) and 4% were living in the capital Abu Dhabi. According to the world population review, only about 15% of the population of the emirate of Dubai was made up of UAE nationals with the rest comprising expatriates, many of whom have either been in the country for generations or were born in the UAE. Approximately 85% of the expatriate population (and 71% of the emirate’s total population) is Asian, Indian (51%) and Pakistani (16%); other significant Asian groups include Bangladeshis (9%) and Filipinos (3%).



**Figure 1:** Sample distribution according to nationality

The survey was distributed among 400 youth from over 40 different nationalities as shown in Figure 1; 178 out of 400 (44.5%) came from an Arab background/origin and the remaining 222 (55.5%) were either from an Asian, European or mixed background. Other nationalities included were Iranian, Filipino, Nigerian, Saudi Arabian, Chinese, Sudanese, American, Algerian, French, Libyan, Yemeni, Russian, Omani, British, Moroccan, Gambian, Angolan, Afghani, Kazakhstani, Romanian, Armenian, Bahraini, Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Canadian, Ukrainian, Japanese, Ethiopian, Turkish and Congolese.

## Part 2: Understanding Tolerance

The second part of the survey explored the youth’s understanding of tolerance. While, 55.5% of the survey sample related to the definition provided by the [UNESCO Declaration \(1965\)](#) as the most comprehensive and applicable, 25.5% percent related more to [Voght’s \(1997\)](#) definition of tolerance as something they must do or feel only to fit in within their society.

**Table 4:** Respondents’ understanding of the definition of tolerance

Defining Tolerance	N	%
Recognizing and respecting other beliefs and practices without sharing them ( <a href="#">Neufeldt, 1994</a> )	76	19%
The respect, acceptance, and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human ( <a href="#">UNESCO, 1965</a> )	222	55.5%
Tolerance is intentional self-restraint in the face of something one dislikes, objects to, finds threatening, or otherwise has a negative attitude towards ( <a href="#">Voght, 1997</a> )	102	25.5%

The definition of tolerance provided by the UNESCO seems to be very comprehensible to the youth in the UAE as half of the sample (55.5%) felt that this definition encompasses all the elements of a healthy and tolerant society.



In addition, responses to other questions in the survey revealed that 69% of the sample understand tolerance as accepting people the way they are, and 29.5% understand it as accepting certain traits or actions of people.

When asked to describe the kind of society we live in the UAE, 70.5 % of participants expressed the belief that we live in a tolerant society, whereas 29.5% expressed that we need to work more on instilling values of tolerance, integration and acceptance in the society. Certain areas of intolerance were mentioned such as freedom of speech, political representation and working-class rights were highlighted and are discussed in the following section.

According to the survey results, 66% of youth also believed that women are the more tolerant gender by nature, and the fact that they take up more roles and responsibilities in society than they used to before has added to that belief.

The study results revealed that youth considered academic institutions and family as the primary contributors for gaining and learning tolerance. Additionally, youth expressed a lack of understanding and appreciation of different political views and religion as the biggest challenges that need to be overcome to be more tolerant. Nontrivial gaps between (in)tolerance in principle and in practice will remain a challenge.

### **Part 3: Social Tolerance**

The third section of the survey was dedicated to the exploration of levels of social tolerance among youth. The results received were highly satisfactory and positive. When asked whether the respondents agree or disagree with expatriates having the same rights as citizens, 74% of respondents agreed with the statement, whereas 26% believe that it is normal that local Emirati citizens have more rights as they own the land and that these differences only occur in certain governmental areas of employment. (Emiratisation programme)

When asked whether having neighbors of different ethnic origin, culture, or religion is bothersome, a mere 18 out of 400 respondents, representing a minority of 0.9%, answered 'yes', implying it does bother them. On the other hand, 99.1% collectively pointed out that it does not bother them at all; on the contrary, it has helped enrich their lives and made them become more open to understanding different cultures and ethnicities. Shared celebrations such as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Christmas celebrations, Diwali and the Chinese New Year were cited as the most celebrated occasions among the participants. They referred to these as bonding seasons/occasions in which people of different religions and cultures came together.

Only 4% of the respondents answered with 'yes' when asked if they discriminate against those who are racially, religiously, or culturally different from them. Their reason for this was that they were brought up in such a manner. Even though the percentage is not alarming, it reflects how some cultures still have rigid ideologies even though human behaviour is flexible and adaptative. On the other hand, the remaining 96% responded that they did not discriminate on any of these bases. Responding to the acceptance and integration levels with People of Determination (disabilities), 21.5% of the respondents stated that they still need to be more informed on how to act properly and socially integrate with People of Determination. Notably, 78.5% stated that they are already cultivated and have high acceptance of individual differences, which reflects the success of several community and awareness campaigns organized by the UAE government.

### **Part 4: Cultural and Religious Tolerance**

Moving on to the fourth part of the survey, the questions in this section were designed to analyze the degree of cultural and religious (in) tolerance among the youth in the UAE. The UAE recently established a ministry in 2016 solely dedicated to tolerance. When asked how many among the youth sample were aware of the presence of this ministry, surprisingly, 53.5% responded that they did not know about the existence of such a ministry, whereas 46.5% were aware of its presence and goals.

When asked whether they would like to continue living in a culturally diverse environment, 79% replied with 'yes'. According to the survey results, a major 91.5% of the respondents believed that people freely practice their cultures and religions in the UAE. It is evident from the survey that out of the 400 respondents, 95% considered themselves socially interactive, and individuals who could easily make friends with people of different cultural backgrounds without any bias or discrimination. They did mention in subsequent sections that their families played a role in them being socially and culturally interactive with others.

Responding to whether it is annoying when other nationalities speak their native language in public, 7% of the respondents replied, 'yes it bothers me', whereas 93%, replied that it does not bother them at all; on the contrary, they find it 'quite amusing' and a source of further human interaction.

From the previous results, it is evident that despite the current achievements, significant efforts need to be directed towards instilling tolerance in the Emirati society. Facing acts of intolerance requires more individual awareness. Bigotry, stereotypes, stigma, insults, and racial jokes are examples of individual expressions of intolerance to which some people are



subjected daily. Intolerance breeds hatred and disputes. Thus, for the UAE's efforts to yield results, fighting intolerance requires education and further individual awareness. Endeavors to build tolerance through education will not succeed unless they reach all age groups and take place everywhere: at home, in schools, in the workplace, in law-enforcement and on all media platforms.

### Part 5: Youth's Opinion of Tolerance

The final part of the survey examined youth's self-reported understanding and opinions of the meaning of tolerance in the UAE.

**Table 5:** Respondents' opinions regarding tolerance

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1. People around me are tolerant	58	248	70	18	6	400
2. I believe tolerance is important	254	132	12	0	2	400
3. I feel accepted regardless of race, ethnicity and religion in the UAE	118	212	46	16	8	400
4. I'm unbiased towards different cultures, races and religions	192	144	44	10	10	400
5. My school helped instill the importance of tolerance in me	58	174	98	46	24	400
6. I believe cultural diversity is important	218	154	18	8	2	400
7. I have experienced cultural tolerance in the UAE	78	148	82	66	26	400
8. Tolerance is an important value to have in the UAE	224	148	18	4	6	400
9. People from other cultures and ethnic groups enrich my life	166	168	56	8	2	400
10. Without tolerance, the world would not be a safe place	224	128	34	8	6	400

**Table 6:** Respondents' opinions regarding tolerance

1. People around me are tolerant	14.5%	62%	17.5%	4.5%	1.5%	100%
2. I believe tolerance is important	63.5%	33%	3%	0%	0.5%	100%
3. I feel accepted regardless of race, ethnicity and religion in the UAE	29.5%	53%	11.5%	4%	2%	100%
4. I'm unbiased towards different cultures, races, and religions	48%	36%	11%	2.5%	2.5%	100%
5. My school helped instill the importance of tolerance in me	14.5%	43.5%	24.5%	11.5%	6%	100%
6. I believe cultural diversity is important	54.5%	38.5%	4.5%	2%	0.5%	100%
7. I have experienced cultural tolerance in the UAE	19.5%	37%	20.5%	16.5%	6.5%	100%
8. Tolerance is an important value to have in the UAE	56%	37%	4.5%	1%	1.5%	100%
9. People from other cultures and ethnic groups enrich my life	41.5%	42%	14%	2%	0.5%	100%
10. Without tolerance, the world would not be a safe place	56%	32%	8.5%	2%	1.5%	100%

It is evident from Table 6 that there is a common agreement among the participants that the UAE is a very accepting and accommodating society regardless of the racial and ethnic differences. According to the respondents, its people are 'warm' and 'very adaptive' to the vast number of nationalities that live and practice their social, cultural, and religious beliefs freely. Nevertheless, there have been individual cases of bias and intolerance, but it is not considered normalized behaviour in the UAE which is reported to be a very peaceful society.



The last section of the survey contained a series of open-ended questions that were structured to highlight some issues of intolerance as cited by the study sample; 13% of the respondents reported individual incidents of intolerance, primarily citing the 'lack of free speech', 'LGBTQ rights' and 'expression of political views', and 9% stated they read or heard about actions of abuse towards specific Asian laborers living in the UAE who were being 'overworked and underpaid'.

This could be a result of several religious, political, and societal factors. From the religious perspective, the UAE is a Muslim country that follows *Al Sharia* law, therefore making all sexual relations outside a heterosexual marriage illegal and punishable by law. As for the Asian laborers workload and pay, in 2008, the UAE government decreed and gradually implemented a series of reform acts to help improve the labor force. 'Mid-day break' periods for all construction companies were given and illegal visa overstayers were assured amnesty and repatriated to their home countries.

From the political perspective, as per the UAE laws, publishing or disseminating false news or information that poses harm to national security is considered a crime. Local media and social media platforms also undergo censorship to avoid any acts of criticism against the Royals and government officials, which is also punishable by law ([Federal Law no. 5, 2012](#)).

Furthermore, 4% of the participants also mentioned the favorability of Emiratis in employment via the newly enforced Emiratisation programme, forcing companies to limit the number of migrant workers in a company. The government imposed this programme for the purpose of stabilizing the labor market and protecting the rights of local Emiratis who are a minority in their own country.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From the previous results, it is evident that despite the current achievements, significant efforts need to be directed towards instilling tolerance in the Emirati society. Facing acts of intolerance requires more individual awareness. Bigotry, stereotypes, stigma, insults, and racial jokes are examples of individual expressions of intolerance to which some people are subjected daily. Intolerance breeds hatred and disputes. Thus, for the UAE's efforts to yield results, fighting intolerance requires education and further individual awareness. Endeavors to build tolerance through education will not succeed unless they reach all age groups and take place everywhere: at home, in schools, in the workplace, in law-enforcement and on all media platforms.

However, overall, the survey respondents evaluated the objectives of the '2019, Year of Tolerance' in the country to be quite successful in terms of the first three pillars (Community, Education, and Culture). They also believe that the initiatives taken in 2019 need to continue and grow for societal benefit and to maintain harmony and that the other pillars need more attention to succeed. Participants also praised the historic Papal visit to the country's capital that brought together key religious identities; Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist faiths. Those who attended this unprecedented event believed that it was a message of peace and that it highlighted the codes of tolerance that are considered the cornerstone of today's societies.

In general, the perceptions of most of the participants appear to be in favor of the implemented objectives of the Ministry of Tolerance so far. Among the male Emirati participants, a few concluded by quoting the words of UAE's founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan saying, "Without tolerance, there has neither been friendship or brotherhood".

## CONCLUSION

The research findings of this exploratory study reveal that youth living in the UAE have a concrete understanding of the value of tolerance and practice it daily. The significance of this research lies in its purpose of examining how 2019, coined as the Year of Tolerance, has helped the youth become more accepting and understanding towards other cultures and ethnicities. It also reveals how the youth perceives the UAE as the cradle for communication, co-existence, and cultural understanding. There is a common belief among youth that dialogue is essential for a healthy, tolerant society.

The Middle East and Gulf region have for long been labelled as an intolerant zone harboring extremist thoughts and areas of conflict. However, several Arab countries in the past few years have undertaken the responsibility of trying to reverse this portrayal. Various initiatives have been launched by UAE government to support human fraternity and for maintaining peace and stability in society (establishing the Ministry of Tolerance in 2016, construction of the Tolerance bridge in 2017, renaming a popular mosque in the capital after Virgin Mary 'Mariam Umm Eisa' and formulating a National Tolerance Programme in 2016).

Evidently in the UAE, there is a need for clear strategies, policies, and performance indicators to evaluate tolerance because citizens' security is based on the tolerance in the community. The co-existence of 200 nationalities in the UAE is considered an opportunity to promote tolerance based on the core values promoted and socially embedded within the UAE society which are critical to instilling the spirit of tolerance and acceptance in this multicultural environment. The Middle East and Gulf region have previously witnessed many socio-political issues that have affected its social dynamics and structure.



Political (in)tolerance, in particular, is of significance; people are not naturally tolerant, and tolerance for diverse beliefs must be learned. This study also revealed that youth considered academic institutions and family as the primary contributors and the most prominent socialization factors for learning tolerance and that have contributed to their understanding of political tolerance and acceptance of others. Youth are aware of the importance of living in a tolerant society and have emphasized their sense of acceptance regardless of race, ethnicity and religion in the UAE.

### LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

This paper supports the continuation of multiculturalism policies and programmes throughout the emirates that are intended to improve intercultural relations, boost values of co-existence, and reject attitudes of hatred and discrimination. Research institutes, non-governmental organizations, cultural, educational and religious institutions will also need to do their part to continue collaborating to build a society that incubates diversity.

There is also a pressing need for further research dedicated to analyzing political and religious areas of tolerance. This paper suggests further multidisciplinary approaches of research on tolerance using more societal approaches and integrating the dynamics of social psychology. There is a need to focus more research on gender (in)tolerance, minority (in)tolerance, (in)tolerance towards immigrants and other areas of interest to socially cultivate the value of tolerance in the future generations with respect to every ethnic and racial community in the Middle East and the Gulf region.

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