

# Negotiating Identity, Navigating Dialogue: Friendship Preferences in Religious Streams

## Menegosiasikan Identitas, Menavigasi Dialog: Preferensi Pertemanan dalam Konteks Aliran Agama

Ika Hana Pertiwi<sup>1</sup>, Fadhil Maliky Islah<sup>2</sup>, Muhamad Arif Saefudin<sup>3</sup>,  
Wenty Marina Minza<sup>4</sup>, dan F. A. Nurdiyanto<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Muria Kudus, Indonesia  
ika.hanapertiwi@umk.ac.id

<sup>2</sup> Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia  
fadhil.maliky@unm.ac.id

<sup>3</sup> Program Studi Psikologi, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia  
arif.muhamad@upi.edu

<sup>4</sup> Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
wminza@ugm.ac.id

<sup>5</sup> Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
franznur@gmail.com

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### ABSTRAK

*Keberagaman agama di Indonesia tidak hanya mencakup perbedaan antaragama, tetapi juga meliputi sub-kelompok di dalam satu tubuh agama, sering diistilahkan dengan "aliran", yang dibedakan oleh karakteristik ritual keagamaan, keanggotaan jemaat, simbol keagamaan, dan orientasi teologi atau mazhab. Pada masyarakat multiagama, ruang pertemanan antarkelompok menjadi hal yang tidak terelakkan, namun masih sedikit penelitian mengenai bagaimana aliran agama berperan dalam pembentukan pertemanan. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi relevansi aliran keagamaan dalam pertemanan, untuk mengungkap preferensi dalam menjalin pertemanan dengan sesama kelompok maupun lintas kelompok. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menyebarkan survei kualitatif secara daring dan menganalisis 131 respon partisipan menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan sebagian besar partisipan (89%) menyatakan bahwa afiliasi aliran keagamaan tidak berpengaruh pada pilihan pertemanan mereka. Dengan kata lain, mereka terbuka untuk berteman dengan kelompok lain. Walaupun demikian, sebagian kecil partisipan lain memiliki preferensi homofili- berteman dengan sesama kelompok. Temuan penelitian ini kami sajikan dalam dua tema, yaitu (1) preferensi pertemanan sesama aliran yang menunjukkan homofili dan motif meningkatkan religiusitas, dan (2) preferensi pertemanan lintas, yang menunjukkan keluwesan dalam pluralisme dan diiringi strategi kontak di dalamnya. Sebagai sintesis dari temuan tersebut, aliran keagamaan dalam preferensi pertemanan ternyata berbicara tentang sikap seseorang dalam menegosiasikan pentingnya identitas dan navigasi dialog dalam membicarakan masalah keagamaan. Kedua preferensi tidak semata-mata dilihat sebagai kontradiktif, melainkan menunjukkan dinamika beragama dalam masyarakat majemuk.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Preferensi Pertemanan; Aliran Keagamaan; Identitas; Dialog*

### ABSTRACT

*Religious diversity in Indonesia extends beyond interreligious differences to include intra-religious sub-groups, often termed "streams" (aliran), distinguished by variations in rituals, congregations, religious symbols, and theological orientation (madhhab). While interreligious friendships have been widely studied, little is known about how individuals navigate intra-religious diversity in shaping friendship preferences. This study explores the relevance of religious streams in friendships to uncover preferences for engaging in same- or cross-group friendships within the same religion. This study was conducted by administering an online qualitative survey and analyzing the 131 valid responses using thematic analysis. Results indicate that most participants (89%) reported that religious streams did not influence their friendship preferences, expressing openness to friendships across different religious streams. However, a small proportion of participants expressed a preference for homophily or same-group friendship. The findings are presented into two themes: (1) preference for same-group friendships, reflecting homophily as a means for personal religious advancement; and (2) preference for cross-group friendship, characterized by pluralistic openness and religious dialogue navigation. As a synthesis, religious streams in friendship preferences reflect attitudes in negotiating the importance of social identity and navigating religious dialogue when engaging with religious matters. These two preferences should not be viewed as inherently contradictory; rather, they demonstrate the dynamic nature of religious life within pluralistic societies.*

**Keywords:** *Friendship Preferences; Religious Streams; Identity; Dialogue*

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's religious landscape is characterized by remarkable institutional diversity. According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs Regulation (*Permenag*) No. 8 of 2024, Indonesia is home to 705 Islamic religious institutions, 609 Christian religious associations- including national church fellowships, synods, foundations, and organizations- 13,027 Catholic institutions, 1.122 Hindu institutions, 875 Buddhist institutions, and 173 Confucian institutions. Certain religions encompass multiple *streams*, often distinguished by places of worship or organizational affiliations. These internal divisions are commonly referred to as sects, denominations, or religious organizations and manifest in variations of rituals, congregations, religious symbols, or teachings (*madhhab*). For the purpose of this study, we adopt the term *religious streams (aliran)* to refer to a more flexible and fluid understanding of intra-religious grouping. Given that such diversity fosters unavoidable encounter, this study focuses on how people view religious streams in their friendships.

People may or may not belong to a specific religious affiliation or stream. In the Indonesian context, people are formally registered with officially recognized religions or local beliefs, as stipulated by state administrative requirements. However, in practice, people also tend to engage with religious teachings through smaller sub-religious groups or communities. The involvement in specific sub-groups (religious streams) is often shaped by socialization and community dynamics (Asrawijaya 2022). For instance, among Protestant Christians, membership in the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) is closely tied to Batak ethnic identity, regional customs, and family traditions. Similarly, in Islam, affiliations such as Muhammadiyah or Nahdlatul Ulama reflect not only theological orientations but also embedded communal histories and long-standing educational networks. In contrast, some religious streams have emerged as responses to modernization, urbanization, and global religious movements. For example, Gereja Bethel Indonesia (GBI), which represents charismatic or evangelical movements, derived from Pentecostal influences. Ultimately, religious stream affiliation reflects the internalization of specific teachings that shape individuals' interpretations, experiences, and expressions of faith.

Against the historical context, intra-religious heterogeneity has, in fact, been growing since the colonial period. However, the New Order era (and its aftermath) marked the significant expansion of religious organizations in Indonesia (Baskara 2017; Wardana 2026). The increasing diversity of religious streams has also created threats for social, cultural, and political contestation, particularly when groups compete over religious authority and social influence (Saparudin and Emawati 2023). In eastern Indonesia, for example, tensions have emerged between local Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Nahdlatul Wathan, and Salafi movements (Fitriani 2015). Research indicates that conflicts within religion can become particularly intense when rival groups compete over religious authority, legitimacy, and access to political or economic resources, while simultaneously seeking to preserve group boundaries and cohesion (Permana 2021). Returning to the case above, the diversity of Islamic traditionalists and Islamic puritanism has triggered conflict and religious violence. This example illustrates how intra-religious diversity may generate social tensions when doctrinal differences intersect with competition over authority, resources, and symbolic legitimacy within a shared social and religious space. Consequently, studies on intra-religious diversity have predominantly approached the topic through the lens of conflict, contestations over religious teaching, and boundary-making.

Because religious streams may provide distinct social environments, networks, and systems of meaning, they also create opportunities for social interaction and friendship formation. People often participate in congregations, religious study groups (*pengajian*), youth organizations, or educational institutions associated with particular streams, increasing the likelihood of forming friendships within these circles. For example, a study by Fahrezi et al. (2024) found that religious orientation and the quality of friendships play a significant role in shaping individuals' sense of happiness and comfort within communal religious settings, such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). At the same time, differences in religious teachings and practices may influence how individuals perceive and relate to members of other streams. Research on religious homophily suggests that while ties within similar religious

groups reinforce shared identity and social cohesion, connections across religious boundaries provide access to diverse perspectives and broader social networks (McClure 2021). Consequently, the formation of friendships in the context of religious streams may depend on individuals' capacity to negotiate religious differences and navigate boundaries within a shared religious identity.

Existing research on friendships in the context of religious groups in Indonesia has largely concentrated on inter-religious group relations (Fonda and Muttaqin 2023; Pertiwi and Faturachman 2023), whereas friendships in the context of intra-religious diversity have received far less scholarly attention. This imbalance may stem from the enduring influence of scholarship on religious pluralism, which has traditionally emphasized interfaith tolerance, coexistence, and peacebuilding (Driessen 2025). In addition, religious streams within the same religion are often assumed to constitute a single, relatively homogeneous social category, obscuring the significance of internal diversity. As a result, there is a limited understanding of how differences among religious streams shape interpersonal preferences and social interactions. This raises a broader question about how such diversity is associated with patterns of social cohesion, whether friendship ties are driven by similarity (homophily) or across cross-cutting differences. By linking Indonesia's religious diversity to intergroup studies, this study explores the relevance of religious streams in friendships to uncover preferences for engaging in same- or cross-group friendships within the same religion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Religious streams as a social identity**

Religious identity can be more significant than membership in other social identities, as it provides a deeply meaningful basis for self-concept and social belonging (Mavor and Ysseldyk 2020). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong, and these group memberships shape attitudes, perceptions, and behavior in relation to others (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Within religious communities, adherence to particular religious teachings can serve as an important basis for group categorization. Followers often align themselves with their religious affiliation not merely because of similar beliefs, but also because it fosters both self-esteem and social esteem while reinforcing strong bonds with other members (Mavor and Ysseldyk 2020).

Pargament (1997) conceptualized two dimensions that explain why religious identity is highly relevant. First, religion encompasses the essence of the sacred. Second, it provides a unique function in explaining life experiences and existential matters. In this way, religious worldviews help individuals manage their existential insecurity and maintain psychological well-being, while also building a strong sense of belonging and commitment to their religious community (Aggarwal et al. 2023). This process of identity formation is fundamentally relational, as it involves defining group boundaries and positioning the self in relation to others. As a result, religious identity often becomes highly salient.

Compared to cross-religious groups, the differences among religious streams often provoke sharper prejudice and tensions. The key factor is concern for "the truth claim" as defined in religious teaching (Leder, Vaart, and Machielse 2025). Excessive emphasis on the truth claims of a certain tenet can reinforce rigid boundaries shielding the ingroup, as it can be used to provoke confrontation towards other streams, i.e., traditional vis-à-vis puritanism of Islam (Turmudi 2018). Differences in religious teachings can be perceived as threats and challenges to one's identity, which may complicate relations both between religions and religious streams. Consequently, the ingroup is cognitively and affectively constructed through a sense of "us," contrasted with "them," the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

However, the salience and importance of religious identity do not necessarily lead to hostility or exclusion. Social Identity Theory suggests that stronger group identification may foster intergroup bias, yet it also allows for considerable intra-group variation in how individuals interpret and enact group membership. Individuals within the same religious tradition differ in the extent to which they identify with the group and the degree to which

religion constitutes a central component of their self-concept (Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg 2010), which in turn shapes social categorization and friendship preferences.

### **Friendship and the social dynamic of intergroup contact**

While religious streams function as a key form of social identity, their social consequences are primarily shaped by contact. The study of contact or intergroup contact is closely linked to Allport's seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Allport 1955). Allport was optimistic that contact could help reduce prejudice toward other groups. However, contact is not necessarily always related to prejudice, as strong attachment to the ingroup does not have to be accompanied by hostility toward the outgroup. According to Allport (1955), intergroup contact is likely to produce positive effects for the individuals involved when four optimal conditions are met: equal status between groups, cooperation, common goals, and support from authorities, laws, or customs.

In the broader development of intergroup contact studies, meta-analyses by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) indicate that these four conditions have limitations, as they are not always attainable across different contexts. Even when these conditions are not fully met, contact can still reduce prejudice. Pettigrew (1998) distinguishes between necessary and facilitating conditions, arguing that Allport's four conditions should be understood as facilitating rather than strictly necessary for positive contact outcomes. Building on this, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) identify a global indicator of successful contact, namely friendships.

Friendship has long been recognized as a powerful form of intergroup contact. Cross-group friendships are seen as informal yet meaningful relationships that can reduce prejudice and foster affective ties across group boundaries (Davies et al. 2011; Pettigrew 1998). As such, friendship is not merely a personal connection, but also a social space where group identities are encountered, affirmed, and negotiated. Davies et al. (2011) further suggest that contact through friendships is particularly effective when it involves self-disclosure and shared time together. In addition, the relevance of cross-group friendship is reflected in dimensions such as closeness, perceived inclusiveness toward the outgroup, the number of outgroup friends, and the proportion of outgroup members within one's friendship network.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the complexities of cross-group friendship (see Dion 2023; Khuu et al. 2023). Khuu et al. (2023) suggest that individuals' pre-existing attitudes towards other groups play a greater role in determining whether such friendships form. The formation and stability of friendships are also shaped by broader structural and contextual factors. These factors play a crucial role in shaping the likelihood and stability of friendships. Institutional settings, such as schools and neighborhoods, may encourage cross-cultural interactions, yet social norms, group identity salience, and perceived intergroup threats can influence whether these relationships develop and endure (Schmid et al. 2008; Yustisia 2016).

What matters most is the quality of contact (Davies, Tropp, et al. 2011). Harwood (2010) proposes a concept of "contact space" to demonstrate the dynamics of communication in contact situations. Challenging the previous literature about intergroup contact (see Allport 1955; Pettigrew 1998), Harwood stressed the content of contact itself. Particularly in the context of intergroup contact, such communications are meaningful, i.e., questions out of curiosity, expressions of interest toward other groups, appreciation, openness about group-based prejudice, recognition without judging differences and stereotypes, and humor about groups. In some cases, people might feel uncertainty and anxiety if a sensitive topic came up, so they prefer to avoid interfaith dialogue. Moreover, engaging with diversity involves risks and is often uncomfortable, but it ultimately proves to be beneficial.

In religious contexts, the dynamics become even more pronounced. While interreligious friendships are often framed as a means of fostering tolerance and mutual understanding, religious identity can serve as both a bridge and a barrier in social relationships (Hillenbrand 2020). Although the central teachings of religion emphasize compassion, in reality, members of religious groups are often prone to prejudice against those perceived as less devout or holding different beliefs (Hunsberger and Jackson 2005). Yet, understanding friendship preferences in this issue is crucial, as they reveal how individuals navigate contact

with both same-group and cross-group members in everyday life. Understanding these patterns can provide insights into ways religious identities shape social boundaries, opportunities for interaction, and attitudes toward diversity.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study used an exploratory qualitative approach. Participants in this study (N=224; 57 males and 167 females) were recruited via an online announcement. They ranged in age from 20 to 40 years old (mean age = 25). This analysis represents a subset of data from a larger exploration of neighborhood friendships (see Minza et al., 2022). From the demographic profile, the religious groups were reported as 88% Muslim (Islam), 7% Christian, 3% Catholic, 1% Hindu, and 1% preferred not to disclose their religion. Participants live in various settings in Indonesia, including rural and urban areas, traditional villages, and modern housing.

Although the study aims to investigate the relevance of religious streams in friendship preferences, we did not request participants to specify their particular religious affiliation. When designing the demographic section of the survey, we considered the potential for sensitivity associated with disclosing specific religious affiliations, which might influence their responses (see Regnerus & Uecker 2007). While this represents a limitation of the study, we believe the findings remain valuable for identifying trends and patterns in friendship preferences within religious streams.

After reading the informed consent, participants filled out the responses to both closed- and open-ended questionnaire items. Among the series of questions asked as hooks, this study focuses on analyzing the specific topic of religious streams in friendships. Responses to two questions were analyzed: “Do you think that religious streams influence your friendship? (e.g., *Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Charismatic Christianity, Javanese Christianity, etc.*)”. We used the nominal scale of “yes” and “no” choices. It was followed by an open question, “*Why do you choose yes or no in the previous question? Please explain your choice*”. Building on the questions posed, this study explicitly explores individual preferences for forming intra-religious friendships, both within the same group and across groups.

Of the 224 responses obtained, 199 (89%) answered “no,” indicating that religious stream affiliation does not influence their friendship preferences, and their responses reflected openness to forming friendships with other religious streams. A smaller proportion (11%) answered “yes,” indicating a homophily orientation. We separated the responses into “yes” and “no” to look more closely at what the participants explained about their choices.

Responses were screened for relevance and interpretability. Responses consisting only of brief statements without explanatory content (e.g. “no effect”, “not important”, “it doesn’t matter”) were excluded because they did not provide sufficient information for thematic coding. In total, 93 responses were excluded. The remaining 131 responses contained sufficient exploratory detail and were included in thematic analysis. Of these, 115 responses (87.8%) reflected openness toward friendships across group differences.

The dataset was further analyzed using a thematic strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify a range of features associated with religious streams in friendships. We read each response carefully, identified the initial codes, and developed potential themes. The initial coding was independently conducted by the first, second, and third authors (IHP, FMI, MAS). The coding outputs were subsequently compared and discussed to reconcile interpretations and refine the coding framework, and were subsequently reviewed by the fourth and fifth authors (WMM and FAN). All authors engaged in regular discussions to identify, review, and refine potential themes. Through an iterative process of analysis and discussion, the research team collectively developed and agreed upon the final themes.

From this analytical process, two overarching friendship preferences emerged, each with two main features: the importance of identity and dialogue in friendship. The importance of identity refers to the extent to which individuals place religious-stream identity at the center of their friendship. It shapes how they select and sustain friendships. Dialogue in friendship captures how individuals manage their engagement within and across religious streams, whether motivated by a desire to enhance their religiosity or by the need to navigate religious

dialogue adaptively. To ensure clarity and consistency, all authors engaged in regular discussions to refine the key analytical findings presented below.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

We present the results into two overarching themes, integrating the importance of identity and dialogue found in both same-group and cross-group friendship preferences (see Table 1). The first theme highlights how same-group friendships are oriented toward homophilic bonding as a pathway for personal religious advancement. The second theme captures cross-group friendships, characterized by pluralistic openness and the navigation of intergroup contact. It should be noted that these findings reflect dominant tendencies rather than strictly separated categories.

**Table 1.** Findings on same-group and cross-group friendships

Friendship preferences	The importance of identity	Dialogue in friendship
same-group	<b><i>Homophilic bonding</i></b>	<b><i>Religious advancement</i></b>
	Similarity of beliefs Prejudice towards other groups	Sharing kindness and religious teaching
cross-group	<b><i>Pluralistic openness</i></b>	<b><i>Religious dialogue navigation</i></b>
	Strong affiliation Non-affiliation	Avoiding uncomfortable conversation Seeking religious discussion
	Personal character over creed	

### Same-group friendship: Homophilic bonding as personal religious advancement

Based on analytical findings on the perception of “yes” (religious stream matters in friendship), we found a tendency toward homophilic bonding in expressing the importance of religious identity. Two sub-categories emerged: the interest in belief similarity and prejudice towards other religious streams. In this context, homophily was evident in a tendency to express positive attitudes toward ingroup members or members of the same religious stream. This preference was often accompanied by participants' emphasis on the exclusivity of their friendship, highlighting the importance of shared religious teachings and the benefits of engaging in collective religious practices. Conversely, some participants expressed prejudice towards other religious streams, describing feelings of discomfort and perceiving symbolic threats in common narratives about certain religious streams.

Similarity in religiosity is perceived as essential to embracing a group's sense of belonging, thus upholding the vision of religiosity. Several participants expressed that the similarity of religious identity is important as it brings benefits. Shared vision, common goals, and mutual understandings were identified as reasons for feeling comfortable in friendships. In this sense, religious individuals tend to regard their membership as central to their self-concept. This membership allows them to gain both personal and collective self-esteem, fostering strong bonds with fellow group members. As an exemplar, Ali (26, Islam) prefers to build close friendships with fellow members of Muhammadiyah.

*I choose yes (religious stream similarity matters). I'm a member of Muhammadiyah. Because Muhammadiyah means followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Building friendships with fellow Muhammadiyah members allows us to collectively uphold and honor the teachings of Islam, fostering a sense of unity and mutual support in realising the vision of a truly Islamic society.*

On the other hand, friendship is about conversation and dialogue, and people tend to be selective with whom they want to share their story with. In addition to affinity for shared beliefs, some participants expressed discomfort or distrust toward those from different religious streams. The distrust can manifest as hesitation and a perception of a lack of openness among outgroup members. Such hesitation is reflected in Fajar's (23, Islam) experience when interacting with people from different Islamic affiliations. *“I am more reluctant to discuss*

*religious teachings when interacting with the outgroup*". He prefers to make close friendships with the same religious stream to avoid tension in intergroup friendships.

Moreover, Niluh (33, Hindu) also articulated, *"I see some religious groups as open-minded, while others are not. So, I chose 'yes'; it's more comfortable with the same fellow"*. She identified that certain Hinduism communities tend to be exclusive and narrow-minded. For her, forming close friendships within the same religious stream at least provides assurance that her friends share an open-minded mindset, as taught in her religion. Those findings suggest that prejudice often stems from hesitation, encouraging individuals to avoid potentially sensitive conversations and to avoid discomfort.

While the importance of identity in same-group preference is expressed through homophily or ingroup favoritism, such orientation also promotes religious support, particularly through the sharing of kindness and religious teachings. Mutual understanding is one of the key factors that make exclusive friendships feel "connected". Moreover, religious practices are everyday actions that contribute to attaining divine rewards and reinforcing religious identity (Kimani 2024). The benefits of exclusive friendships align with and support this religious orientation. As expressed by Fatma (24, Islam), *"It is essential because we can share many things about the same religious teachings"*.

Seeking comfort in forming friendships within the same group is also articulated through the ease of communication. Ultimately, the essence of friendship lies in everyday conversations. Being "in sync" means feeling a sense of compatibility and a strong intention to discuss religious topics. Individuals feel more comfortable and disclose without any sense of tension. Communication flows more smoothly and naturally, as expressed by Tya (26, Islam), *"We are more in sync in viewing many things; there are shared, profound understandings of the values and teachings of the religion we follow"*. This orientation further supports the explanation of the individual's motivation to deepen their religious knowledge by leveraging friendships as a means of religious advancement.

Additionally, we found contextual factors related to social influences, such as the composition of the local population. For individuals who are residents in a particular location (such as their hometown), their friendship preferences tend to align with the social connections within their local community. For example, Vina (21, Islam) illustrates, *"In my kampung, everyone follows Nahdlatul Ulama"*, demonstrating that population homogeneity fosters opportunities for same-group contact and friendships. As a young woman who has spent most of her time in her *kampung*, Vina grew up surrounded by friends from the NU community. Similarly, Fitri (26, Islam) notes, *"Religious activities in my kampung are not separated by groups or streams"*. This shared participation in religious activities suggests that Fitri has never been exposed to religious difference, reinforcing her perception of religious uniformity in her community. As Vina and Fitri stated that religious streams are relevant in forming friendships, these findings suggest that preferences are influenced by the extent to which individuals have opportunities to interact in their living area.

### **Cross-group friendship: Pluralistic openness and religious dialogue navigations**

The second theme demonstrates the perception that religious streams do not affect friendships. This orientation also reveals the tendency to be open to forming friendships with other religious streams. Within the dimension of identity importance in this preference, we identified a sense of confidence in embracing diversity (pluralistic openness) and in navigating communication about religious teachings. Pluralistic openness is articulated as fluidity and openness in seeing diversity and differences. However, pluralistic openness varies among those who recognize a strong sense of religious identity, have no specific religious affiliation, and prioritize the concept of humanity.

Individuals with a strong identification with their own religious identity may have greater tolerance toward others because their solid sense of self and belonging reduces feelings of threat from different beliefs. The tendency to avoid compartmentalizing religious groups reflects the orientation toward higher relational values and indicates the characteristic of intrinsic religious orientation (Allport 1960). Maria (20, Christian) said that she and her friends belong to different churches, but it has no impact on their friendship. Another exemplar,

Yanuar (20, Islam) stated, “*I don't look at SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations). I always have a choice, and I choose to follow a particular stream. So, the difference of religious streams in friendship will not affect my belief*”. Yanuar revealed a common stigma: fear of being influenced by other religious teachings when engaging in cross-group friendships. Consciousness of this stigma helps individuals evaluate their group identity, thereby committing to tolerance due to strong religious affiliation.

On the other hand, people who are unconcerned with religious streams and tend to be open to friendships with anyone are typically unaffiliated with any specific stream. In other words, individuals choose to practice religion in a general sense, where stream or affiliation does not constitute the importance of their identity. A total of 12 participants acknowledged having this orientation, explaining that their lack of affiliation with any religious sub-group allowed them to adopt a more inclusive perspective. For instance, Rima (26, Islam) expressed her willingness to form friendships with anyone, including friends from specific religious groups.

*I do not identify myself with any particular religious group. However, I perceive that my living environment shares a similar religious background, which I find advantageous. Yet, when there are differences in religious affiliation among friends, they do not pose any significant problem.*

In addition to the two forms of identity importance mentioned above, participants' responses were largely dominated by considerations of good personal characteristics rather than religious categorizations. This mindset emphasizes valuing a person's good character and attitudes, promoting the idea of inclusivity and humanity. As stated by Puja (32, Islam), “*We are all equal in the eye of God*”, she encouraged compassion and mutual respect, challenging exclusive claims that might hinder the formation of inclusive friendship. In addition, Rani (26, Islam) stated “*No matter what religious group, the most important thing is good morality and behavior*”. Also, Nina (25, Islam) stated, “*I do not consider religious groups when it comes to friendship. Whoever they are, if they are fun to be around, why not?*” This finding revealed that focusing on an inclusive mindset and personal characteristics enables people to create a pro-diversity environment and establish inclusive friendships.

In cross-group preference, religious dialogue navigation emerges as a crucial mechanism to maintain social harmony among individuals engaged in inter-religious stream friendships. Having intergroup friendships often requires a balance between openly sharing everything and respecting others' beliefs. Navigating such dialogues (especially about religious teachings) involves selective communication, in which sensitive theological differences are either avoided or approached tactfully to prevent conflict. In this theme, we found two valences to navigate religious dialogue: *avoiding* and *seeking*.

People tend to avoid having certain uncomfortable conversations, especially when it comes to different religious principles. Bunga (35, Islam) stated “*I avoid bringing up issues of religious understanding in our daily conversations*”. Another exemplar, Santi (26, Islam) tends to avoid or hide her cross-religious stream friend about specific issues.

*My friend belongs to a different religious stream than I have. I consider her a close friend, but I choose not to confide in her about my boyfriend because she holds very strict principles regarding relationships between women and men.*

While some avoid certain topics related to religious principles to prevent conflict and discomfort, others actively seek to discuss religious diversity. The opportunity to have cross-religious stream friendships is viewed as beneficial for enriching understanding of religious diversity. The key is not to oppose or debate beliefs, but to value mutual respect. As an exemplar, Intan (20, Islam) stated,

*I live among friends from different religious stream backgrounds, but so far, this has not had any negative impact on us. Occasionally, it becomes a topic of lighthearted discussion, but it never leads to tension, as we strive to understand one another.*

In this specific space, school also serves as a space for religious diversity. Such intergroup contact experiences play a role in shaping openness to friendship across group boundaries. Indeed, school functions as a strategic setting for encountering and intensively "seeing" different groups. As Lisa (25, Islam) explains, "*Although we study at a Muhammadiyah-based school, and I'm a Muhammadiyah follower, we are still accustomed to the presence of other religious groups, including the majority NU*". Her familiarity with the majority stream in Islam (NU) at her Islamic school fosters openness to forming cross-group friendships, suggesting that exposure to religious diversity in her environment reduces barriers to intergroup relationships.

## **Discussion**

The findings highlight the dual nature of friendship preferences in a multireligious society, showcasing the interplay between same-group and cross-group orientations in the context of religious streams. While same-group friendships were often motivated by homophilic belonging and the reinforcement of personal religious advancement, cross-group friendships reflected a broader openness, characterized by pluralistic openness and adaptive communication navigation. However, these two orientations function for a balanced social environment through personal and communal growth, paving the way for well-being (Singh et al. 2023).

To summarise the findings, religious streams in friendships underline the broader relevance of identity importance and interactional styles. Identity importance emerges as a central feature in friendship selection, reflecting how individuals integrate their religious affiliations into their self-concept and social interactions (Morris 1979; Tajfel 1974). The notion of identity importance also gets captured by the subjective significance of a particular identity at the level of self-awareness (Brenner 2011), especially for individuals who perceive the significance of religious teachings in their social lives. Moreover, it shapes how individuals approach social interactions. It determines how individuals manage their friendships, especially their involvement in everyday religious conversations.

In this context, individuals who emphasized the importance of religious homophily in friendship (though only a small proportion of total responses), demonstrated the necessity of religious advancement, revealing how intra-group friendships function as vehicles for religious reinforcement and support. The formation of same-group friendships is highly likely in religious study groups or *dakwah* gatherings (Fabriar and Muhajarah 2024), and it can also give rise to religious activist movements (Hedi and Mibtadin 2018). This orientation also contributes to the preservation and cohesion of the religious group, particularly in homogeneous environments where such friendships reinforce social adhesion (see Sarbini et al., 2018). While the findings do not entirely dismiss the presence of prejudice towards other religious streams, participants rarely articulated overt prejudice. Their preference for homophily highlights comfort and ease rather than hostility. It stresses the social dimension of religion and challenges the common dichotomy that equates exclusivity with intolerance, rather than with a desire for comfort, understanding, and ease of communication. Thus, this preference does not operate rigidly; individuals may choose to establish close friendships within the same group while also remaining open to cross-group friendships, albeit with a lesser degree of closeness (Bracegirdle et al. 2022).

In cross-group orientation, individuals with low identity importance in religious streams are less likely to see denominational alignment as critical to their relationships. Research on cross-group friendships demonstrates that individuals with lower centrality of group identity perceive their identity poses less of a barrier to forming connections (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Interestingly, the dynamics of cross-group friendships lie in how individuals navigate everyday communication. Adaptive communication navigation becomes a feature of the complexities of intergroup friendships (Paolini, Harwood, Hewstone, & Neumann 2018). Individuals who steer clear of potentially contentious religious topics are often motivated by a desire to maintain harmony within the friendship. This approach involves selective sharing and directing conversations away from sensitive issues. However, it also suggests that being close friends does not necessarily entail sharing every aspect of one's life; rather, people may

tailor their interactions depending on the compatibility of topics with each friend. In contrast, those who are more open to discussing differences in religious teaching typically share relationships built on trust and mutual respect (Aijudin 2017). This openness is often driven by curiosity about their friends' beliefs, with such communication serving as a bridge across groups (Houck, 2019).

This study draws on established theoretical traditions in the study of social relations, especially social identity theory and intergroup contact theory. However, rather than treating these frameworks as fixed explanatory models, they function as analytical lenses for exploring how friendship preferences are shaped in everyday religious life. The findings extend existing perspectives by showing that friendship preferences are shaped not only by group identification but also by relational negotiation across religious boundaries. This study demonstrates that religious streams in friendships are not reducible to fixed group categorizations but are shaped by the interplay between the importance of identity and opportunities for dialogue. In this sense, social identity remains a key anchor of belonging, yet it does not deterministically determine friendship formation. Instead, individuals actively negotiate identity tensions and manage religious difference within relational context. This study highlights the agentic ways through which diversity is lived and managed in contemporary society.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the variety of those initial features demonstrates the cultural-social texture of religious streams; these issues have been relatively underexplored compared with cross-religious contexts. This study offers insight into how the importance of identity and dialogue reveal that religious streams in friendships are not merely a matter of group categorizations but are influenced by complex, context-dependent dynamics through which individuals engage with religious diversity. This study contributes to understanding how religious streams shape both same-group and cross-group friendships, highlighting the nuanced ways individuals balance belonging and contact motives in multireligious societies.

Although this study reveals initial features important for explaining friendship preferences, it has limitations. The participants are overrepresented by Muslim (88%), meaning the findings are more representative of Muslim perspectives and may reflect the dynamics of a majority religious group rather than providing balanced insight across different streams in other religions. In addition, as this study relied solely on a simple survey, the depth of experience in both same-group and cross-group friendships within the context of religious streams ought to be further examined in future research through qualitative approaches that can generate more nuanced and comprehensive accounts of friendship life.

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