

Interfaith Interaction in Gen Z Friendship Circles from a Multicultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract

Interfaith interaction within the friendship circle of Generation Z (Gen Z) is an interesting phenomenon. This study aims to explore how interfaith friendships influence the formation of an inclusive and tolerant social identity. This study used a descriptive qualitative research method with interviews involving Gen Z respondents who experienced interfaith interaction, especially within the friendship circle. The results show how social media plays a significant role in creating inclusive discussion spaces. Gen Z demonstrates a high level of multicultural awareness in terms of acceptance and appreciation of religious differences, although challenges in the form of initial prejudice and limited knowledge remain. The experience of interfaith friendships has been shown to foster the formation of a more open, inclusive, and empathetic character.

Keywords: Generation Z, multicultural communication, social media, interfaith friendship, tolerance;

INTRODUCTION

Of the various factors influencing human growth and development as social beings, friendship is a crucial one. Interacting with friends is a crucial element in identity formation, expanding one's social circle, and developing the social and emotional skills essential for effective interaction. Friendships also provide opportunities to learn to understand differences, increase empathy, and enrich interpersonal experiences, all of which contribute to personal development and the quality of life. In forming friendships, we interact with a variety of people from diverse backgrounds, including differing religious beliefs. Communication and interaction with friends of different faiths can provide valuable experiences in understanding religious diversity and differing spiritual values.

Religion is a belief that provides value and meaning to life, tailored to the needs of each adherent. Religion plays a significant role in shaping an individual's perspective, and its influence permeates various aspects of life (Lakonawa, 2013), as cited by Oktawirawan & Kristiyanti, (2024). Friendships between individuals formed due to religious differences can be both unifying and divisive. Research conducted by (Fitria, n.d.) suggests that interfaith interaction can have a positive impact and foster unity. This can be achieved if interactions are conducted with an inclusive attitude that prioritizes cooperation, such as in shared social activities.

Generation Z (Gen Z), born between the 1990s and early 2010s, has adapted to the digital era where technology and the internet are inextricably linked. Exposure to this technology has led them to be more inclusive, accepting of diversity, and possessing a high level of social awareness. They are highly connected through social media, allowing them to interact with people from various religious backgrounds more easily and quickly. Data from IDN Media in the "Indonesia Gen Z Report 2022" indicates that approximately 30% of Gen Z in Indonesia spend more than three hours per day on social media. Furthermore, 48% of Gen Z access social media multiple times a day. As noted by (Evita et al., 2023), Gen Z in Indonesia is the largest digital consumer and highly active on

social media. They use social media for various purposes, including seeking entertainment and more serious information about education and employment. A journal titled "Multicultural Awareness of Generation Z and Its Implications for Education" states that Gen Z has a high level of multicultural awareness. This is reflected in their greater acceptance and respect for cultural and religious differences, as well as their openness to interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Efianingrum et al., 2022). Gen Z is considered to be very vocal in supporting equality, inclusivity, and minority rights, including in matters of religion. These values make them more likely to accept and embrace religious differences in their friendships. Growing up in the digital age, Gen Z frequently interacts through social media, which provides a space for open and direct interfaith discussions and sharing of experiences through their accounts. The increasingly inclusive education system also helps shape Gen Z's views, with curricula that include materials on tolerance, diversity, and inclusivity. Compared to previous generations, interfaith friendships are more common among Gen Z because they are more inclusive and collaborative in their interactions. Multiculturalism is generally described as a worldview implemented in various cultural policies in societal life that emphasizes acceptance of the realities of religion, diversity, and multiculturalism (Azyumardi Azra, 2007) as cited in (Irhandayaningsih & Si, n.d.). A multicultural communication approach is highly relevant to understanding this dynamic because it presents concepts for understanding, appreciating, and interacting with religious differences within the friendship circle of Gen Z. Gen Z uses multicultural communication principles to bridge understandings regarding religious differences. This study was conducted to determine the challenges in interfaith friendships, especially among adolescents, and how this friendship cycle shapes a person's characteristics. By exploring these factors, it is hoped that this study can provide insight into how multicultural communication can support harmony and respect for religious diversity among Gen Z.

Based on the background presented, the problem to be studied is: The research question is: How do interfaith friendships among Gen Z play a role in the formation of individual identity and the development of the process of maintaining friendships?

Interfaith friendships play a crucial role in the formation of individual identity and the development of an understanding of religious culture and values. Through in-depth interaction and communication, individuals can develop a more inclusive and tolerant social identity. This aligns with the purpose of this study, which is to examine how interfaith friendships play a significant role in the formation of individual identity and the development of an understanding of religious culture and values.

This study will utilize Multicultural Communication Theory to understand how interfaith interaction and communication influence the formation of individual identity. According to Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, Multicultural Communication Theory explains the importance of awareness and appreciation of cultural differences and the ability to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. The use of this theory is also supported by the quote, "Multicultural communication is a communication process that occurs in societies with diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures. In social life, interactions occur between individuals or groups, even between communities." (Fitria, n.d.). Through this theory, we can see how cross-cultural communication can reduce prejudice, increase understanding, and form a more inclusive social identity.

METHOD

Suharsimi Arikunto (2013) explains that "Descriptive research aims to investigate a condition, situation, or other stated matter, with the results presented in the form of a research report." Another view, according to Sukamdinata (2017), "Descriptive research aims to examine various aspects related to existing phenomena, such as their structure, activities, characteristics, development, relationships, similarities, and differences between one phenomenon and another."

In this study, the author used a descriptive qualitative research method in the form of interviews. The author chose this method to understand the context and experiences of the research subjects, describe their characteristics, and explain the factors contributing to Gen Z communication interactions in interfaith friendships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interfaith Interactions of Gen Z on Social Media

Social media plays a crucial role in interfaith interactions among Gen Z. Platforms like Instagram and X provide an open space for individuals to interact with anyone. Respondent 1 (Sancha, 20 years old) stated that as a Gen Z member who actively uses social media platforms, she feels a sense of security and empathy for other users due to the openness and inclusivity inherent in forming interfaith friendships. Even social media platforms that don't always clearly provide information about users' religious beliefs don't hinder them from interacting with each other. This is evident in how Sancha follows social media influencers who demonstrate that friendships can take many forms, regardless of religious or cultural background, through their posts. Sancha explained that religion isn't a barrier to her friendships, but rather provides an opportunity for her to learn about other religious cultures. From Sancha's statement, it can be seen that Gen Z is open-minded in choosing their circle of friends.

Social media provides a space for open discussion about individual beliefs and also provides a platform for learning about other religions. These interactions are often positive, with respondents reporting gaining a deeper understanding of other religions and feeling more open to differences. While these interactions don't always revolve around religion, there are no boundaries between them, despite differences in religious backgrounds. However, when open discussions about religion occur, Sancha doesn't express negative judgments or compare religions with others when expressing her opinions. Instead, she uses them as a space to discuss freely and to see others' perspectives.

The Influence of Social Circle of Friendships

Respondent 2 (Sarah, 25) feels that the rapid development of social media and technology has not only opened up many topics of conversation between her and her friends but also provided a platform for them to discuss issues they might have previously avoided, including religion. Through various platforms, Sarah and her friends can share personal perspectives and experiences about their respective religions, which helps deepen their understanding of each other. As a Gen Z, Sarah feels that her circle of friends often engages in religious discussions on social media. This is a factor in Sarah's thought process and how she views others. She stated that her circle of friends has a significant influence in shaping her perspective on religious diversity.

Sarah works as a singer, which places her in a creative field, frequently encountering new people from diverse religious backgrounds. She believes this has a significant impact on her social circle, as it broadens her perspective on how she evaluates others. Friends of different faiths provide diverse perspectives and help Sarah understand the importance of appreciating and respecting the differences of individuals from different religious backgrounds. This interfaith friendship also provides firsthand experience in understanding and appreciating diverse values and beliefs, thus helping to shape a more tolerant and inclusive individual character. Sarah also acknowledged that she feels more tolerant of the individuals she encounters in other social settings.

Challenges in Interfaith Interaction

Growing up with increasingly rapid exposure to technology and easy access to social media, Gen Z tends to interact more easily with a wide range of individuals, potentially from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This ease also poses certain challenges in how individuals perceive others. Respondent 3 (Farhah, 22 years old) admitted that she had little experience

making friends with individuals from different religious backgrounds. However, after studying outside her hometown, her circle of friends expanded, and Farhah had more friends from different backgrounds, including different religions.

In her initial experience meeting new friends, Farhah faced challenges such as prejudice or stereotypes about friends of different religions. This led to social distance, which forced Farhah to limit herself to a few friends to avoid misunderstandings. Furthermore, Farhah also felt a limited understanding of religion. According to Farhah and her friends, the boundary in question is the difficulty in communicating about how to explain her religious culture. Farhah gave an example of her experience as a Muslim friend with a Christian, explaining her prayer times when they wanted to arrange a meeting. In her experience, she found it difficult to explain her beliefs without offending or appearing negative. However, Farhah's frequent interactions with friends from different religious backgrounds broadened her perspectives and she learned more about how others view interfaith interactions. From Farhah's explanation, it is clear that although interfaith friendships have various benefits, there are still challenges that must be faced and overcome to achieve inclusive and tolerant relationships.

Forming a More Inclusive and Tolerant Social Identity

Interfaith interactions within Gen Z friendships not only contribute to the formation of a more inclusive social identity but also to the development of a more tolerant character. Respondent 4 (Flo, 23 years old) revealed that making friends with individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds has made her a more open-minded and tolerant individual. This is because Flo feels she has opened herself to a deeper understanding of the diverse cultures she encounters. As a nursing student, who is likely to encounter individuals from different religious backgrounds, Flo has learned how to adapt to others. Being exposed to this cultural diversity, Flo took the initiative to learn more about these cultures through the interactions and discussions about religion with others. Flo's circle of friends is very open and transparent when it comes to religious topics, which, as we know, can sometimes be a sensitive topic to discuss with others. Based on Flo's experience, she is now able to better select elements of conversation that will not offend others when discussing religion and is still able to maintain a comfortable conversation for herself and her interlocutors.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that interfaith interactions within Generation Z's friendships play a significant role in shaping a more inclusive and tolerant social identity. As a generation growing up in the digital age, Gen Z demonstrates a high level of multicultural awareness through active interactions on social media. Social media provides a space for open discussions about religion, facilitates cross-cultural understanding, and encourages acceptance of differences.

However, this study also identifies challenges in interfaith interactions, such as initial prejudice, limited insight into other religions, and communication barriers in explaining one's beliefs. Therefore, the experience of interfaith friendships can positively contribute to the development of a more open and empathetic character toward individuals from different religious backgrounds.

This study emphasizes awareness of cultural differences and the ability to communicate inclusively using multicultural communication theory. This explanation reveals that interfaith friendships among Generation Z not only help them live better lives socially but also contribute to building religious harmony.

The author's suggestions for compiling this research are as follows:

1. Various parties, both individuals and communities, are expected to be more open-minded in accepting diversity and fostering cross-cultural and interfaith discussions to create an inclusive environment.
2. Social media can be used to disseminate positive messages about diversity, facilitate healthy discussions, and strengthen relationships between individuals despite differences in background.
3. Inclusive communication skills need to be further developed, both in social and professional settings, to address misunderstandings and strengthen harmonious relationships. Various social and community groups are expected to collaborate to organize activities that address diversity, for example, interfaith discussions, joint social projects, or cultural programs involving various groups.

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