

**The Influence of Educational and Media Institution as Agents of Intragroup Contact
and Socialisation: The case of Australian-Muslim tertiary students**

**A Influência das Instituições Educacionais e Mediáticas como Agentes de Contato e
Socialização Intragrupal: O caso de estudantes muçulmanos australianos do Ensino Superior**

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the attitudes and perceptions of Australian-Muslim tertiary students toward non-Muslim Australians, focusing on the roles of educational and media institution as agents of socialisation and intergroup contact. Utilising a cross-sectional design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 94 students across six major universities in Victoria and New South Wales. The findings indicate that while the participants hold a generally positive attitude towards social integration, their tendency to befriend non-Muslims is significantly influenced by their negative perceptions of outsiders and unfair media portrayals of their faith. Notably, the findings also suggest that initiating intergroup friendships may counter negative media representations of Muslims and Islam, whereas educational institutions played a vital role in fostering positive interfaith relations. The

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study thus highlights the critical necessity for educational systems to actively mitigate prejudice and cultivate positive intergroup perceptions in educational institutions, thereby supporting the broader social integration of minority (religious) communities

KEYWORDS: intragroup; culturalism; minority education; social distance; inter-cultural relations; inter-ethnic communication.

RESUMO: Este artigo de pesquisa oferece insights detalhados sobre os sentimentos e experiências de um segmento chave da comunidade, ou seja, estudantes muçulmanos em instituições de ensino superior (IES). Ele se destaca na forma como mensura as atitudes e percepções de estudantes muçulmanos do ensino superior, que refletem implicações distintas para a integração social e as relações intergrupais. Uma série de diferenças atitudinais entre gêneros, variáveis religiosas e o impacto na percepção comportamental e no distanciamento social em relação a pessoas de fora do grupo foram examinados neste contexto. Os resultados revelaram que a percepção negativa de não muçulmanos influencia significativamente a atitude dos respondentes em relação à integração social e sua probabilidade de fazer amizade com não muçulmanos; seu nível acadêmico correlaciona-se negativamente com sua tendência a fazer amizade com australianos não muçulmanos; e sua tendência a fazer amizade com não muçulmanos é condicionada por sua percepção negativa de não muçulmanos e sua disposição geral para a coesão comunitária.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: intragrupo; culturalismo; educação de minorias; distância social; relações interculturais; comunicação interétnica.

Introduction

The Muslim community in Australia, currently constituting 2.6% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), is one of the nation's fastest-growing religious groups. Despite this demographic growth and increasing scholarly attention, media representation of Muslims in Australia frequently marginalises Muslims. Research indicates that the relationship between intergroup contact and attitudes towards 'others' is highly context-dependent and varies across different minority group (Ata, 2020; Ata et al., 2009; Ata & Ali, 2018; Hassan, 2015; Lee et al., 2013; Yip et al., 2019). Therefore, examining cross-cultural attitudes of both Muslim and non-Muslim Australians requires a nuanced understanding of specific local contexts rather than relying on generalised assumptions.

The Muslim community's relation with the greater Australian public at large is intriguing due to varied reasons: (a) the Muslim community is the fastest growing community over the last few decades which designates them as the second largest faith community to those of a Christian affiliation; (b) although the two faiths share similarities in the genesis, future judgments and other faith based tenets, fundamental differences – both cultural, religious and predicate irreconcilable differences; (c) the judgment from the host societies may have steadfastly kept Muslim migrants on the margin of society, and in turn contributes to growing sense of malignancy towards their hosts, thus standing in the way of full integration.

Understanding this background is crucial, as minority responses to the dominant majority are complex and multifaceted. The focus of this study is a) to identify perception and attitudes of Muslim tertiary students, with respect to the larger community; and to interpret the influence of social media on the ease, or retardation of integration of members of Muslim communities into the mainstream society; b) to examine attitudinal differences across gender, religious variables, and impact on behavioural perception to and social distancing from outsiders. Moreover, this study builds upon previous national surveys which examined attitudes of Australian non-Muslim school age students to Muslims (Ata, 2020; Ata & Ali, 2018; Ata & Baumann, 2020), thus enabling a comparative insights. By focusing on Muslim students in higher education institutions (HEIs), this study highlights the successes and failures of integrating cultural, linguistic, and religious minority in into largely secular and Western tertiary institutions. Ultimately, the participants in this survey are asking: *At what point are educational secular institutions able to accommodate a non-Western minority with different religious and identity sentiments from the majority?*

1. Literature Review

Notwithstanding the diversity of research focus on intergroup interactions between members of minority and majority groups, a summary of fundamental revelations outlined below would benefit the reader.

First, whereas majority group members are generally self-aware of their own prejudice towards the minority groups within contact situations, minority group members tend to be more concerned about being the targets of such prejudice (Kende et al., 2018; Pettigrew et al., 2007). Second, minority group members tend to think of themselves in terms of their own group membership more than majority group members and tend to be aware of their groups devalued status (Habtegiorgis et al., 2014). Third, the intergroup attitudes of minority group members are often based on the anticipation of prejudice from the majority group, whereas intergroup attitudes of majority group members tend to be based on their own perceptions and beliefs (Lee et al., 2013). Additionally, research also suggests

that the social media – one of several social-psychological factors influencing fact driven attitudes – contributes to developing a negative perception of Muslims, often portraying Islam in direct conflict with the values and traditions of Western cultures; that terrorism and Islam, for example, are synonymous, Germany/Europe and Islam are incompatible; and their world views are irreconcilable (Ata et al., 2009; Ata & Ali, 2018; Pettigrew et al., 2007; Schumann et al., 2014).

2. Education and Media as Agents of Intergroup Contact and Socialization

Recent literature on the media and education has largely reported factors include school culture, attitude towards media (especially social media), support, teacher professional development, learning goals and a clear position in the curriculum (Van Den Beemt et al., 2020). Not only has media become inherent in their daily living, but its dependency on it at work, health services, education is such that society can hardly function in its absence (Gërguri-Rashiti et al., 2017; Karanasios & Parker, 2018). Clearly the way the media forms or limits the public perception in interpreting social and cultural issue seem to be borne of the following reality: how persuasive the coverage will affect other members of the community. However indirect the effect may be the weight and lasting consequence on common knowledge is immense (Gunther, 1998; Van Den Beemt et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2021).

However, the quality of the results of these studies often made controversial statements, unsubstantiated conclusions, and unclear links between conditions and outcomes. And yet recommendations and advice about social media, learning and perceptions are formulated and often adopted as irrefutable evidence of causality. Studies have shown showed that teachers' input promoted learning, and in their absence collaboration between students hardly occurred (Lin et al., 2013; Prestridge, 2014). Hence, focusing on a single aspect instead of interrelatedness several factors meant that the outcome of the learnt content is never objective. Hidden aspects impact of social media on education that extend our understanding of the hidden curriculum, educators' values that that are regularly and subconsciously are transmitted to students-be they those of the individuals, institutions of society at large (Cotton et al., 2013). Phrased differently, the outcome of the learnt content is never objective neither are the existing preferences of those who transmit it. The ongoing question as to whether social media platforms (*i.e.* Facebook, Instagram.) are a cause or an effect to students learning remains dormant. For instance, does Twitter or Google cause lower grades for students or do they consult these platforms regularly once they get lower grades?

Other studies have been conducted to assess the relationship between intention to use and actual use. One of these it has been shown that attitude is the mediating variable through which information quality directly affects purchase intention (Phang & Ming, 2018). Others showed how motivations affect the intention of using social networking sites (Lu & Yang, 2014), and the effects of individual

motivations and demographic differences in social virtual world uses (Nadeem et al., 2015). Dalpiaz (2020) also stated that users' social media literacy can influence their attitude to use social media. In addition, the perceived ease of use and attitude toward utilizing social networking sites are strongly correlated. These findings portray social media as a potent socialisation agent capable of significantly induce bias among individuals. The current study, drawing inference from Dalpiaz (2020) in particular, examines the moderating impact of university students' perceived influence of media and education on their attitudes and perception of outsiders including minority groups, in this case Muslims. The study describes the notion of the theory of planned behaviour, which identifies the elements which may influence the attitude and intention of students at universities to use social media for educational purposes.

The primary reason for focusing on media, particularly that of social media, spoken and examined in tandem with education, is due to their potency as a coalesced socialising agent that fulfils a variety of functions, such as allowing students to communicate in a variety of ways (see also Tsai et al., 2020). Students, for example, may post queries to engage in open discussion improve interactivity and information sharing, as well as address user feelings and attitudes, to encourage university students to use social media platforms for learning. A shy student, on the other hand, can use the private messaging feature to convey his or her queries or remarks directly to the appropriate parties. Social media's extensive communication alternatives not only facilitate students' communication process but also allow quick access to educational resources.

While university students are enthusiastic about using media to gather knowledge, other problems exist regarding the use of education resources, including privacy and the appropriateness of using social media like Facebook for academic purposes. The enormous popularity of social networking sites among the younger generations demonstrates that university students are usually familiar with new technologies. Driven by what literature identifies as personal technological innovativeness, they find it easier to use social media for academic purposes (Gunness et al., 2023; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These platforms function as a crucial educational interface that facilitates student engagement by accommodating varied communication and interaction needs. Even individuals who are new with social media would likely find it simple to learn and use it for attitudinal-behavioural formation and educational purposes.

Additionally, the emergence of media and social media as a driving force of socialisation has also made students vulnerable to misinformation susceptibility (Ewart et al., 2017). Alarmingly, there is little published research examining the extent to which false facts relate to attitudes of Muslims towards Australia (Tsai et al., 2020). This is critical, as negative mass media consumption is consistently associated with outgroup prejudice (Paolini et al., 2021), and false beliefs play a crucial

role in perpetuating negative attitudes, legitimising social distance, and justifying blatant and subtle prejudice (Ata et al., 2009; Ata & Batrouney, 1989). Such studies on anti-prejudice education and cultural diversity approaches in institutional settings (Karataş et al., 2023) show that participants believed that information about out-groups is crucial in challenging negative feelings. By leveraging mediated intergroup contact (Wong et al., 2022), educational institutions can effectively improve positivity towards out-groups and counteract the divisive effects of media disinformation.

3. Research Questions

Therefore, this investigation, data analysis and interpretation included, is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the attitude and perceptions of Muslim Australian tertiary students towards non-Muslim Australians?
- How do Australian Muslim tertiary students perceive educational and media portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Australia?
- What is the Australian Muslim tertiary students' perceived social distance of non-Muslim Australians?
- Is there any significant relationship between the Muslim tertiary students' perceived educational and media portrayal of Muslims and Islam in Australia and their perceived social distance of non-Muslim Australians?

In the context of this study, the following operational definitions are used:

Attitude: Refers to the internal feelings, psychological dispositions, and overall evaluative stance (whether positive or negative) that Australian-Muslim tertiary students hold towards non-Muslim Australians

Perception: Refers to the cognitive interpretation of social realities. In this context, perception encompasses both how the students believe they are viewed by the non-Muslim majority, and their cognitive interpretation of how educational and media institutions portray Muslims and Islam.

Social Distance: Refers to concrete actions and the reported willingness to engage in specific social interactions. In this study, behaviour is operationalized through the metric of social distance, specifically measuring the respondents' stated likelihood of befriending, going out with (dating), or marrying someone of another religion."

3.1. Research Method

The present survey is concerned with understanding what may drive attitudes and behaviour, both negative and positive of Muslim minority students towards the broader host community. It presents both a quantitative and descriptive analysis of tertiary educated Muslim students in 6 major universities in Victoria and New South Wales. The areas selected for analysis are drawn of a larger multifaceted questionnaire which covers numerous thematic components such attitudes, perception, social distance, and beliefs. Of these categories only questions related to perception, social distance and attitudes are analysed for the purposes of this paper. The views expressed are direct, and anonymous. They are brought forward to express the incidents and experiences that are now central in media discussion, public and government domains. They are also key in identifying the political and social contexts which nurture them. Social inclusion, cultural and religious disharmony, antidiscrimination policies are a few areas that are projected to raise essential questions that need to be urgently addressed. These are catalysed by the numerous institutions such as HEIs, mass media, social media, sports industry etc. mainly from Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland.

The sample formed the basis of this field research using a structured questionnaire as the main instrument for data collection, cross tabulation, and comparative analysis. The research instrument is a structured questionnaire comprising 90 variables consisting open and closed ended questions. These variables include items on knowledge about Islam and the participants' attitude, social distance, and perception towards Muslims.

Both open and closed ended questions will elicit precise and free-associated answers reflecting demographic attributes; perception and attitudes; knowledge and behaviour; beliefs and opinions. Table 1 illustrates the reliability measures of each construct.

Scale	Items	Revised α	Avg Inter-Item r
Attitudes Towards Non	5	<u>0.68</u>	<u>0.28</u>
Cumulative Social Distance	3	<u>0.65</u>	<u>0.35</u>
Media Portrayal of Muslims	3	<u>0.62</u>	<u>0.29</u>
Educational Influence	4	<u>0.71</u>	<u>0.38</u>
Negative Perception Towards Non	9	<u>0.81</u>	<u>0.32</u>
Positive Perception Towards Non	6	<u>0.74</u>	<u>0.31</u>
Total	30		

Table 1. Reliability Analysis of Various Constructs

Due to logistical and administrative constraints, a convenience sampling technique was employed to recruit participants. Students were approached in campus library study areas and lecture halls across the selected institutions. The survey was administered between 2022 and 2024 in English to male and female students who were 18 years and over, ensuring that they were mature enough to give informed answers. Table 2 depicts the demographic data of the sample.

	Participants, n = 94	Percentage
Gender	Male	18.1%
	Female	79.8%
	No response	2.1%
Age	Up to 23 years	23.4%
	Older than 24 years	55.3%
	No response	21.3%
Language at Home	Mostly English	6.4%
	Mostly ancestral language	12.8%
	A mixture of both	80.9%
Level of Education	Undergraduate	78.7%
	Postgraduate	19.1%
	Doctoral/PhD	2.1%
Religion of Friends	Mostly Christian	8.5%
	Mostly Muslim	52.1%
	About half and half	31.9%
	No response	7.4 %
Heritage	Australian (Both parents are Australian born)	2.1%
	Non-Australian (Both parents are not Australian born)	87.2%
	Mixed (Either one parent is Australian born)	10.6%

Table 2. Demographic information

4. Findings

Descriptive statistics yielded some tentative insights into the data set, with significant relationships between variables investigated using inferential statistics such as T-test, multiple linear regression and mediation analysis. These analyses were conducted using SPSS version 22. The

findings were subsequently reported parallel to the research questions framed by the background and literature review of this study.

5. Attitude towards and Perception of Non-Muslim Australians

Table 3 below curates information pertaining to the respondents' attitude towards and perception of non-Muslim Australians. In the context of this study, attitude refers one's behaviour towards others, whereas perception points to how one believed s/he is perceived. This study acknowledges that it is normal for one to harbour both positive (M =1.82) and negative attitudes (M =1.99) towards non-Muslim Australians, though one end is likelier more dominant. In line with this, the participants also reported a slightly positive perception of non-Muslim Australians (M =1.26, SD =.273). Both findings are consistent with the participants' attitude towards social integration of Muslims in the general Australian social fabric (*see* Table 4), where most are in favour of greater social integration (M =1.61, SD =.343).

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Positive attitude towards non-Muslim Australians	94	1.816	.351
Negative attitude towards non-Muslim Australians	94	1.993	.387
Valid N (listwise)	94		
(Note: 1 = Agree, 3 = Disagree)			
Positive perception of non-Muslim Australians	92	1.26	.273
Negative perception of non-Muslim Australians	92	1.73	.228
Valid N (listwise)	94		
Table 3. Composite mean scores of attitudes towards and perception of non-Muslim			
(Note: 1 = Agree, 2 = Disagree)			

6. Perceived Educational and Media Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Australia

Table 4 illustrates the respondents' perception towards the role that educational institutions and mass media plays on how Muslims and Islam is perceived in Australia. Institutional-wise, Muslims and Islam remain poorly reflected and portrayed in the Australian media (M =2.62, SD =.451). Their stance resonates with findings in other studies where increased level of wearing full face veil is

correlated positively with higher levels of stereotyping, especially when there was a significant increase in international veiled female students at several universities during the last decade (Aslam, 2018; Hebbani & Wills, 2012). Countering the damaging influences of media is the commendable work of the educational institutions in Australia, where the respondents believe to be effective in fostering better interfaith relations (M =1.79, SD =.319). One other encouraging finding is that the respondents are reportedly willing to work for better social integration with the Australian public (M =1.61, SD =.343), something previously reported by (Teh & Ata, 2022).

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Media portrayal of non-Muslim Australians is accurate & positive	94	2.624	.451
Educational institutional influence on interfaith relations is positive	94	1.794	.319
Attitude towards social integration of Muslims is positive	94	1.606	.343
Valid N (listwise)	94		

Table 4 Composite mean scores of perceived educational and media portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Australia

(Note: 1 = Agree, 3 = Disagree)

7. Perceived Social Distance of Non-Muslim Australians

Table 5 represents the respondents' reported social distance with non-Muslim Australians, which is understood as the concrete manifestation of their attitude towards and perception of the more dominant *other*. When asked if they would befriend, date, or marry someone of another religion, the Muslim Australian respondents remarkably gave contrasting responses. They claim to strongly enjoy befriending anybody beyond their religious circle (M =1.71, SD =.957) yet reportedly belong to a primarily Muslim social circle (52.1%, see Table 2); many did not do so despite declaring themselves willing to befriend non-Muslims. The desire to date someone of another religion is less apparent (M =2.47, SD =1.435), but their willingness to marry non-Muslims drastically reduces (M =4.20, SD =1.093). Understandably, some Muslim communities allow interfaith marriages with spouses of Abrahamic faiths (although only Muslim women can only marry Muslim spouses). It is unsurprising

that the respondents, being mostly of foreign heritage (87.2%, *see* Table 2), are reluctant to date ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.435$) and marry ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.093$) non-Muslims into their families.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I would enjoy having a close friend of another religion	94	1.71	.957
I would go out with someone of another religion	94	2.47	1.435
I would marry someone of another religion	94	4.20	1.093
Valid N (listwise)	94		

Table 5. Reported Social Distance from non-Muslims Australians
(Note: 1 = Agree, 5 = Disagree)

The correlation between demographic variables and the perceived social distance with non-Muslim Australians is interesting. Gender is positively correlated with the respondents' preference to marry non-Muslims ($r = .289$, $p < .01$), where female respondents ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .704$) are less likely to marry a non-Muslim, $t(90) = -4.569$, $p < .01$, $d = -1.227$, compared to their male counterparts ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.687$). Since the respondents are predominantly Muslims of foreign descent, the religious norm of Muslim women being allowed only to marry Muslim men is apparent (*see* Table 1). In many Muslim countries, Muslim men may marry women of Abrahamic faiths without requiring conversion, but Muslim women must only marry Muslim men. Therefore, male respondents are more likely to marry non-Muslims than female respondents. Still, the consensus is that they mostly resist doing so because conversion through marriage is one fond tactic used. Unfortunately, the instrument did not investigate if the respondents were willing to convert from Islam or accept spouses that do not convert to Islam because this would clarify their tolerance towards non-Muslims. Also, the respondents' academic level negatively correlates with their tendency to befriend non-Muslim Australians ($r = -.301$, $p < .01$). Respondents with postgraduate qualifications ($M = 1.22$, $SD = .428$) tend to befriend non-Muslims, $F(2,91) = 3.924$, $p < .05$, more so than respondents do with undergraduate qualifications ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.02$).

		Correlation		
		I would enjoy having a close friend of another religion	I would go out with someone of another religion	I would marry someone of another religion
Spearman's rho				
Gender	Correlation	.083	.180	.280**
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.431	.086	.007
Level of Education	N	92	92	92
	Correlation	-.301**	-.020	-.153
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.847	.141
	N	94	94	94

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Social Distance to mainstream Australians by Gender, Nationality, and Generation designation

8. Relationship Between Educational and Media Portrayal of Muslims and Islam in Australia and Perceived Social Distance of Non-Muslim Australians

Primarily, the respondents felt victimised by the Australian media ($M = 2.62$, *see* Table 2), which may have impeded and complicated their efforts to integrate with the larger Australian community, despite their willingness and intention to do so ($M = 1.61$, *see* Table 4). Being systemically misrepresented in media could have significant impact on how the respondents forge and maintain social relations with others. depicts a correlation analysis of the relationship between various attitudes towards and perception of non-Muslim Australians, and the educational and media institutions on the respondents' perceived social distance with non-Muslim Australians.

Correlation

Spearman's rho		I would enjoy having a close friend of another religion	I would go out with someone of another religion	I would marry someone of another religion
Positive attitudes towards non-Muslim Australians	Correlation	.234*	-.111	.175
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.023	.286	.092
	N	94	94	94
Negative attitudes towards non-Muslim Australians	Correlation	-.172	-.167	-.413**
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.097	.107	<.001
	N	94	94	94
Positive perceptions of non-Muslim Australians	Correlation	.320**	-.018	.306**
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.863	.003
	N	92	92	92
Negative perceptions of non-Muslim Australians	Correlation	-.398**	.151	-.218*
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.150	.037
	N	92	92	92
Media portrayal of Muslims	Correlation	-.333**	.111	.221*
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.286	.032
	N	94	94	94
Educational influence on interfaith relations	Correlation	.333**	.004	.115
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.967	.268
	N	94	94	94
Attitude towards social integration of Muslims	Correlation	.440**	.108	.359**
	Coefficient			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.299	<.001
	N	94	94	94

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 7. Social distance correlated by various attitudes and perceptions

Interestingly, attitudes towards non-Muslim Australians are significantly connected to the respondents' social distance towards non-Muslims. The respondents' positive attitudes towards non-Muslims correlate with their tendency to befriend them ($r = .234, p < .01$), as those who view non-Muslims positively are more likely to befriend them ($r^2 = .077, p < .01$). Contrastingly, their willingness to marry non-Muslims negatively correlates with their negative attitudes towards them ($r = -.413, p < .01$). Respondents who are less negative towards non-Muslims are more likely to marry them ($r^2 = .143, p < .01$). These two findings are coherent, although it's interesting that positive attitudes are more likely to predicate friendship with non-Muslims. In contrast, negative attitudes are more fundamental to their decision making whether to marry non-Muslims. Remarkably, their attitudes towards non-Muslims do not significantly affect whether they would date non-Muslims.

Also, educational influence on interfaith relations ($r = .333, p < .01$) and their attitudes towards social integration ($r = .440, p < .01$) positively correlate with the respondents' likelihood to befriend non-Muslims, which suggests that their attitudes towards non-Muslim Australians are malleable. Further linear regression analysis confirms this (*Adjusted* $r^2 = .145, p < .01$).

However, positive media portrayal of Muslims and the likelihood of befriending non-Muslims are negatively correlated ($r = -.333, p < .01$). The more unfair media depiction of Muslims was, the more urgent their tendency to befriend non-Muslims. Such tendency could be facilitated during Friday sermons in mosques or other congregational prayers, but the current data cannot ascertain if this was a coordinated response. Equally intriguing is how the regression analysis has predicted that the respondents would gradually stop befriending non-Muslims once media portrayal of Muslims improves ($r^2 = .092, p < .01$). This suggests a concerted effort to improve relations with non-Muslims considering poor media portrayal. Positive media portrayal of Muslims positively correlates with the likelihood of marrying non-Muslims ($r = .221, p < .05$).

If friendship with non-Muslims is a strategy to counter negative media depiction, the respondents are far more careful about marrying non-Muslims. However, these two variables had no significant relationship ($r^2 = .034, p > .05$). The respondents' attitude towards social integration with the greater Australian community correlates with their desire to befriend ($r = .440, p < .01$) or marry non-Muslims ($r = .359, p < .01$). A stronger desire to integrate with the local community will encourage them to befriend ($r^2 = .115, p < .01$) or marry non-Muslims ($r^2 = .099, p < .01$).

Regardless of faith, one's perception of a particular faith community circle tremendously affects their social distance from the said community (Kende et al., 2018; Teh & Ata, 2022). In this

paper, the respondents' positive and negative perceptions of non-Muslims significantly correlate to befriending or marrying them. While significantly predict their likelihood of befriending non-Muslims (*Adjusted r*² =.259, *p* <.01), they are not significant predictors of marrying non-Muslims (*Adjusted r*² =.009, *p* >.01). In short, positive and negative perceptions of a faith community are significant motivators for intergroup contact, especially in terms of befriending non-Muslims. The goodness-for-fit regression model accounts for up to 25.9% of the responses collected.

Figure 1 presents a multiple linear regression of various predictors for improving social distance with non-Muslim Australians. Based on the correlational and regression analysis on the respondents' reported social distance with non-Muslims, their attitudes and perceptions of non-Muslim Australians directly influence their social distance with them. Separate multiple linear regressions were conducted for all three forms of intergroup contact, namely enjoy having a close friend of another religion, going out with someone of another religion, and marrying someone of another religion. The variable that resulted in a level of significance was befriending non-Muslims at 30.9% of the variance of the data. The stepwise regression analysis (*r*² =.309, *p* <.01) shows that the decision to befriend non-Muslims is influenced by their negative perceptions of non-Muslims, attitude towards social integration of Muslims, and media portrayal of Muslims. Having negative perceptions of non-Muslims (β =-1.576) is the most influential factor. Hence, mitigating negative perceptions of non-Muslims is paramount for promoting the desire to befriend non-Muslims. Though slightly less influential, the attitude towards integrating with the larger community (β =.700) significantly motivates the respondents to befriend non-Muslims. As media portrayal of Muslims (β =-.462) improves, so does their self-image and confidence, hence reducing their urgency to befriend non-Muslims.

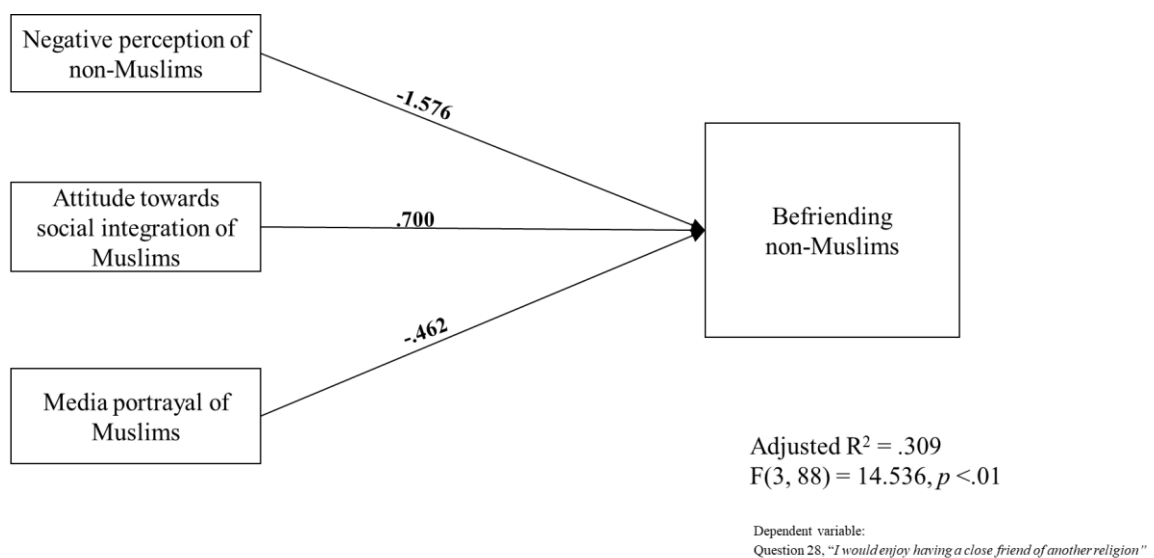


Figure 1. Predictors for improving social distance with non-Muslim Australians*

9. Education, Media, Social Integration, and Minority-Majority Relations

The study proposed that both education and media are potent variables that have considerable effect on respondents' attitudes towards their desire to befriend others. Several mediation analyses were conducted to examine the intricacies underlying these variables. (and below, visualise these analyses.

Firstly, mediation analysis which is illustrated in Figure 2 below demonstrated how negative perception of non-Muslims significantly mediates the educational influence on interfaith relations and their likelihood to befriend non-Muslims ($\beta_{indirect} = 1.697, p < .05$). The results in Figure 3 however did not reveal a significant mediator for the effects of media portrayal of Muslims on their desire to befriend non-Muslims ($\beta_{indirect} = -1.748, p > .05$), even though media appeared to have a significant direct effect on intergroup contact (Figure 1). Rather, negative perception of non-Muslims significantly mediates the respondents' attitude towards social integration on their likelihood to befriend non-Muslims ($\beta_{indirect} = .310, p < .05$).

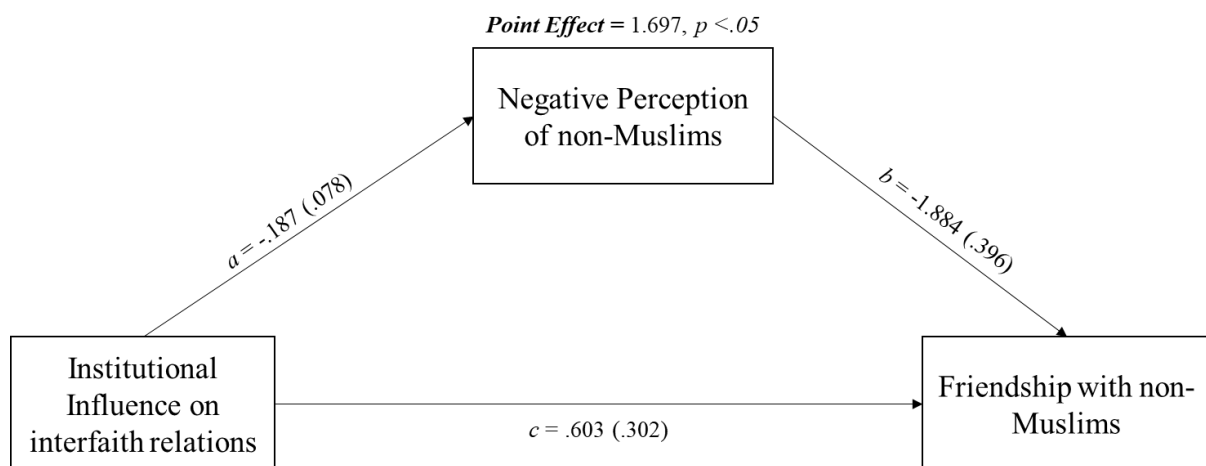


Figure 2. Mediation Analysis Involving Institutional Influences

Secondly, the mediation analysis also implies that the respondents' attitude towards social integration (Figure 3) and befriending non-Muslims (Figure 2) has stronger direct effects ($\beta_{direct} = .646, p < .05$) than negative perceptions of non-Muslims ($\beta_{indirect} = .310, p < .05$). This analysis suggests how negative perception can modulate the respondents' likelihood of befriending non-Muslim Australians. This highlights the importance of developing and cultivating positive perception towards others, especially among the young and the innocent. Such a complex understanding has been made clearly and efficacious as a result of intergroup coexistence and increasing cohesion in society.

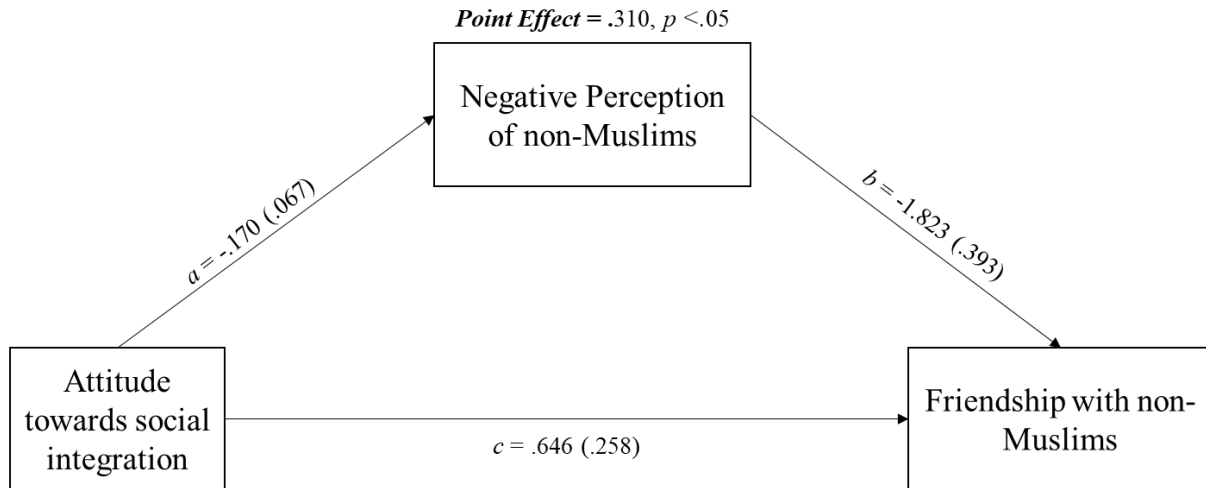


Figure 3. Mediation Analysis Attitude towards Social Integration

Cumulatively, both mediation analysis confirms an underlying relationship connecting education and media as primary drivers of inverted culturalization. The respondents' social distance, particularly that of their willingness befriending Muslim Australians, is subject to the effects of their socialisation via the educational and media institutions, for better or worse. This highlights the importance of the educational institutions on mitigating negative perception of non-Muslims, along with the promotion of positive attitude towards social integration with the larger and more dominant non-Muslim Australian society (Aleem et al., 2022; Griera, 2020; Vezzali et al., 2020).

10. Discussion

The present research expands our understanding on two fronts: the conceptual and empirical. It explores the power of social/entertainment media and group contact on the reduction of prejudice towards outgroups. Overall, the findings of this study paint an interesting picture of Muslim-non-Muslim intergroup contact in Australia. The data describes the respondents' attitudes towards and perception of non-Muslims in Australia, and how these manifested in their engagement and maintenance of social ties with others. More intriguingly, as the bedrock of all social relations, the tendency for the respondents, being Muslim tertiary students in Australia, to befriend non-Muslims is predicated by their negative perception of non-Muslims, and their willingness towards social integration. It is against this backdrop that the massive influence which education and media (concerning how Muslims and Islam is portrayed in the Australian media) play in encouraging or discouraging intergroup contact has emerged. Tsai and associates (2020) further suggested that frequency of intergroup contact, traditional news exposure, and trust in social media emerge as positive predictors of prejudice against Asian and Asian Americans but with diminished prejudice from those

exposed to balanced news transmitters. The implication being that users of both social media and digital news platforms outlets can combat prejudice subject to modification of traditional news discourse (ibid).

As regards intergroup contact mediation towards reduction of prejudice and implication for intercultural positive and negative perceptions of a faith community these were found to be significant motivators for intergroup contact, especially in terms of befriending non-Muslims. The negative association between negative news and intergroup attitudes was significantly weaker amongst respondents with higher levels of intimate and positive intergroup contact – a hypothesis which was also supported by research findings revealed by Fuoichi and research collaborates (Fuoichi et al 2020).

Together with the two variables above we address a controversial approach about the way negative perception of non-Muslims significantly mediates the educational influence on interfaith relations and their likelihood to befriend non-Muslims. A fresh outlook is being presented reflecting both the inter and intragroup contact in educational settings together with implications for inclusivity and diversity. The article expands on the methodology and analytics that were harnessed by other researchers in this field (See also Paolini et.al 2021; Wong et al 2022; Karatas et al 2023).

Conclusions

This investigation probes the relationship between the Australian-Muslim tertiary students perceived educational and media portrayal of Muslims and depth of social distance with non-Muslim Australians. The focus was guided by research questions set out earlier in this paper.

The data in this study has revealed significant findings relevant to causal factors and predictors of attitudes and perceptions held to Muslim-Australian tertiary students towards the mainstream society. This study discovered that Muslim Australian tertiary students generally held favourable attitude and perception of non-Muslims Australians, which translate into willingness to integrate, by means of befriending, and dating with the larger Australian community. Marrying a Muslim, though, is far less likely.

Also, the respondents claimed to be relatively open to befriending anybody beyond their religious circle and the social circle to which they belonged that was mostly Muslim. The decision to befriend non-Muslims was influenced by three major factors: i) their negative perceptions of non-Muslims, ii) their attitude towards social integration of Muslims, and iii) the extensive yet negatively prejudicial media coverage of Muslims.

Negative perceptions of non-Muslims remain paramount for promoting the desire to befriend non-Muslims. There is strong evidence that negative perceptions of non-Muslims significantly mediate the institutional influence on interfaith relations and their likelihood to befriend non-Muslims. This

was further reinforced by the mediation analyses where they demonstrated how educational influence on the participants interfaith relations was found to have a direct effect so that tertiary students' neutrality on this matter could have benefitted from a revamp in the primary/secondary school curriculum in recent decades (Ata & Batrouney, 1989).

It was revealed that social distance, largely their willingness to befriending Muslim Australians, is contingent on the socialization processes nurtured by educational institutions and social media. It is conceivable that the current education system has successfully accommodated a "melting pot" culture leading to awareness about cultural and religious domains. Though slightly less influential, the attitude towards integrating with the larger community significantly motivates the respondents to befriend non-Muslims.

Negative perception of Muslims was not a significant mediator for the respondents' desire to befriend non-Muslims regardless of how unfair the Australian media portrayal of Muslims is. It is likely that the respondents, being tertiary students, would have been able to counteract against unfair media portrayals without affecting their attitude towards social integration and their willingness to befriend non-Muslims.

Nevertheless, the generalisability of the findings of this study is also limited by the non-probabilistic sampling technique employed. Because the participants were sampled via convenience sampling primarily in university libraries and lecture halls, this sample overrepresents participants who are more frequently available or present in these specific locations, thereby introducing selection bias as the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of Muslim students who spend less time on campus, study online, or frequent other university environments (*i.e.* gym, club or sorority houses) may not be adequately captured. In respect to the limitations of this study, the importance of educational institutions on mitigating negative perception of non-Muslims, along with the promotion of positive attitude towards social integration with the larger and more dominant non-Muslim Australian society, cannot be understated. Muslims in tertiary educational institutions may have faced less stigma and stereotypical reactions and behaviours. Future studies should aim to employ probabilistic, randomized sampling methods across a broader array of institutional settings to validate and expand these preliminary findings.

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