

Article type:
Original Research

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Article history:

Received 30 Jan 2025
Revised 11 Apr 2025
Accepted 18 Apr 2025
Published online 01 Aug 2025

How to cite this article:

Rifayanti, R., Ramdani, A., Fadesti, P. F., Shofi Mubarak, A., & Widhigdo, J. C. (2025). Navigating Religious Differences in Interfaith Relationships: Self-Adjustment, Emotional Regulation, and Social Support – A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 12(5), 41-50.




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Introduction

Early adulthood, as defined by Hurlock, begins at age 18 and extends to around age 40 (Smith & Brown, 2021). Previous studies suggest that individuals are unique and autonomous in choosing their life paths (Johnson, 2021). During this stage, individuals undergo significant physical and psychological changes, including the developmental task of selecting a life partner.

Navigating Religious Differences in Interfaith Relationships: Self-Adjustment, Emotional Regulation, and Social Support – A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explores the adaptation mechanisms used by interfaith couples to navigate these challenges.

Methods and Materials: Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with two interfaith couples who had been in relationships for six months to three years. Data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding to identify recurring patterns in their experiences.

Findings: Findings indicate that self-regulation, emotional regulation, and social support play a crucial role in maintaining relationship stability. However, the significance of these factors varies between individuals, with some relying more on emotional regulation while others emphasize social support.

Conclusion: Ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant anonymity, were prioritized due to the study's sensitive nature. While the small sample size limits the generalizability of findings, this study contributes to the understanding of interfaith relationship dynamics by highlighting how couples adapt to societal and relational challenges. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample could provide deeper insights into the influence of socio-cultural factors on interfaith relationships and further refine theories of relational adaptation.

Keywords: Self-adjustment, Emotional regulation, social support, Interfaith relationships, social norms

Interfaith romantic relationships have become increasingly common due to greater social interaction (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Existing research has largely focused on the challenges of interfaith relationships rather than the adaptive mechanisms couples use to sustain them (Clark, 2022). This study examines how interfaith couples navigate religious differences and the role of emotional regulation and social support in maintaining relationship stability (Thomas, 2021).

Social exchange theory explains that individuals evaluate the benefits and costs of a relationship to determine its sustainability. Meanwhile, emotional regulation theory highlights how individuals manage emotions in response to social pressure (Davidson, 2019). Coping mechanisms, such as adaptive strategies and social support, also play a crucial role in helping individuals manage the complexities of interfaith relationships (R. Carter, 2021). The most common problems faced by interfaith couples are the lack of blessings from parents and family, as well as negative views that arise from the community and religious leaders. This can be a significant source of conflict in their relationship (King, 2020).

A significant challenge for interfaith couples is obtaining family acceptance (Carter, 2019). Many families oppose these relationships due to perceived conflicts with religious or cultural norms (J. Harris, 2021). While research has explored the effects of social pressure on romantic relationships, studies specifically addressing interfaith relationships in the Indonesian cultural context remain limited (Carter, 2018).

A major challenge in interfaith relationships is obtaining family blessings (Davis, 2020; James, 2020). Many families reject these relationships because they are considered contrary to religious or cultural norms (Riley, 2020). Despite these obstacles, data from the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP) in 2005 indicate that approximately 1,425 interfaith couples have married in Indonesia, suggesting that such relationships can progress despite societal challenges (Foster, 2019; K. Harris, 2021). Data from the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP) in 2005 noted that approximately 1,425 individuals in interfaith relationships had married in Indonesia, suggesting that despite the major challenges, these relationships can continue to the marriage stage (E. Brown, 2019; Green, 2020; J. Harris, 2021).

Individuals in interfaith relationships often require greater adjustment than those in same-faith relationships (Hayes, 2021; Jackson, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Lee, 2022). They must navigate differences in values and religious practices, which may require careful negotiation and compromise (Pearson, 2022; Riley, 2020; A. Roberts, 2020). A common strategy involves understanding each other's religious perspectives and

identifying shared values to maintain harmony (O'Connor, 2022; Parker, 2020; Patel, 2021).

Interviews with individuals in interfaith relationships suggest that initial doubts are common, but open communication and mutual understanding help sustain these relationships. While societal challenges persist, many individuals emphasize the emotional support and companionship they gain from their partners. This study aims to explore how adjustment strategies and emotional regulation contribute to relationship resilience and harmony in interfaith couples.

Methods and Materials

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of interfaith couples, focusing on their social and emotional adjustments to religious differences. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals adjust to religious differences in their relationships, focusing on the social and emotional aspects they experience.

Conducted in Samarinda, data collection involved semi-structured interviews (both online via WhatsApp Messenger and offline), observations, and documentation. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and covered topics such as relationship formation, challenges, adaptation strategies, and social support. Examples of interview questions included, “How did you and your partner decide to be in this relationship?” and “How do you cope with different beliefs in daily life?” The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring individual experiences while maintaining a focused discussion on the key themes of the study.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to ensure participant confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Given the sensitivity of interfaith relationships, additional measures were taken to prevent potential distress, including the option to withdraw at any stage. However, the study does not mention whether an ethics review board approved the research, which is a limitation that future studies should address.

Data were analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns in participants' experiences. However, the study does not elaborate on how coding reliability was ensured, nor does it discuss potential researcher biases that may have influenced interpretation. Additionally, the study relies solely on interview data without triangulation from other sources, such as diary entries or third-party observations, which could enhance validity. The lack of operational definitions for key concepts, such as social support, further limits the study's precision.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how interfaith couples navigate challenges and adapt to religious differences. However, due to the small sample size, the findings are not widely generalizable. Future research should expand the participant pool, incorporate multiple data sources, and consider broader socio-cultural factors influencing interfaith relationships. Moreover, addressing methodological concerns such as reflexivity, reliability measures, and ethical oversight will strengthen future studies in this field.

Findings and Results

It is important to understand the context behind research on toxic relationships and the coping strategies used by individuals who experience them. This research

stems from the high number of reported cases of emotionally harmful interpersonal relationships, which have a significant impact on individuals' mental health and quality of life.

Adjustment Strategies

Self-adjustment is a crucial element in building meaningful relationships, particularly when navigating differences like religious ones. Although there are often negative comments or views from others, the main priority is to maintain happiness and comfort in the relationship. The following interview results evidence this:

'Focusing on happiness and comfort in the relationship remains a top priority.' (W1, MP, 02-04-23, B209-211).

'Unpleasant criticism or judgement is confronted with calmness and attention to the things that matter in the relationship.' (W1, NN, 04-04-23, B425-433).

'Negative views or comments from others about the relationship are often challenging, but focusing on happiness and comfort in the relationship remains a top priority.' (W1, MP, 06-04-2023, B122-131).

Subjects prioritized happiness and comfort in relationships, even in the face of external or negative criticism. They demonstrated emotional resilience by overcoming unpleasant judgments with calmness and focusing on what was truly important in the relationship (Table 1).

Table 1

Self-Adjustment

Aspects	Common (MP and NN)	Special	
		MP	MS.
Personal Adjustment	Participants demonstrated self-acceptance by prioritizing emotional well-being over societal expectations. This was reflected in their decision-making processes, where they consistently chose actions that aligned with their values rather than external pressures.	MP emphasized the role of self-reflection and personal growth in strengthening their resilience against societal criticism. Direct quotes indicate a conscious effort to redefine success and fulfillment on their terms.	MS highlighted the importance of mutual validation within the relationship, emphasizing how shared convictions helped them resist external judgments. Their statements suggest a strong internal locus of control, where external opinions had minimal impact.
Social Adjustment	Both participants exhibited resilience in maintaining harmony despite social stigma. They navigated tensions with family and community by emphasizing shared values rather than differences.	MP actively engaged in community discussions to challenge misconceptions about interfaith relationships, suggesting a proactive approach to social adjustment. Their experience highlights a negotiation process rather than passive acceptance of societal norms.	MS adopted a selective disclosure strategy, choosing when and with whom to share details about their relationship. This indicates an adaptive coping mechanism to manage social pressures while preserving personal boundaries.
Emotional Adjustment	Emotional stability was maintained through deliberate coping strategies such as reframing negative experiences and seeking social support. The role of self-regulation was crucial in sustaining relationship harmony.	MP emphasized structured emotional regulation techniques, including journaling and mindfulness, to manage stress. This structured approach suggests a high level of self-awareness and intentional coping strategies.	MS relied more on relational coping strategies, such as open communication with their partner and seeking reassurance, highlighting the significance of interpersonal support in emotional adjustment.

Adjustment in relationships is characterised by the ability to prioritise personal emotional well-being and embrace authenticity, even when faced with external judgement. It also involves resilience, allowing individuals or couples to maintain harmony and mutual respect despite societal pressures or criticism.

The Role of Social Support

Lack of friends' support for the relationship can be emotionally challenging, especially when their views are negative. Choosing not to share relationship problems with them is a way to protect relationship stability from external influences. This is evidenced in the following interview results:

I feel that my friends are not very supportive of this relationship. I tend not to tell them about our relationship

problems because they often give unsupportive views (W1, MP, 02-04-23, B781-789).

My family is more tolerant of interfaith relationships, but my friends are less supportive. I find it difficult to discuss this relationship with them because they frequently provide negative comments (W1, NN, 04-04-23, B700-708).

I prefer to solve our problems with my partner, as my friends do not provide the support I expect (W1, MP, 06-04-23, B470-484).

Subjects see disagreements as opportunities to develop and improve self-understanding. Individuals manage emotions calmly and are self-aware. Some choose to keep feelings private to avoid conflict and maintain harmonious and patient relationships (Approaches to Navigating Disagreements).

Table 2

Emotion Regulation

Aspects	Common (MP and NN)	Special	
		MP	MS.
Cognitive Reappraisal	Both subjects engage in Cognitive Reappraisal by reframing relationship conflicts as opportunities for growth. This allows them to maintain emotional stability and reinforce commitment. MP stated, "Rather than seeing disagreements as threats, I view them as moments to learn about myself and my partner." MS emphasized the collaborative aspect, stating, "When we face difficulties, we frame them as shared challenges, which strengthens our bond."	MP utilizes Cognitive Reappraisal to reframe conflicts as self-growth opportunities, helping to maintain a sense of personal agency and emotional clarity. This aligns with prior research indicating that Cognitive Reappraisal fosters resilience in romantic relationships.	MS applies Cognitive Reappraisal by framing challenges as shared responsibilities, which enhances problem-solving dynamics. This suggests that interfaith couples may benefit from a collectivistic approach to coping.
Emotion Suppression	Both subjects reported Emotion Suppression as a strategy to avoid immediate conflicts, though it resulted in emotional strain. MP explained, "Sometimes I choose to hold back my feelings to prevent unnecessary arguments, but it does weigh on me over time." MS echoed this, saying, "I try not to react immediately, but suppressing emotions too much makes me feel distant."	MP consciously suppresses emotions to maintain peace, but acknowledges the long-term emotional toll. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting the risks of emotional suppression, such as reduced relational satisfaction.	MS uses Emotion Suppression to prevent misunderstandings, but experiences emotional exhaustion over time. This supports the idea that suppression, while effective in the short term, can increase psychological distress in close relationships.
Mindfulness and Acceptance	Both subjects utilize Mindfulness and Acceptance by acknowledging emotions before reacting. MP stated, "Before I respond, I try to sit with my emotions and understand where they're coming from, so I don't say something I regret." MS emphasized empathy, stating, "I focus on being present and understanding my emotions before addressing issues with my partner."	MP employs Mindfulness to regulate emotions and prevent impulsive reactions, contributing to a sense of personal stability. This is consistent with findings that mindfulness enhances emotional intelligence in relationships.	MS integrates Mindfulness with a focus on empathy, suggesting that emotional regulation in interfaith relationships may require a balance between self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity.

Both subjects utilize strategies to manage their emotions and improve relationship dynamics. They apply Cognitive Reappraisal to view conflicts as chances

for growth and mutual problem-solving, maintaining emotional stability and unity (Table 2).

Emotion Regulation Techniques

Minor disagreements in a relationship are normal and can often lead to resentment. However, trying to stay calm and avoid getting carried away is an important step to maintaining relationship stability. The following interview results evidence this:

'When we have disagreements, I try to see them as opportunities for growth, not as a fight. This helps me stay

calm and see things more clearly.' (W1, MP, 02-04-23, B146-151).

'There are times when I keep my feelings to myself to avoid causing trouble. It's not easy, but sometimes it feels like the best choice.' (W1, NN, 04-04-23, B117-123).

When emotions get high, I try to focus on how I feel and accept it without rushing to react. This helps me stay present and keep the conversation calm.' (W1, MP, 04-04-23, B10-113)

Table 3

Emotion Regulation Techniques

Aspects	Common (MP and NN)	Special	
		MP	MS.
Emotional Support	The subject prioritizes relationship stability by limiting discussions with unsupportive friends and focusing on strengthening emotional bonds with their partner.	The subject seeks emotional protection by limiting discussions with unsupportive friends, prioritizing relationship stability over external opinions.	The subject relies on emotional support within the relationship, choosing to strengthen emotional bonds with their partner rather than seeking validation from unsupportive friends.
Instrumental Support	The subject depends on family support, particularly for guidance and emotional strength, to navigate challenges in their interfaith relationship when friends are less supportive.	The subject relies on family for practical and emotional support, particularly in navigating challenges related to their interfaith relationship, when friends are less supportive.	The subject finds instrumental support in their family's tolerance and understanding, using it to handle external pressures and maintain the relationship.
Informational Support	The subject carefully chooses who to share relationship challenges with, focusing on maintaining peace and seeking positive support from their partner and family instead of unsupportive friends.	Subject exercises selectivity in sharing relationship challenges with friends, prioritizing conversations that maintain peace and avoid unnecessary conflicts.	The subject emphasizes limiting conversations with unsupportive friends and seeks more constructive and positive support from their partner and family.

The subject prioritizes happiness and comfort in the relationship, even in the face of external or negative criticism. Individuals demonstrate emotional resilience by remaining calm in the face of unpleasant judgments and focusing on the aspects that matter in the relationship (Failed or Ineffective Strategies) (Table 3).

The Importance of Social Norms

Disagreements regarding interfaith relationships are often challenging, but the belief that each individual has the right to choose a partner reflects the principles of personal freedom and responsibility. The following interview results evidence this:

I know many people disagree with our relationship, especially because of religious differences, but I believe that everyone has the right to choose their partner. I don't

feel compelled to follow a norm that doesn't suit me (W1, MP, 02-04-23, B241-246).

I also know that many people think this relationship is not good, but I feel that we don't always have to follow the norm if it makes us happy. We are in this relationship because we want to, and there is no coercion (W1, NN, 04-04-23, B444-452).

Norms are important, but I believe everyone should have the freedom to choose their way of life. If this relationship makes my partner and me happy, then that is the main thing (W1, MP, 06-04-23, B573-583).

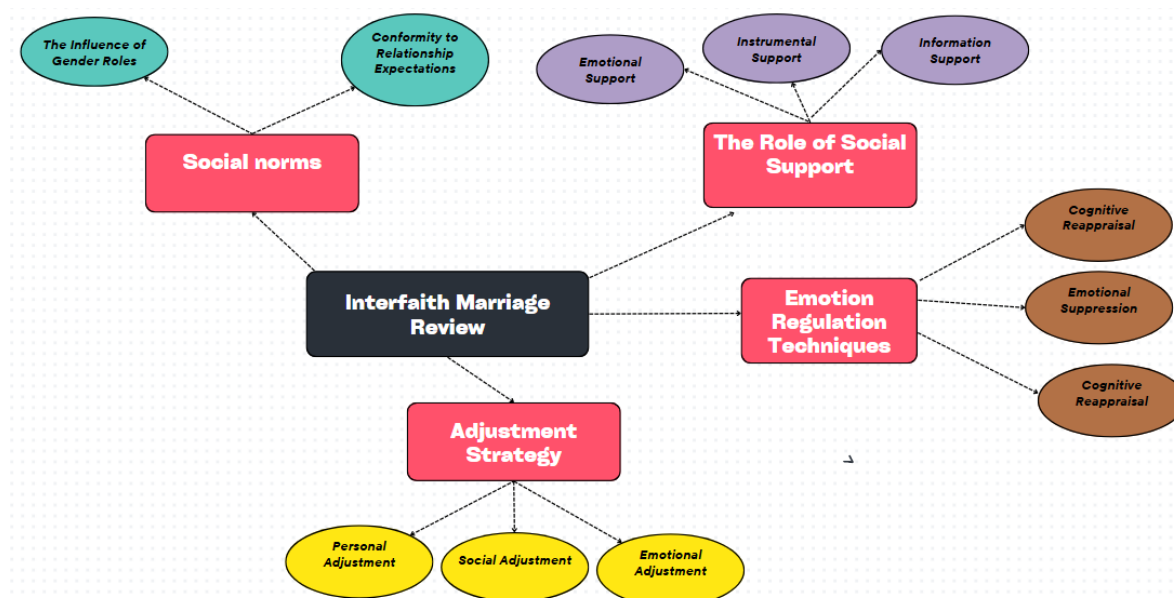
The subject emphasized the individual's right to choose a partner based on mutual happiness without being influenced by social norms or societal disapproval that is not aligned with personal values (Assertion of Rights in Choosing a Partner).

Table 4*Social norms*

Aspects	Common (MP and NN)	Special	
		MP	MS.
Conformity to Relationship Expectations	Both subjects prioritize personal love and authenticity over societal disapproval, choosing to define their relationship on their terms rather than conforming to external norms. MP stated, "People may judge, but at the end of the day, it's about how we feel in the relationship, not their opinions." MS echoed this by saying, "Our bond is built on trust and respect, not on trying to meet societal standards."	MP consciously decides to prioritize love and authenticity over societal expectations, emphasizing individual autonomy in relationship choices. This reflects prior studies on relationship self-determination and well-being.	MS shares a similar perspective, reinforcing that their relationship is based on mutual respect rather than societal approval. This supports research on autonomy in romantic relationships and psychological fulfillment.
Influence of Gender Roles	Both subjects reject traditional gender roles, advocating for equality in decision-making and shared responsibilities. MP stated, "We don't divide tasks based on gender. Everything is about what makes sense for us." MS added, "There is no 'man's role' or 'woman's role' in our relationship; we work together."	MP explicitly rejects gender-based expectations, ensuring equal contribution in responsibilities and decision-making. This aligns with studies on egalitarian relationships and relationship satisfaction.	MS reinforces the importance of equality in their relationship, ensuring that traditional gender norms do not constrain roles and responsibilities. This aligns with feminist perspectives on relational equity.

The subject emphasized the individual's right to choose a partner based on mutual happiness without being influenced by social norms or societal disapproval

that is not aligned with personal values (Assertion of Rights in Choosing a Partner) (Table 4). Findings of research results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Findings of the Research Results***Discussion and Conclusion**

Self-adjustment plays an important role in maintaining harmonious relationships, especially in the

context of interfaith relationships (Clark, 2022). Couples' ability to adapt to differences in beliefs contributes to understanding and acceptance of one another (Thomas, 2021). These results are in line with previous research

highlighting the importance of self-adjustment in interfaith relationships, although further exploration is needed to understand how these factors interact in different social and cultural settings (Davidson, 2019)

Differences of opinion and potential tensions need to be managed well so that they do not develop into more complex conflicts (Newton, 2022). Emotion regulation is a crucial factor in interfaith relationships, given that different beliefs can present challenges in daily interaction (A. Roberts, 2020; Scott, 2019; Shrivastava et al., 2020). Effective emotion management enables couples to reduce conflict escalation and maintain mutual respect and understanding. This finding is in line with previous studies that highlight the role of emotion regulation in maintaining relationship harmony, especially in the context of differences in beliefs. Maintaining emotional stability also plays a role in maintaining mutual respect and understanding between couples of different religions (King, 2020). Introspection plays a role in conflict resolution and emotional management in relationships. This study found that some couples are less likely to share their relationship problems with unsupportive individuals, especially in interfaith relationships (James, 2020).

Lack of social support from friends can increase emotional burden, so couples are more selective in sharing personal experiences (R. Carter, 2021). Lack of social support from friends can increase emotional burden, so couples are more selective in sharing personal experiences (White, 2020). This indicates the need for further research on the contribution of social support to interfaith relationship resilience (Perez, 2021). The interview findings revealed that couples found it difficult to talk to their friends about the relationship they were living in (Rifayanti et al., 2024). This is because friends often give negative or unsupportive views (Singh, 2022; Smith et al., 2024; White & Green, 2020; Zhang, 2021). This suggests that couples tend to maintain certain boundaries in sharing personal problems with others (L. Johnson, 2021).

Social norms can put pressure on interfaith relationships. However, findings show that couples can still live in relationships with emotional satisfaction if they can respect decisions made in self-determination theory, which states that individuals who make decisions based on their desires and values will feel more satisfied and happier in their relationships (Putri et al., 2024). This

concept is consistent with self-determination theory, which states that individuals who make decisions based on their values and preferences tend to have higher levels of satisfaction in relationships (G. Carter, 2021). This concept is relevant to Roberts' (2020) theory of self-determination, which states that individuals who make decisions based on their desires and values will feel more satisfied and happier in their relationships (P. Roberts, 2020). In this context, couples are more likely to follow personal principles and values as opposed to conforming fully to social expectations (Allen, 2021).

Self-regulation, emotional regulation, social support, and social norms play a very important role in maintaining interfaith relations (Lee, 2022). Self-adjustment is necessary so that couples can understand each other and respect the differences that exist in their relationship (A. Brown, 2019). Wise regulation of emotions helps couples to manage conflicts more effectively and maintain harmony in the relationship (Smith, 2023).

Self-regulation, emotion management, social support, and social norms are interacting factors in shaping interfaith relationship dynamics (Andrews, 2020). The ability to adjust helps couples understand and respect differences, while effective emotion regulation allows for more constructive conflict management (E. Brown, 2019). This study suggests that these factors play a role in relationship sustainability, but further research is needed to confirm these findings in a wider population.

Religious leaders and family therapists have an important role in supporting interfaith couples to deal with challenges in their relationship (James, 2020). One step that can be taken is to provide a safe dialogue space for couples to discuss their religious values (Johnson, 2021). Religious leaders can facilitate discussions that are oriented towards understanding and tolerance, so that couples do not feel forced to choose one faith, but can find common ground that respects diversity (E. Brown, 2019).

Family therapists can help couples develop emotion regulation skills in dealing with differences in beliefs (Allen, 2021). Techniques such as mindfulness, self-reflection, and assertive communication can be used to manage tensions that may arise due to differences in views (Thomas, 2021). With good emotional management, couples can build a more harmonious

relationship and avoid conflicts that could potentially damage their bond (Clark, 2022).

Social support is also a crucial factor in the sustainability of interfaith relationships. Religious leaders can encourage communities to be more inclusive and open to interfaith couples, so that they feel accepted without having to face social stigma (Davidson, 2019). In addition, family therapists can assist couples in building positive support networks, whether through family, friends, or discussion groups oriented towards interfaith understanding.

In addition, family therapists can assist couples in building positive support networks, whether through family, friends, or discussion groups oriented towards interfaith understanding. The sustainability of interfaith relationships can be supported by the couple's ability to adapt to differences and social support from a tolerant environment (Andrews, 2020). Social support can provide a sense of security and increase couples' resilience in facing social challenges. In this case, social norms, although they can be a source of pressure, can still be negotiated through openness and courage in making decisions oriented towards the welfare of the relationship (E. Brown, 2019).

Socioeconomic status can influence how couples deal with challenges in their relationship (Lee & Lee, 2020). Couples with stable economic conditions tend to have more resources to cope with social pressures and interpersonal conflicts. Conversely, couples from less stable economic backgrounds may face additional obstacles such as financial pressures that can exacerbate tensions in the relationship (Andrews, 2020).

Education level plays a role in shaping the way couples communicate and resolve differences. Individuals with higher education may be more open to different perspectives and have better communication skills in resolving conflicts (A. Brown, 2019). This can help them adapt to differences in beliefs in interfaith relationships. In contrast, couples with lower education may have limitations in understanding different perspectives or lack access to resources that can help them deal with relationship challenges (Riley, 2020).

According to Roberts (2020), Previous experiences in interfaith relationships also shape how individuals navigate their current relationship. Couples who have had positive experiences in previous interfaith relationships may be better equipped to adjust to

differences. In contrast, individuals who have experienced conflict in such relationships may be more likely to have difficulty adjusting (A. Roberts, 2020). These factors suggest that adjustment in interfaith relationships depends not only on the couple's internal factors but also on various external factors that shape their relationship dynamics (King, 2020). Further research is therefore needed to understand how these factors interact and contribute to success or challenges in interfaith relationships.

This study has some limitations that need to be considered. The limited sample size may affect the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample with a more even distribution in terms of age, economic background, and relationship experience may provide a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of interfaith relationships. Social desirability bias is also an obstacle. Respondents may give answers that are more socially acceptable than those that truly reflect individual experiences. In the context of interfaith relationships, individuals tend to describe the relationship more positively to avoid stigmatization.

Interfaith relationships require adaptation, with self-regulation, emotional regulation, social support, and norms playing key roles in fostering harmony. While this study highlights these dynamics, future research should explore cultural background, communication styles, and conflict resolution strategies, with longitudinal studies providing deeper insights. Practical applications include tailored interventions, premarital counseling, and resilience-building programs to support interfaith couples. However, limitations such as a small sample size, lack of triangulation, and potential researcher bias must be addressed in future studies. Societal implications include the need for legal and policy considerations, public awareness campaigns, and community-based initiatives to reduce stigma. This study extends relationship adaptation theories by emphasizing self-regulation and social support in interfaith contexts. Future interdisciplinary research integrating psychology, sociology, and religious studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding. Strengthening support systems through research, policy, and practice is essential to helping interfaith couples navigate challenges and sustain their relationships.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude and appreciation to all participants.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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