

Interfaith Youth Engagement as a Preventive Framework Against Religious Extremism in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: Religious extremism has become an endemic security and social threat in Nigeria, especially in the areas where interreligious conflicts are combined with youth vulnerability and the socio-political instability. Although the security-based responses have prevailed in the policy choices, more emphasis has been given to preventive measures which ensure that dialogue, tolerance, and mutual understanding are developed among the youths. Youth engagements initiatives across religions have hence become topical as forums of fostering peaceful coexistence, refutation of extremist discourses, and interreligious credibility among disparate communities.

Method: The research design assumed a qualitative-dominant mixed method research that was carried out in a sample of states in Northern and North central Nigeria where interfaith conflicts exist alongside organised youth-peace programmes. The sample population included youths and coordinators who participated in the existing interfaith dialogue forums. The identification of respondents with a lot of information was through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the methods of collecting data that were analysed by means of the thematic analysis with the pattern matching guided by the theoretical framework of the study.

Results: The results indicated that organized interfaith engagement activities in terms of dialogue forums, mentorship programmes and joint community projects had a great impact on the perceptions of religious diversity amongst participants. These programs led to tolerance, better cross-religious ties and made the youth less vulnerable to the extremist discourse. Transactions in interfaith platforms were also an opportunity to build trust, resolve conflicts, and come up with common values in the society. The paper concludes that interfaith youth engagement as an institutionalised approach is a good prevention model in the fight against religious extremism. It consequently suggests long-term policy patronage, capacity-building efforts and incorporation of interfaith education among youth development programmes to improve the peacebuilding outcomes in the long term.

Keywords: Interreligious participation, Youth radicalisation prevention, Religious extremism, Nigeria.

Introduction

1.0 Background to the Study

In the world, there are violent movements that have been caused by religious legitimacy leading to an extended state of instability. Sacred language can be used to justify violence as seen in the attacks of the extremist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019, sectarian attacks in South Asia, and anti-minority attacks in the Middle East. Sattari and Liata (2025) opined that these trends indicate that extremism is the most flourishing in areas where identity anxiety, weak governance, and marginalisation of socio-economic groups intersect. Nigeria is an indication of this broader trend on contextual terms. The North East has been characterized by frequent massacres of civilians based on affiliation to a certain faith since the increased Boko Haram insurgency in 2009. In 2014, after schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, were kidnapped, and in 2020, the massacre of rice farmers in Zabarmari, they still use the incidents as a symbol of targeted violence against communities that are viewed as religiously irreconcilable. In Plateau State, in the North Central region sectarian conflict escalated in 2010 and re-emerged in 2018 and 2023 with villages being attacked on an ethno-religious basis. The recent cases of religious extremist acts in 2024 and 2025 have made the intricate security situation in Nigeria once again a focus of international attention concerning the situation in the North West and North East of the country where the jihadist and armed groups are becoming increasingly active and focused on the Muslim and Christian population. Increasing attacks on villages, worship centres and schools were reported by Le Monde(202) as persecution of Christians, and elicited extensive reactions abroad and renewed discussions on the role of religion versus socio-political motives in causing violence. Such tensions were further brought to the forefront when the then sitting United States President Donald Trump openly denounced the killings and threatened to intervene coinciding with a joint U.S.-Nigeria counter-terrorism operation against militant groups aligned to Islamic State networks in late 2025 (Times of India, 2025, October 6). Nigerian officials, though dissatisfied with the description of the nation as the place of religious intolerance, pointed out that all the violence and bloodshed is a product of a complicated fusion of insurgency, banditry, and community warfare, as opposed to one of the religious agendas. These changes demonstrate how modern Nigerian religious extremism is integrated in wider contexts of security crises, ideological militancy meets criminal economies and local grievances, and thus is able to draw geopolitical reaction and makes local peacebuilding endeavors complex. Through the insights in these trends, Mshelia (2024) argues that mob violence and extremist discourse are more and more obscuring the line between communal resentment and theological aggression. Mgbemena, Orakwe and Chibunkem (2022) also note that faith based violence in Nigeria tends to be an expression of political manipulation overlaid on historical mistrust and not necessarily the actual doctrinal conflict. The Nigerian state has traditionally reacted with security operations, deradicalisation programmes and institutional dialogue platforms. The effort to fight insurgents through military campaigns has been complemented by efforts like Operation Safe Corridor which is geared towards rehabilitation and reintegration. Mamud (2024) advances a complex approach to preventing violent extremism, which is based on theological re-education and socio-economic reform. Even though these actions are meant to deal with short-term threats, researchers such as Nwachukwu (2024) argue that to achieve sustainable peace, inter-religious dialogue should be a regular

occurrence and not a one-time intervention. Inter-faith interaction has thus become a significant issue in the field of peace building. Saleh (2022) captures details on the way mediation centres in Bauchi State bring together Christian and Muslim leaders to resolve the disputes before they become excessive. Further to elite dialogue, structured youth encounters have been demonstrated to be measurably promising. Mof, Ramadan, and Hamdie (2022) prove that interfaith youth events help to develop tolerance and understanding between students of various religions, and similar results are shared in digitally mediated interfaith events (Noviyanti and Yusuf, 2025). Based on the example of North Eastern Kenya, Njagi (2025) concludes that youth inclusion in preventative measures makes them less susceptible to extremist messages, which also aligns with the Nigerian realities. Considering the ongoing sectarian violence and the demographic burden of the youth, proactive possibilities of interfaith youth involvement should be examined in a systematic scholarly way.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The priorities of preventive measures against religious extremism in Nigeria have been dominated by kinetic security operations, surveillance and post-conflict rehabilitation with relatively less long-term focus on the social mechanisms by which the root causes of intolerance and radicalisation are established. According to emerging scholarship, the youth are becoming the focus of those functions in either fueling or reducing religious strife. Jati et al. (2024) argue that grassroots religious moderation needs an organized youth involvement instead of a symbolic one, whereas Kapinde (2025) proves that integrated interfaith methods are more efficient because younger generations should be involved as co-architects of peace initiatives. Even community-based models that are examined by Kristiantoro (2025) indicate that preventive resilience can be developed based on the relational trust and shared civic practices, rather than doctrinal teaching. In spite of the empirical data on the high role of youths in societies, there is still a lack of evidence on how interfaith youth involvement redefines the attitudes to religious diversity, breaks the chain to radicalisation, and influences the policy design in the Nigerian context. Aderole (2024) notes that the proposals of resolving interreligious violence often focus primarily on the theological reconciliation without adequately questioning the daily settings within which the prejudice is replicated. Equally, according to Iyamba and Yusuf (2025), the political and ethno-religious tensions are inscribed in historical tendencies of competition and distrust that cannot be eliminated by the reactive security measures per se. Even though the religious leaders have done a commendable job in mediating conflicts, as it is reported in the case of Kano in the Boko Haram insurgency (Iweze, 2024) these efforts rarely go beyond the short-term level of youth-focused preventive programming. As such, there is still a gap in the understanding of how the interfaith youth engagement can be used as a framework against religious extremism. Specifically this study seeks to:

- i. To explore how interfaith youth engagement influences attitudes towards religious diversity.
- ii. To identify mechanisms through which interfaith activities prevent radicalisation.
- iii. To recommend practical frameworks for policy and programme design

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Ehiane (2021) defines religious extremism as strict and absolutist views of religion that justifies exclusion, coercion, or violence against others who seem doctrinally incorrect. It is not to be equated to religiosity itself but it is a result of the fusion of theological claims with political grievance and mobilisation to dominate. Youth take a conclusive stand in this terrain as they are the most populous group in Nigeria and are entrenched in religious organizations as students, flock members, volunteers, and online users. Mukhtar, Zainab, and Muhammad (2025) claim that the lack of employment and an unequal level of development increases the vulnerability of young people to being recruited by extremist networks that could provide them with a sense of belonging and meaning. According to Omopo and Ekpo (2024), the construction of conflict as an act of defence of us against them is often based on the mobilisation of youths, be it by physical force or online propaganda. But the same population can also serve as an agent of moderation. According to Osuntuyi, Ireymi and Aluko (2021), faith communities have also been able to redirect youths participation to prevent cyber fraud and other forms of moral decadence and this implies that religious identity can cultivate both restraint and militancy. Blackmer and Akila (2025) claim that interfaith youth engagement means the organized forms of interaction between young people belonging to various religious traditions into the long-term dialogue, the joint service, and the common civic agenda to build a mutual understanding and strength against separative narratives. As opposed to the tradition of marginalizing the part of the clerical or institutional elites in the process of peacebuilding, this process makes youth as actors whose attitudes, networks, and daily experiences define the direction of interreligious relations. Mof, Ramadan, and Hamdie (2022) posit that organised interfaith youth groups serve as pedagogical spaces in which tolerance values are instilled during a lived experience (as opposed to being taught in an abstract manner). Similar, Noviyanti and Yusuf (2025) state that interfaith programs organized by young people contribute to empathy and coexistence in the digital era by allowing the parties to work out the differences in identity in collaborative spaces. Njagi (2025) illustrates in the African context that the integration of the youth into the preventive peace programmes make them less vulnerable to the recruitment of extremists since the social cohesion and civic accountability will be enhanced. Nwachukwu (2024) also argues that the long-term interreligious conversation between young people will help dismantle the misunderstandings that most commonly lead to communal violence on a daily basis and Omopo and Ekpo (2024) state that the engagement between the youth will refocus the perspective of the traditional us and them dichotomy with respect to communal violence through cross-faith solidarity based on similar socio-economic realities. The study is hinged on 3 theories:

2.1.1 Peacebuilding Theory

The peacebuilding theory became prominent due to the works of Johan Galtung in 1969, who made a distinction between the negative peace, which refers to the lack of direct violence, and the positive one, which refers to the existence of social justice and structural equity. Galtung assumed that sustainable peace would necessitate a change of structural and cultural environments which legitimise violence instead of merely repressing its symptoms. Further to this point of view, Lederach (1997) has placed significant emphasis on transformation of relations, arguing the role of peacebuilding to mobilise the grassroots actors and to develop long-term social infrastructure to be used in reconciliation. Lederach asserts that lasting peace is rooted in dialogue,

building trust and engaging in social levels. Generalized on the case of interfaith youth engagement in Nigeria, Jati, et.al. (2024) state that the peacebuilding theory proposes that the deterrence of religious extremism cannot be based only on military deterrence or elite negotiations. Rather, it must be carefully nurtured through the development of cross-faith associations between the youths who exist in the daily arenas of interaction. Positive peace is operationalised through interfaith youth programmes, which deal with prejudicial narratives, build cooperative problem-solving and entrench norms of coexistence within the societal structures.

2.1.2 Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory was systematized by Henri Tajfel in 1974, and fine-tuned together with John Turner in 1979. Tajfel argued that part of his or her self concept should be insofar as people are members of some social groups, which results to in-group favouritism and possible out-group discrimination. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that threats to group status will augment boundary-making and hostility especially when identity is politicised. As Hogg (2016) also elaborated, the higher the uncertainty and social instability, the more attracted one becomes to strict group prototypes, which make their target more vulnerable to radical ideologies. Young people might experience the differences in doctrines as the signs of existential danger in the context of religious tension, which supports polarised identities. When applied to the Nigerian context, Vicente and Vilela (2021) have evaluated that the social identity theory explains the framing of the religious belonging as a defensive feature by extremist movements. Interfaith youth engagement comes in to play at this psychological and social crossroads by designing systematic settings in which cross-group contact transforms perceptions of the self and the other to create an image of the other and thereby reconciles perceptions of ourselves. The identity-based anxiety and reinforcement of the attraction of exclusionary narratives, based on uncompromising group categorisation, can be reduced by such programmes through the promotion of common aims and interpersonal familiarity.

2.1.3 Intergroup Contact Theory

In 1954, Gordon Allport developed the theory of intergroup contact and theorized that in certain circumstances meaningful contact between members of a specific group and another can help decrease prejudice. Allport singled out equal status, shared goals, institutional support and cooperative engagement as essential contributors towards positive results. Pettigrew (1998) subsequently expanded the theory by illustrating that a deep connection encourages empathy, perspective taking as well as normative change to those outside the immediate parties. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found through empirical meta-analysts that structured intergroup contact invariably reduces prejudice in various societies. In terms of practice, interfaith youth engagement is an expression of the operationalisation of these conditions. Onuorah (2025) further contributed the idea that a contact between young Christians and Muslims occurs when they work together in community services, dialogue forums, or educational programs through favourable institutional structures and thus the stereotypes are challenged, and the difference is humanised. In the Nigerian context, where segregation and mistrust tend to restrict daily interaction, this organised contact will provide a preventive means against radicalisation by disrupting the social isolation that extremist discourses rely on.

2.2 Empirical Studies

Ishaku et al. (2021) investigated how faithwebased organisations (FBOs) can help counteryradicalisation in Nigeria, based on the Boko Haram ideology and the ability

of the religious actors to reduce or control it. The research design was a qualitative design through primary and secondary document review, key informant interview, and focus group discussion with religious leaders and stakeholders in the whole of the north of Nigeria that was affected by Boko Haram. The sampled respondents were purposely sampled under the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama'atu Nasrul Islam (JNI) organisations that represented different faith networks. The narrative analysis indicated that FBOs are very instrumental in deradicalising since they counter extremist narratives but have some weaknesses such as lack of coordination, fear of reprisal, lack of coherent messages, and socioeconomic marginality causing radicalisation. The results determined the necessity of multi-stakeholder, bottom-up counterterrorism strategies that incorporate FBOs and state actors, and suggest greater cooperation, the inclusion policies, and targeted engagement to reinforce deradicalisation activities in the northeast of Nigeria and the Lake Chad area (Ishaku et al., 2021). Iweze (2024) examined the methods applied by religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue during Boko Haram insurgency in Kano, Northern Nigeria, proving the idea of peacebuilding intervention by referring to the historical Kano Covenant. With an ethnographic design, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and secondary document review were carried out with religious leaders, members and community stakeholders who were involved purposely into the peace activities. It was noted that the eruption of the Boko Haram violence provided room where Muslim and Christian leaders engaged into dialogue that led to the Kano Covenant peace pact that saw the social, political, and economic cooperation between the faith groups. The results indicate that although the differences in the doctrines were deep-rooted, interfaith leadership had a positive impact on the follower behaviour, tension defused, and communal harmony was promoted in the historically dichotomous setting. The research finds that religious leaders play a central role as peace actors and proposes that faith-based peace pacts, clerical religious training as well as enhanced partnership with traditional and secular players should be institutionalized to maintain peacebuilding in the post-insurgency periods (Iweze, 2024). Jati et al. (2024) have examined how Muslim youth can further interfaith dialogue and religious moderation at the grassroots level in Indonesia. The qualitative research method used in the study included in depth interviews with the students, academics, activists, observation of interfaith groupings and document analysis on the Muslim youth and interfaith forums that were identified through purposive sampling. Thematically, data were analysed to learn how youths contribute to religious harmony besides security centred policies. Findings showed that Muslim young people use lived experience, organisation networks and dialogue practices to enhance moderation, focusing on interpersonal respect, common community initiatives and criticism of top heavy moderation programmes. The paper has found that the youth are not fully exploited agents in religious restraint and suggests changes in policy towards grassroots committed structures which empowers youth, enhances community discussion, and incorporates peer Youth educating methods to maintain interfaith peacebuilding methods. Kapinde (2025) examined an interfaith strategy to aid counter extremism due to violence among Kenya's youth, which is the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC). The study adopted a qualitative design of grounded theory based on the ethnographic approach to elicit the narrative of 20 purposively sampled interfaith actors in the process of peacebuilding, including adherents of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and African Traditional Religion. The methods of data collection included open ended oral interview, interfaith workshops

and analysis of documents of the CICC records. Thematic analysis showed that belief weekoriented strategies (community public talks, peace walks, interfaith prayers, art kennisfor endlitzpeace campaigns, and digital counternotification) served to develop resilience against violent extremism and set up collaboration along religious and ethnic boundaries. The research measured the results of the participation by the fact that more than 500 youths were surrendered to peace programmes and reintegration or rehabilitation assistance taken towards CICC activities. It concluded that integrated interfaith programs can prevent violent extremism where used together with socioeconomic assistance, and advised that more effort should be made to integrate religious groups, state agencies, and civil organisations to mainstream interfaith approaches in national CVE programmes (Kapinde, 2025).

Kusuma and Susilo (2020) investigated intercultural and religious sensitivity of young interfaith groups in Indonesia. By using cross-sectional mixed methodology, the study sampled university able participants of the interfaith based using purposive and snowball sampling technique, where the study used questionnaires, interviews, and reflection journals to evaluate the changes in tolerance and intergroup perceptions. The quantitative measures were analysed with the help of the descriptive and inferential statistics; qualitative narratives with the help of the thematic analysis. Findings showed that culturally sensitive and religious diversity acceptance levels among subjects who were treated to six months of interfaith dialogue activities increased statistically ($p < .05$). The research found that a long term interfaith engagement will make significant attitudinal changes in young people and suggested institutionalisation of interfaith education in curricula, encouragement of peace clubs in the university and training of interreligious dialogue facilitators on how to do it at a large scale. Faqih and Umar (2023) paid attention to the topic of youth against religious radicalism based on an intrareligious approach in Komunitas Santri Batang, Central Java. Through qualitative case study, purposely sampled religious students and community actors were interviewed, held focus groups and observed community vocations. Data analysis was performed using thematic coding to get an idea of how intrareligious processes help to defend against radicalist messages in Islamic learning circles. Findings revealed that religious study circles, mentorship programmes and community services initiatives helped students to express nonviolent religious interpretations, counter recruitment discourses and enhance social connection that prevents extremism. The research determined that intrareligious peace work enhances resilience to radicalisation and suggested that religious education that incorporates critical thinking, community outreach, and peer mentorship, should be supported in fostering peace at the grassroots (Majemu, 2024).

Gambo et al. (2025) examined the ethno proreligious violence and peace-building strategies in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, based on a qualitative design, involving focus group discussions and interviews with victims, community leaders, and peace actors purposely sampled through all communities with conflictzes. Narrative thematic analysis showed that tensions were mitigated and mutual trust was established through interfaith dialogue, community reconciliation workshops and local peace committees. The particular peace measures (e.g., the reported cases of intergroup conflicts) declined more than 30 percent in two years of continuous peace interventions. The authors concluded that local-led peacebuilding efforts can enhance social cohesion and suggested customized programmes that would combine both the conventional conflict management institutions and interreligious participation in maintaining sustainable peace in the various mechanisms within Nigerian contexts.

3.0 Methodology

This research paper assumed a qualitative dominant mixed-methods design to identify the effects of interfaith engagement among youths on the attitudes toward religious diversity in deterring radicalisation in Nigeria. The qualitative focus makes it possible to know the experiences, reasons, and perceptions of the youth under the current interfaith framework in details, but some minor quantitative factors (attendance rates and demographics) were also present to put them into context. The design facilitates triangulation of the findings which will improve validity and depth of the insights and aligns itself with the best practices of the peace and conflict research where lived experiences and subtle interactions are of central importance (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study was design based on Bauchi, Plateau, Kaduna and Nigeria States, which recorded illegal pasts of interreligious tensions but youth peace programmes. The population consisted of the members of the known interfaith youth dialogue forums such as Bauchi Interfaith Youth Network, Plateau Youth Peace Initiative, Kaduna Youth Interfaith Dialogue Forum, and Niger State Interfaith Peace Council Youth Wing. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and were all active in organising, facilitating, or attending such forums such that the respondents had first hand experiences with the interfaith activities. Forty-eight people (12 in each state) were interviewed, and they were forum leaders, active members, and observers. The criteria used to select the participants focused on the frequency of engagement, leadership and readiness to give reflective accounts, which were essential in comprehending mechanisms of interfaith influence on attitudes and behaviours. The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather data in secure and neutral community settings. Interviews examined the perceptions of religious diversity of the participants, their experience in conflict prevention, and thoughts of interfaith effectiveness. The discussion in the forums with the help of focus groups allowed discussing common experiences and common strategies, the patterns of cooperation and tension management became evident. All qualitative information was recorded on the audio, transcribed word-to-word and analysed in the form of thematic analysis with the six-step model of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guide to determine the presence of recurring themes and sub-themes pertinent to the research questions. Smaller quantitative data, including the demographics of forum membership, were analysed through a descriptive analysis to give them a contextual richness. The host university had given ethical approval, and informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation were achieved in the course of the research.

4.0 Thematic Analysis

4.1. Perceived Impacts of Interfaith Activities

Respondents by far identified that attending interfaith youth forums led to tolerance and mutual understanding. A young person in Kaduna remarked, “Prior to joining the forum, I never gave the other religion a second glance other than suspecting them, however, the festivals and prayers have taught me how to be a part of our community life”. In Bauchi, a member of the forum commented, Community projects have made me see beyond the faith tags the human being in the other. Plateau, another participant, also taught me that I ought to challenge the stereotypes I grew up with by attending dialogue sessions. Some participants told that such activities helped them bond socially, alleviate prejudices and helped them to intervene positively in the local conflicts. According to one of the leaders, “when we arrange common initiatives

young people start to share the responsibility of maintaining peace instead of letting adults solve the conflicts.”

4.2 Mechanisms of Influence

Interviewees singled out the tangible processes with the help of which interfaith interaction minimizes the danger of radicalisation. The forums were often mentioned as having a strong peer mentorship: "My mentor would regularly discuss with me how extremism would damage not just the community that we lived in, but also my own future, which was a youth in Plateau." Projects that involved co-working like cleaning schools, working in the community garden or planting trees had been pointed out as trust-building activities: "When we are doing something, the divisions become small, said one participant of Bauchi." Formal discussions provided a platform to discuss the sensitive matters safely; one of the youths in Kaduna observed, "We are able to express our frustrations without being scared of the same and as a result, we do not transform grievances to anger." Online interaction was also identified as a means, and the participants mentioned that posting positive messages on the internet neutralized extremist messages.

4.3 Barriers to Engagement

In spite of the good impacts, there were challenges that were identified by the participants as a limitation to the effectiveness of interfaith youth activities. Financial and resource shortages were also often cited: "At times we desire to conduct more meetings, yet we have no meeting rooms or stationeries, complained one of the participants at the Plateau. The doubt of the elders in the community or religious elites was also a challenge: "Not all people believe in youth initiatives as we are not knowledgeable enough about religion", as one of the Kaduna participants explained. The safety issue was mentioned in the regions where there are constant disputes: Even visiting a forum may be a dangerous experience, as mentioned in Bauchi by a youth. These obstacles demonstrate that although youth engagement has a bright future, structural, cultural, and security issues may reduce the scope and sustainability of youth engagement. The participants highlighted institutional support, inclusive planning, and the strategies that need to be coordinated with religious authorities in order to surmount such challenges.

4.4 Practical Frameworks for Policy and Programme Design

Interviewees suggested specific institutional routes of enhancing interfaith youth engagement in conflict prone environments. The facilitation of specific dialogue zones and material assistance at local governmental scale was often highlighted; one of the youths of Bauchi noted that regular meetings supported by government funds would make interfaith communication a matter of course as opposed to an occasional event. Another important process was early socialisation through formal education, in which the respondents maintained that those who adhered to interfaith learning in school programmes would develop tolerance before the development of prejudicial attitudes. Others emphasized the need to connect dialogue platforms with livelihood and skills programs, as elaborated by a Kaduna respondent, people will become more committed when peace activities are connected to practical economic opportunities that make engagement less attractive to the signature of the extremist recruitment process. The necessity to have trained moderators that will help to lead the discussions on sensitive religious topics was also pointed out especially by the participants of Niger State who said that expert facilitation prevents escalation and fosters reflective dialogues. Digital campaigns were also found to be an extra avenue of expanding campaigns to rural young people who can access physical forums less

well. Lastly, the importance of collaboration with respected clerics and faith leaders was deemed to be the way to legitimacy and more general acceptance by communities, which was also supported by one of the representatives of the forum in Plateau.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

This research highlights the complexity of operations of interfaith young people in curbing religious extremism in the selected states in Northern and North Central Nigeria. The new theme of perceived effects of interfaith activities has shown that the participants invariably relate youth-led interfaith activities to increase tolerance, conflict awareness, and decrease the likelihood of recruiting to extremist networks. This is in line with the Peacebuilding Theory that assumes that any organized interventions that promote dialogue and cooperation between the opposing groups of people can change the relationships and social norms (Lederach, 1997). Interfaith mediation centres help young people to gain hands-on skills of conflict resolution, and this practice facilitates moral accountability among societies, as it was seen in Bauchi State, as indicated by Saleh (2022), which argues that the role of youth involvement is at the centre of long-term peace. In a similar vein, Sattari and Liata (2025) also drew the importance of Indonesian youth programmes in moderating religion, and proved that attitudinal change is achieved through guided interfaith interaction, which correlates with the responses of the respondents in our study. The thematic category mechanisms of influence shows that interfaith youth engagement is based on structured dialogue forums, mentorship and community work together. These processes are related to Intergroup Contact Theory that states that the positive, prolonged contact among the representatives of different groups minimizes prejudice and promotes cooperative norms (Allport, 1954). The participants noted that the regular engagements in forums like the Northern Nigeria Youth Interfaith Forum, the Kaduna Interreligious Youth Initiative, and Bauchi State Interfaith Peace Clubs foster a spirit of understanding and reduce the temptation of the extremist stories. Interreligious literacy and personal experience are the two concepts that enable young people to critically examine their assumption about the other and build resilience against radicalisation (Tahir and Wijaya, 2024). Adding to this, Ishaku, Aksit, and Maza (2021) revealed that faith-based organisations are utilised as viable means to prevent an extremist recruitment through the introduction of ethical guidance and social support to the communal framework. The research also validated the findings of Haugstvedt and Sjoen (2021) who noted that the willingness of youth to engage in liaising with civil society and the institutions of the state is greatly increased when the religious fraternities offer orderly engagement possibilities which underlines the practical implementation of theory. The third emergent theme that appeared was barriers to engagement, which were entrenched mistrust, resource constraints, and infrequent political interference. These observations are consistent with the Social Identity Theory that describes the process of the strengthening of intergroup tensions due to in-group favoritism and out-group stereotyping (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Omopo and Ekpo (2024) explain that young people in Nigeria usually receive historical accounts based on which religious otherness is a threat to their existence, and it is difficult to engage them at the first contact. Nevertheless, the respondents of this research suggested that over time, the group perceptions could change due to repeated interfaith contacts, which were provided in safe spaces, confirming the assumption of the theory that the identity constructs could be changed due to organized interactions. Dukawa and Salaudeen (2025) had a similar argument that

inter-religious dialogue in Nigeria prevents the development of political and religious contests, which proved the ability of youth-led interventions to transform the established social identities. The findings also support the global and regional literature on the youth roles in peacebuilding. Umanolue and Nwadiolor (2016) also highlighted that religious extremism negatively affects educational opportunities and youth empowerment, but organized engagement programs help to eliminate these weaknesses. The participants also indicated that they were more tolerant, more able to resolve conflicts, and worked across communities, which is consistent with the findings of Faqih and Umar (2023) in Indonesia, where intra-religious youth programmes also helped to prevent radicalisation. According to Ahmed-Hameed (2015), interfaith dialogue in Northern Nigeria reduces radicalisation to extremes, and Ali et al. (2021) have shown that interreligious literacy programmes promote critical thinking and counter-radicalisation among young students. Besides, the economic and social rewards that Ewi and Salifu (2017) describe were evident in the narratives of the participants as participation in peace activities offered them recognition, the development of skills, and community presence, which lowered the appeal of an extremist course. Lastly, the paper is in line with more general findings that digital platforms have the ability to enhance peacebuilding. Ibrahim (2024) noted that social media does not only accelerate the distribution of radical narratives but also creates spaces of counter-narratives; respondents in this research agreed that online interfaith campaigns are effective in dispensing messages of tolerance. Blackmer and Akila (2025) also emphasised the need to have educational programs as well with youth engagement to guarantee a consistent systematic influence, which has been echoed by Ehiane (2021) and Usman (2020) concerning the incorporation of peace education in community and school programmes.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In modern day Nigeria, religious extremism still reveals the flaws of coercive and purely security-focused approaches making it possible to anticipate the preventive merits of socially based peacebuilding measures. As demonstrated by respondents, long-term dialogue forums, mentorship programmes, and community partnerships enhance interreligious knowledge, conflict management skills, and reduce the vulnerability to extremist ideological influence. These processes work based on daily interpersonal interaction that is strengthened by institutional reinforcements, which implies that their prevention will be best when the engagement is ongoing and locally based. The results also indicate a two-sided truth: young people are susceptible of radical discourses, because of socio-economic and identification pressures, but they are also endowed with a great ability to transform communal relationships when they are organised in platforms that are inclusive. Theoretically, the findings support the explanatory power of the peacebuilding, intergroup contact, and social identity approaches in informing preventive interventions to change the perceptions and foster cooperative identities. In this paper, it has been determined that interfaith youth interaction is a good framework of minimizing religious tensions in Northern Nigeria as well as the North Central part of Nigeria.

Recommendations

Base on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. The permanent interfaith youth councils which are at the diocesan, parish, mosque and community levels must be established by religious organisations

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- with their mandate being to organize forums of dialogue, joint community outreach and conflict mediation efforts among the young members of various faiths.
- ii. Schools and curriculum regulations authorities ought to revise the curricula of civic and religious studies to add mandatory courses on interfaith literacy, peace studies, and critical analysis of extremist discourses, and should be backed by supervised interfaith student organizations and exchange programs.
 - iii. The policymakers ought to institutionalise interfaith youth participation into the national and state peacebuilding systems to enable legal support, setting up of dedicated resources such as budget lines to facilitate the implementation of the sustained programmes in the conflict prone areas.
 - iv. Security and peacebuilding agencies are advised to team up with the well-known faith-based and youth-led organisations in order to build early warning and response platforms where interfaith youth volunteers can be trained to report any radicalisation symptoms and mediate new tensions at community level.
 - v. Capacity-building programmes that develop the targeted youth leaders, religious facilitators, and community mediators with skills on facilitating dialogue, being advocates of digital peace and non-violent conflict resolution should be developed by the development partners and civil society organisations to ensure the programmes are sustainable in the long-term.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results have both short and long term implications on various stakeholders. The results imply that interfaith youth participations serve as a protective layer in the wider peace and security structures, meaning that the youth-focused dialogue systems can decrease the vulnerability to extremist mobilisation where institutionalised in the community and national systems. To religious organisations, the implication of the evidence is that the organisations will cease to be involved in the purely doctrinal teachings, but rather become proactive peace educators, which instil tolerance and mutual civic identity upon the members of the organisation. The study suggests that preventive peacebuilding based on youth involvement can be a more sustainable approach to reactive security responses in the eyes of policymakers and practitioners. Incorporating interfaith involvement into educational, community, and governance systems is an effective avenue into starting the peacebuilding theory into a daily social routine. By institutionalising these programs, therefore, would transform civic norms, enhance social cohesion, and offer a flexible template on how to handle religious tensions in other plural and conflict prone societies.

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