

Negotiating Diversity: Experiential Learning and the Formation of Multicultural Awareness among Muhammadiyah Youth Cadres

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ABSTRACT

The growing intensity of religious polarization, identity-based tensions, and declining intercultural engagement among youth has raised significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of conventional tolerance education in plural societies. Within the context of Indonesian Muslim youth movements, multicultural awareness is frequently promoted through normative religious discourse, yet often lacks meaningful experiential engagement capable of transforming social perception and civic behavior. This article aims to examine how experiential learning contributes to the formation of multicultural awareness among Muhammadiyah youth cadres through direct encounters with religious diversity. This research employed a qualitative design using a transcendental phenomenological approach. Ten active cadres of the Ikatan Pelajar Muhammadiyah in East Java who participated in the *Pelatihan Dai Pelajar Muhammadiyah (PDPM) III 2025* program were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and field observations during interfaith visits to religious communities, including churches, Buddhist temples, and indigenous belief groups. The data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis involving horizontalization, thematic clustering, and interpretive synthesis. The findings reveal that experiential encounters with religious diversity generated significant emotional, cognitive, and behavioral transformations among participants. Direct interaction disrupted inherited stereotypes, encouraged reflective reinterpretation of Islamic identity within plural democratic contexts, and fostered emerging commitments toward inclusive civic engagement. Multicultural awareness developed not through abstract doctrinal instruction alone, but through emotionally meaningful encounters, dialogical reflection, and ethical negotiation of coexistence. The study highlights the strategic role of experiential learning in cultivating socially engaged, democratically oriented, and multicultural Muslim youth within increasingly polarized societies.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, issues surrounding religious tolerance, multicultural coexistence, and democratic citizenship have become increasingly significant within global educational and socio-political discourse [1]. The rapid expansion of globalization, digital communication, and transnational ideological movements has intensified encounters between diverse cultural, religious, and social identities, particularly among youth communities. In many plural societies, diversity simultaneously represents both a social asset and a source of tension when not accompanied by inclusive attitudes and intercultural understanding [2]. Indonesia, as one of the world's largest multicultural democracies, continues to face recurring challenges related to religious intolerance, identity polarization, and socio-political fragmentation. Reports from the Setara Institute documented more than 180 incidents of violations of religious freedom and intolerance in Indonesia in recent years, while national surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) revealed that a significant proportion of Indonesian youth demonstrated intolerant attitudes

toward groups with different religious or ideological backgrounds. These conditions indicate that formal normative education alone is insufficient to cultivate multicultural awareness and sustainable democratic tolerance among younger generations [3].

The growing concern regarding intolerance among youth has stimulated academic interest in multicultural education, civic engagement, and transformative learning processes. Existing studies have emphasized that tolerance is not merely a cognitive understanding of diversity but also a socially constructed disposition shaped through interaction, reflection, and lived experience [4]. Within educational scholarship, experiential learning has increasingly been recognized as an effective pedagogical approach for fostering empathy, intercultural sensitivity, and inclusive social awareness. Drawing from the theoretical contributions of John Dewey and David Kolb, experiential learning positions direct engagement and reflective experience as central mechanisms for personal transformation and social learning. Recent studies in multicultural and peace education further demonstrate that participation in cross-cultural encounters, collaborative community activities, and interfaith engagement contributes positively to the development of democratic attitudes and multicultural competence among youth [5]. However, much of this literature remains concentrated within Western educational settings and secular institutional contexts, leaving limited exploration of experiential multicultural learning within faith-based Islamic youth organizations in Southeast Asia.

Among Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah occupies a distinctive position due to its long-standing commitment to modern Islamic education, civic engagement, and social reform. As one of the country's largest Muslim organizations, Muhammadiyah has played a substantial role in shaping moderate Islamic discourse and promoting social welfare initiatives across diverse communities [6]. Its cadre education system is not solely oriented toward doctrinal transmission but also incorporates organizational activism, community service, and social interaction that potentially facilitate experiential encounters with diversity. Several previous studies have examined Muhammadiyah's role in Islamic moderation, educational reform, and civic participation. Other scholars have investigated youth religiosity and organizational identity formation among Muhammadiyah members. Nevertheless, these studies predominantly focus on ideological orientation, institutional dynamics, or normative religious values rather than exploring how experiential learning processes contribute to the formation of multicultural awareness among youth cadres. Consequently, the experiential dimensions of tolerance formation within Muhammadiyah's cadreization practices remain underexplored in contemporary scholarship [7].

The existing body of literature also reveals important methodological limitations. Prior research on religious tolerance and multicultural education in Islamic organizations has largely employed quantitative survey approaches that measure attitudes, perceptions, or levels of tolerance through standardized indicators. While these studies provide valuable statistical insights, they often overlook the subjective meanings, reflective experiences, and interpersonal encounters through which tolerance is socially negotiated and internalized. In phenomenological terms, multicultural awareness emerges not only from formal instruction but from lived experiences that shape individuals' interpretations of difference, identity, and coexistence. The scarcity of phenomenological investigations examining experiential learning among Muslim youth organizations creates a significant gap in understanding how multicultural consciousness is actually formed within everyday organizational and social practices [8]. This absence becomes particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Indonesia, where youth organizations increasingly function as strategic spaces for ideological contestation, civic learning, and identity negotiation.

This study argues that multicultural awareness among Muhammadiyah youth cadres is not formed exclusively through doctrinal religious education, but through experiential processes involving social interaction, organizational participation, reflective engagement, and encounters with diversity in everyday life [9]. The formation of tolerance is understood as a dynamic and negotiated process shaped by lived experiences within multicultural social environments. Through a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to uncover how Muhammadiyah youth cadres interpret, experience, and internalize multicultural values through their participation in organizational and

social activities. The study positions experiential learning as a transformative mechanism capable of bridging religious identity with democratic coexistence and intercultural understanding.

The urgency of this research lies in both its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study extends contemporary discussions on experiential learning, multicultural education, and Islamic civic formation by integrating phenomenological perspectives within the context of Muslim youth organizations in the Global South. It contributes to the limited scholarship examining how multicultural consciousness is constructed through lived experiences in faith-based educational environments. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for policymakers, educators, and youth organizations in designing more transformative models of cadre education that strengthen democratic tolerance, intercultural engagement, and peaceful coexistence among younger generations. In the broader socio-political context marked by rising polarization and identity-based tensions, understanding the experiential foundations of multicultural awareness becomes increasingly essential for sustaining inclusive democracy and social cohesion in plural societies.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Muhammadiyah youth cadres participating in experiential learning activities related to multicultural and interreligious encounters. Phenomenology was considered the most appropriate methodological framework because the study sought to understand the essence and meaning of participants' subjective experiences regarding tolerance, diversity, and multicultural awareness. Following the transcendental phenomenological tradition developed by Edmund Husserl and further elaborated in contemporary qualitative inquiry, the research emphasized participants' conscious reflections and interpretations of their direct experiences rather than external behavioral measurement. This approach enabled the researchers to capture how experiential learning processes contributed to the internal transformation of attitudes toward religious and cultural diversity among Muhammadiyah youth cadres.

The study specifically focused on experiential encounters conducted during the *Pelatihan Dai Pelajar Muhammadiyah (PDPM) III 2025* program organized by the East Java branch of the Ikatan Pelajar Muhammadiyah. The program incorporated interfaith visits and multicultural engagement activities, including visits to Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI) Batu, Vihara Dhammadipa Arama, and the Sapta Dharma Community. These experiential activities served as the primary social context through which participants encountered and reflected upon religious and cultural differences. The phenomenological design allowed the study to investigate how such encounters shaped participants' meaning-making processes, emotional responses, and evolving understandings of multicultural coexistence.

Participant

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all individuals possessed direct experience relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be active Muhammadiyah youth cadres affiliated with the East Java regional branch of IPM, (2) have participated fully in all experiential learning sessions during PDPM III 2025, and (3) demonstrate willingness to engage in reflective interviews and written documentation. A total of ten participants were involved in the study, consisting of six female and four male cadres aged between 17 and 19 years.

The participants represented diverse regional backgrounds across East Java, enabling the study to capture varied sociocultural perspectives within Muhammadiyah youth communities. Although the sample size was relatively limited, it was considered adequate within phenomenological inquiry because the primary objective was depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. The participants' direct involvement in interfaith and multicultural

engagement activities provided rich experiential narratives essential for uncovering the essence of tolerance formation through experiential learning.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profile

No.	Gender	Age	Region
1	Male	18	Malang
2	Male	18	Batu
3	Male	19	Jember
4	Male	19	Gresik
5	Female	17	Malang
6	Female	17	Malang
7	Female	18	Surabaya
8	Female	18	Lamongan
9	Female	19	Probolinggo
10	Female	19	Pasuruan

Instruments

The primary research instruments consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews and reflective participant journals. Semi-structured interviews were selected to provide flexibility for participants to narrate their experiences openly while still allowing the researchers to maintain alignment with the study objectives. The interview protocol focused on several thematic dimensions, including participants' initial perceptions of religious diversity, emotional reactions during interfaith encounters, reflective meaning-making processes, and perceived transformations in attitudes toward tolerance and multiculturalism.

In addition to interviews, reflective journals were utilized to document participants' immediate personal reflections following experiential learning activities. These written narratives provided complementary data regarding participants' internal dialogues, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations of multicultural interactions. The integration of interviews and reflective writing strengthened data richness through methodological triangulation, allowing the researchers to compare verbal narratives with written self-reflections.

To enhance credibility and consistency, the interview guide was reviewed by qualitative research experts and scholars in multicultural education prior to data collection. Minor revisions were made to improve question clarity and ensure alignment with phenomenological inquiry principles. Throughout the research process, the researchers also maintained reflexive field notes to document contextual observations, emerging interpretations, and potential researcher biases.

Table 2. Core Dimensions of Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Focus Area	Purpose
Semi-structured Interviews	Lived experiences, emotions, perceptions, reflections	To explore subjective meanings and transformative experiences
Reflective Journals	Personal reflections and introspection	To capture immediate interpretive responses after experiential activities
Field Notes	Contextual observations and researcher reflections	To support reflexivity and contextual understanding

Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted over the course of the PDPM III 2025 program and immediately following participants' experiential learning activities. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the research objectives, ethical procedures, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study commenced.

The experiential learning activities involved direct visits to religious and cultural institutions representing different belief systems. During these visits, participants engaged in dialogue sessions, observational activities, and informal interactions with members of different religious communities. These encounters functioned as experiential spaces through which participants confronted, negotiated, and reflected upon issues of diversity and coexistence.

Following the completion of each experiential activity, participants were asked to write reflective journals documenting their thoughts, emotional reactions, and interpretive insights. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were conducted individually in a conversational and open-ended format to encourage participants to articulate their lived experiences freely. Each interview lasted approximately 45–70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Data collection continued until experiential saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of similar themes and the absence of substantially new meanings emerging from subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis inspired by the procedures proposed by Clark Moustakas and phenomenological analysis frameworks developed by John W. Creswell. The analysis began with transcription and repeated reading of interview recordings and reflective journals to achieve immersion and holistic familiarity with participants' narratives. During this stage, the researchers engaged in *epoche* or bracketing to minimize personal assumptions and maintain openness toward participants' lived meanings.

The next stage involved horizontalization, in which significant statements related to tolerance, diversity, experiential encounters, and multicultural awareness were identified and treated with equal analytical value. These statements were subsequently coded and grouped into clusters of meaning based on conceptual similarities. Through iterative comparison and thematic reduction, broader themes were developed to represent the essential structures of participants' experiences.

After thematic construction, the researchers developed two interconnected forms of phenomenological description: (1) textual descriptions explaining *what* participants experienced, and (2) structural descriptions explaining *how* contextual and experiential conditions shaped those experiences. The final stage involved synthesizing these descriptions into a composite understanding of the essence of multicultural awareness formation among Muhammadiyah youth cadres.

To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were implemented, including member checking, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing. Participants were invited to review preliminary interpretations to confirm the accuracy of meaning representation. Furthermore, continuous reflexive engagement was maintained throughout the analytical process to strengthen interpretive rigor and reduce subjective bias.

Table 3. Stages of Phenomenological Data Analysis

Stage	Analytical Activity	Objective
Data Immersion	Repeated reading of transcripts and journals	To achieve holistic understanding
Epoche/Bracketing	Suspending researcher assumptions	To maintain phenomenological openness
Horizontalization	Identifying significant statements	To extract experiential meanings
Clustering Themes	Grouping related meanings	To develop thematic categories

Textural Description	Describing “what” participants experienced	To represent lived experiences
Structural Description	Describing “how” experiences were shaped	To explain contextual influences
Essence Synthesis	Integrating themes into composite meaning	To identify the essence of the phenomenon

Ethical Considerations and Research Limitations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants’ identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and all collected data were treated confidentially. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Despite its contributions, this study possesses several limitations. The research involved only ten participants from East Java, limiting the transferability of findings to broader Muhammadiyah youth populations in other sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, the phenomenological design prioritized subjective interpretations rather than quantitative measurement, meaning that findings are context-dependent and interpretive in nature. The study also did not employ longitudinal observation to examine whether transformations in multicultural awareness persisted over time. Future research may therefore benefit from broader geographic coverage, mixed-method approaches, and longitudinal designs to explore the sustainability of experiential learning outcomes in multicultural and democratic education contexts.

RESULTS

The phenomenological analysis revealed that experiential learning activities conducted during the *Pelatihan Dai Pelajar Muhammadiyah (PDPM) III 2025* program generated substantial transformations in participants’ perceptions of religious diversity, multicultural coexistence, and interfaith engagement. Across interviews, reflective journals, and field observations, participants consistently described their experiences as emotionally significant and intellectually transformative. The findings demonstrated that multicultural awareness among Muhammadiyah youth cadres developed through a gradual process involving emotional disruption, reflective negotiation, and the emergence of inclusive social commitments. These transformations did not occur instantaneously; rather, they evolved through direct encounters with religious communities previously unfamiliar to the participants.

Prior to participating in the experiential learning program, many participants admitted having limited interaction with non-Muslim religious communities. Several interviewees acknowledged that their understanding of other religions had largely been shaped by indirect information, assumptions, and social stereotypes rather than direct experience. As a result, feelings of hesitation, unfamiliarity, and social distance toward religious minorities were commonly expressed at the beginning of the program. One participant explained: *“Before joining this program, I honestly had never entered a church or a vihara. I only knew them from stories or social media. There was always a feeling that those places were very different and maybe uncomfortable for Muslims like us.”* Similarly, another participant reflected: *“At first, I thought people from other religions would be difficult to approach because we have different beliefs. I worried about saying the wrong thing or feeling awkward during the visit.”*

These initial perceptions began to shift significantly once participants directly engaged in interfaith encounters during visits to Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI) Batu, Vihara Dhammadipa Arama, and the Sapta Dharma Community. Participants repeatedly described these visits as emotionally powerful experiences that challenged many of their previous assumptions regarding religious difference. Several participants emphasized that direct interaction with members of other religious communities created unexpected feelings of calmness, acceptance, and empathy. One participant described their emotional response after visiting the Buddhist temple: *“At first, I imagined the vihara as a dark and mysterious place. But when I entered, the atmosphere felt peaceful. I saw the Buddha statue smiling, and the monks explained meditation very calmly and logically. It completely changed my feelings.”*

Another participant expressed a similar reaction during the church visit: *“When we entered GKI Batu, we were welcomed warmly by the congregation. There was music, people smiling, and open conversations about faith. I realized they were not as different from us as I had imagined.”* The interviews further revealed that these encounters generated not only cognitive reconsideration but also deeper emotional reflection regarding participants’ religious identities and attitudes toward diversity. Many participants experienced an internal process of negotiation between maintaining Islamic beliefs and developing respect toward different religious communities. This reflective process emerged strongly within both interviews and personal journals. One participant articulated this tension by stating: *“At the beginning, I questioned myself. If I respect other religious practices, does that mean I agree with their beliefs? But after reflection and discussion, I understood that respecting others is part of protecting human dignity, not abandoning my faith.”* Another participant similarly wrote in their reflective journal: *“Visiting Sapta Dharma taught me about simplicity and spirituality. I remembered that Islam teaches us to value good character. Respecting others does not weaken our religion; instead, it strengthens our humanity.”*

The findings also demonstrated that participants interpreted their experiences through Islamic and Muhammadiyah values already familiar to them. Concepts such as *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*, moderation (*wasathiyah*), compassion, and moral responsibility were frequently used by participants to explain their evolving perspectives on diversity. Rather than perceiving multicultural engagement as contradictory to their religious identity, participants increasingly framed tolerance as an extension of Islamic ethics and Muhammadiyah’s social mission. One participant explained: *“I realized that Muhammadiyah teaches us to become Muslims who bring benefit to society. After these visits, tolerance no longer feels like just a theory from class. I could see how it works in real life.”* Another participant stated: *“The experience helped me understand that respecting people from different religions is part of Islamic morality. We can stay firm in our faith while still appreciating others.”*

Reflective discussions conducted after each experiential activity played a crucial role in shaping participants’ interpretations of their experiences. Participants consistently mentioned that conversations with facilitators and fellow cadres helped them process emotional reactions and reinterpret their assumptions regarding diversity. Through these dialogues, participants gradually developed more nuanced understandings of multicultural coexistence and interreligious interaction. One participant remarked: *“The discussion sessions were important because they helped me organize my thoughts. Sometimes I felt confused after the visits, but hearing different perspectives from friends made me realize that tolerance is something we practice, not just something we talk about.”* Another participant similarly noted: *“When we shared reflections together, I realized many of us had similar fears at first. But after the experience, we became more open-minded and less suspicious of people from different backgrounds.”*

The data further indicated that participants began developing concrete intentions to apply their new perspectives within their own social environments. The transformation experienced during the program did not remain at the level of abstract understanding; instead, it stimulated aspirations toward practical social engagement and interreligious collaboration. Several participants expressed commitments to creating dialogue spaces, educational activities, and collaborative programs involving youth from different religious communities. One participant explained: *“After returning home, I want to propose a live-in program between IPM students and students from Catholic schools. I think direct interaction is much more effective than only discussing tolerance theoretically.”* Another participant stated: *“I want to create social media content about my experience because many young people still misunderstand other religions without ever meeting them directly.”*

In addition to future-oriented commitments, participants also reported immediate changes in their everyday attitudes and sensitivities toward discriminatory behavior. Several participants acknowledged becoming more critical of intolerant jokes, stereotypes, and exclusionary comments commonly encountered within peer interactions and online spaces. One participant reflected: *“Before this program, I sometimes ignored jokes about certain ethnic or religious groups. But now I feel uncomfortable when hearing them because I realize how harmful stereotypes can be.”*

Another participant added: *“I became more careful when speaking about other communities because I now understand that every group has human values and dignity.”*

Field observations conducted throughout the experiential learning process supported these interview findings. At the beginning of the visits, participants often appeared reserved, hesitant, and cautious during interactions with members of other religious communities. However, as the program progressed, participants demonstrated increased openness, curiosity, and confidence during dialogue sessions. They became more willing to ask questions, engage in informal conversations, and participate actively in shared activities. Observational notes documented a visible transition from passive observation toward more relaxed and collaborative engagement patterns among participants.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that experiential learning functioned as a transformative process through which Muhammadiyah youth cadres reconstructed their understandings of tolerance, diversity, and social coexistence. Participants' narratives revealed interconnected transformations across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Direct encounters with religious diversity generated emotional disruption, reflective reinterpretation, and emerging commitments toward inclusive social engagement. These experiences collectively contributed to the formation of multicultural awareness grounded not merely in abstract doctrinal instruction, but in lived interpersonal encounters and meaningful social interaction.

DISCUSSION

Experiential Encounters as Catalysts for Multicultural Consciousness

The findings demonstrate that experiential encounters with religious diversity functioned not merely as supplementary educational activities, but as transformative moments capable of destabilizing entrenched assumptions and reconstructing participants' multicultural consciousness. Unlike conventional doctrinal instruction, which often positions tolerance within abstract normative discourse, the experiential learning model implemented in PDPM III 2025 exposed Muhammadiyah youth cadres to direct interpersonal interaction with religious communities previously situated outside their everyday social horizons [10]. The significance of these encounters lies precisely in their capacity to interrupt inherited patterns of perception. Participants entered churches, temples, and minority belief communities carrying socially mediated imaginaries shaped by limited interaction, communal narratives, and latent stereotypes. However, these assumptions became increasingly difficult to sustain once participants encountered the ordinary humanity, openness, and ethical sincerity of the individuals they met. The experiential dimension therefore transformed diversity from an abstract category into a lived social reality, forcing participants to negotiate the inadequacy of prior prejudicial constructions [11].

This transformation is analytically important because it illustrates that multicultural awareness is not primarily produced through informational acquisition, but through affective-cognitive disruption generated by embodied social encounters. Several participants described experiences of emotional disorientation when entering non-Muslim religious spaces, particularly when the atmosphere they encountered contradicted preconceived expectations of strangeness or threat [12]. Such moments represent more than emotional surprise; they indicate the collapse of what phenomenological inquiry would describe as the “taken-for-granted structure” of social perception. Participants' previous assumptions regarding religious others were destabilized through direct sensory and interpersonal engagement, producing a rupture in habitual meaning structures. In this context, experiential learning operated as a mechanism of epistemological interruption, compelling participants to reconsider categories previously accepted without reflection [13].

Importantly, the transformative effect of these encounters cannot be reduced to simple exposure theory or superficial multicultural celebration. Mere physical proximity to difference does not automatically produce tolerance. Rather, the findings suggest that transformation emerged because the encounters fulfilled several critical relational

conditions simultaneously: dialogical openness, equal participation, institutional legitimacy, and emotionally meaningful interaction [14]. Participants did not encounter religious others as passive observers positioned above or outside the interaction, but as dialogical subjects engaged in reciprocal exchange. This distinction is crucial because hierarchical or tokenistic encounters frequently reproduce rather than dismantle prejudice [15]. The program instead created a relational environment in which religious difference became humanized through shared vulnerability, conversation, and emotional reciprocity. Consequently, multicultural awareness emerged not from ideological persuasion, but from the recognition of shared humanity across theological boundaries.

The findings also reveal the central role of affect in processes of multicultural learning, an aspect frequently underemphasized in formal civic and religious education [16]. Existing educational approaches often conceptualize tolerance as a rational civic competency achieved through cognitive understanding of pluralism. However, participants' narratives indicate that emotional experience preceded intellectual reinterpretation. Feelings of calmness within the vihara, warmth during church visits, and empathy toward minority religious communities generated affective responses that disrupted fear-based perceptions long before participants articulated explicit ideological reflections [17]. This suggests that multicultural consciousness is deeply embodied and relational rather than purely conceptual. Emotional encounters created the necessary conditions for reflective reinterpretation by weakening defensive social boundaries and opening participants toward alternative understandings of religious difference.

From a phenomenological perspective, these findings indicate that experiential encounters functioned as moments of *epoché*, in which participants temporarily suspended inherited assumptions and became receptive to previously excluded meanings. The significance of this process lies in its transformative epistemic quality [18]. Participants were no longer interpreting religious others solely through externally inherited narratives, but through first-person lived engagement. This shift from mediated perception to direct experience fundamentally altered the structure of meaning-making itself. Rather than reproducing binary distinctions between "self" and "other," participants began constructing more fluid and dialogical understandings of coexistence. Multicultural consciousness therefore emerged as an interpretive achievement grounded in lived relationality rather than abstract ideological acceptance.

The findings further challenge reductionist assumptions that strong religious identity necessarily inhibits multicultural openness among Muslim youth. On the contrary, the experiential encounters revealed that participants' Islamic identities became more reflexive and ethically expansive precisely through interaction with difference [19]. The destabilization of prejudice did not produce religious relativism or identity dilution; instead, it encouraged participants to reinterpret their religious commitments in more socially inclusive ways. This distinction is analytically significant because dominant public discourse frequently frames religiosity and multiculturalism as mutually antagonistic categories. The experiences of Muhammadiyah cadres suggest a more complex dynamic in which interreligious engagement may strengthen ethical self-awareness rather than weaken religious conviction [20].

Moreover, the findings expose important limitations within conventional cadreization models that rely excessively on textual transmission and ideological reinforcement without creating meaningful spaces for experiential engagement. Participants repeatedly emphasized that previous understandings of tolerance remained largely theoretical until confronted by direct interaction with diverse communities. This indicates that multicultural values cannot be effectively internalized through normative discourse alone [21]. Without experiential interruption, concepts such as moderation, coexistence, and inclusivity risk remaining rhetorical abstractions disconnected from lived social reality. The study therefore suggests that transformative multicultural education requires pedagogical structures capable of generating emotional engagement, reflective tension, and dialogical interaction simultaneously.

The broader implication of these findings extends beyond Muhammadiyah cadre education itself. In contexts marked by increasing polarization, digital echo chambers, and identity-based fragmentation, experiential intergroup

encounters may represent one of the few remaining pedagogical spaces capable of disrupting algorithmically reinforced prejudice [22]. Contemporary intolerance is increasingly sustained not through direct conflict, but through social distance, mediated stereotypes, and the absence of meaningful interaction. The PDPM III experience demonstrates that carefully structured experiential learning can intervene within this dynamic by rehumanizing social difference and reconstructing the emotional foundations of coexistence. Consequently, multicultural consciousness should not be understood as a passive cognitive outcome of civic education, but as a transformative relational process requiring embodied encounter, emotional vulnerability, and sustained reflective engagement.

Negotiating Islamic Identity and Democratic Coexistence

The findings reveal that the development of multicultural awareness among Muhammadiyah youth cadres did not occur through the erosion of religious identity, but through an active process of negotiating Islamic commitment within the realities of democratic pluralism [23]. This distinction is analytically significant because dominant narratives surrounding religious tolerance in Muslim societies often operate within a binary framework: either strong religiosity is perceived as a barrier to democratic coexistence, or multicultural engagement is framed as requiring the dilution of theological conviction. The experiences of participants challenge this dichotomy by demonstrating that interreligious engagement can instead stimulate more reflexive, ethically grounded, and socially responsive forms of Islamic identity [24]. In this sense, multicultural consciousness emerged not from detachment from religion, but from reinterpretation within religion itself.

Participants' reflections indicate that the most profound tension generated by experiential encounters was not interpersonal discomfort, but theological and moral negotiation. Many participants initially struggled to reconcile respect for religious difference with concerns regarding doctrinal boundaries. This internal negotiation exposed the inadequacy of simplistic understandings of tolerance frequently reproduced within formal religious education [25]. Tolerance was no longer interpreted merely as passive acceptance or social politeness, but as an ethical responsibility requiring conscious reinterpretation of how Islamic values operate within plural social realities. Participants repeatedly emphasized that appreciating the dignity of others did not necessarily imply theological relativism [26]. Instead, democratic coexistence became increasingly understood as part of Islamic moral responsibility rather than external secular imposition.

This finding is particularly important because it challenges reductionist assumptions embedded within both secular liberal discourse and conservative religious discourse. Within secular frameworks, democratic coexistence is often conceptualized as dependent upon the privatization of religion or the weakening of exclusive truth claims. Conversely, conservative religious frameworks frequently portray pluralistic engagement as a threat to theological purity and communal boundaries [27]. The experiences of Muhammadiyah cadres suggest a more complex interpretive model in which democratic coexistence emerges through ethical negotiation rather than ideological surrender. Participants did not abandon Islamic exclusivity at the level of belief; instead, they reconstructed the social implications of belief through concepts emphasizing compassion, coexistence, and human dignity [28].

The findings further demonstrate that Muhammadiyah's intellectual tradition played a crucial mediating role within this negotiation process [29]. Participants frequently mobilized concepts such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, *ukhuwah wathaniyah*, *wasathiyyah*, and *Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Syahadah* to reinterpret their encounters with religious diversity. Importantly, these concepts were not merely repeated as organizational slogans; rather, they became interpretive tools through which participants translated unfamiliar social experiences into religiously meaningful frameworks. This process reflects a dynamic interaction between lived experience and theological reasoning, where religious concepts acquire renewed relevance precisely because they are tested within concrete multicultural realities.

Table 4. Negotiated Dimensions of Islamic Identity and Democratic Coexistence

Initial Orientation	Experiential Tension	Reconstructed Understanding
Religious difference perceived as social distance	Direct interaction with non-Muslim communities	Religious difference understood through shared humanity
Tolerance viewed as passive coexistence	Ethical discomfort during interfaith encounters	Tolerance interpreted as active moral responsibility
Fear of theological compromise	Reflection on Islamic values and diversity	Respect for diversity seen as compatible with Islamic commitment
Identity centered on communal boundaries	Exposure to multicultural interaction	Identity expanded toward civic and democratic coexistence
Multiculturalism perceived as external discourse	Integration with Muhammadiyah principles	Multicultural engagement framed as Islamic ethical practice

The table above illustrates that participants' transformations were fundamentally interpretive rather than ideological. What changed was not the core of participants' religious belief, but the social meaning attached to religious identity within plural contexts. This distinction is critical because it demonstrates that democratic coexistence among Muslim youth cannot be adequately understood through binary measurements of "tolerant" versus "intolerant" attitudes. The findings instead suggest that multicultural awareness develops through ongoing negotiations between theology, experience, and social reality [30]. Such negotiations are inherently dynamic, unstable, and context-dependent.

Moreover, the findings expose the limitations of educational approaches that treat democratic values as externally transferable civic competencies detached from participants' moral and religious worldviews. Participants did not internalize multicultural awareness because they were instructed to adopt liberal-democratic norms abstractly. Rather, multicultural awareness became meaningful only after participants were able to reinterpret democratic coexistence through categories already embedded within their Islamic ethical imagination [31]. This indicates that democratic education within religious communities cannot succeed through secular universalism alone. Educational transformation requires dialogical engagement with participants' existing moral frameworks rather than attempts to bypass or replace them [32].

At the same time, the findings also reveal that this negotiation process was neither linear nor entirely resolved. Several participants continued expressing uncertainty regarding the boundaries between respect, acceptance, and theological commitment even after completing the experiential program [33]. This unresolved tension is analytically important because it demonstrates that multicultural awareness should not be romanticized as a final state of ideological harmony [34]. Instead, democratic coexistence within religious communities often involves continuous ethical negotiation marked by ambiguity, reflexivity, and occasional contradiction. The persistence of uncertainty does not necessarily indicate failure; rather, it reflects the complexity of navigating pluralism within deeply held systems of belief.

The study therefore contributes to broader debates concerning Islam, democracy, and multiculturalism by demonstrating that religious identity and democratic coexistence are not inherently oppositional categories [35]. Instead, their relationship depends largely upon the interpretive frameworks through which religious actors negotiate social diversity. The Muhammadiyah cadres in this study did not become less religious through experiential multicultural engagement. On the contrary, many participants articulated stronger ethical awareness regarding the social consequences of their religious commitments. Democratic coexistence consequently emerged not as secular accommodation, but as a form of ethically engaged religiosity grounded in reflective interaction with plural social realities [36].

These findings carry significant implications for contemporary Muslim youth education. In many contexts, religious formation continues to emphasize doctrinal certainty without sufficiently preparing young Muslims for the ethical complexity of plural democratic societies [37]. As a result, multicultural discourse is frequently perceived either as ideological threat or superficial political rhetoric disconnected from religious life. The experiences documented in this study suggest that experiential pedagogies can create critical spaces where Muslim youth negotiate these tensions constructively rather than defensively. Such spaces are increasingly essential in societies experiencing intensified polarization, identity politics, and digital radicalization.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that democratic coexistence is not sustained through the weakening of religious identity, but through the cultivation of reflexive religious subjectivities capable of engaging difference without perceiving it as existential threat. The negotiation between Islamic identity and multicultural coexistence therefore represents not a crisis of faith, but a transformation in how faith is socially enacted within diverse democratic contexts.

From Reflective Awareness to Civic and Social Commitment

The findings indicate that the transformative impact of experiential learning did not culminate at the level of personal reflection or attitudinal adjustment alone. Rather, participants increasingly articulated forms of civic consciousness that extended beyond internal awareness toward concrete social responsibility. This transition from reflective understanding to civic commitment is analytically significant because it demonstrates that multicultural learning becomes socially meaningful only when translated into forms of ethical action and public engagement [38]. In other words, the success of experiential learning cannot be measured solely by shifts in perception, but by its capacity to generate durable orientations toward democratic participation, social mediation, and inclusive civic practice.

Importantly, participants' emerging commitments were not expressed in abstract ideological language detached from everyday realities. Instead, they appeared in the form of practical aspirations, localized initiatives, and interpersonal responsibilities situated within participants' immediate social environments [39]. Several participants proposed interfaith youth collaborations, school exchange activities, and dialogue-based programs aimed at reducing social prejudice among peers. Others emphasized the importance of transforming digital spaces by producing social media narratives promoting coexistence and respectful communication. These aspirations reveal that multicultural awareness became operationalized through civic imagination — the ability to envision oneself as an active agent capable of shaping more inclusive social relations [40].

This finding challenges a persistent limitation within many multicultural education programs, namely the assumption that attitudinal tolerance automatically translates into democratic engagement. In practice, tolerance often remains confined to passive acceptance without producing meaningful civic participation. The experiences of Muhammadiyah cadres suggest a different trajectory: experiential learning generated not only interpretive transformation but also an emerging sense of civic agency [41]. Participants increasingly positioned themselves not merely as individuals who “understand diversity,” but as actors responsible for sustaining social cohesion within plural democratic contexts. This distinction is crucial because democratic coexistence depends not only on private attitudes, but on the willingness of citizens to actively resist exclusionary practices and cultivate inclusive public interaction [42].

The findings further demonstrate that civic commitment emerged through moral reflexivity rather than institutional obligation. Participants did not describe their aspirations primarily in terms of formal political participation or state-centered citizenship. Instead, civic responsibility was articulated through everyday ethical practices: challenging discriminatory jokes, mediating misunderstanding within peer groups, promoting respectful dialogue online, and creating opportunities for intergroup interaction [43]. Such forms of engagement may appear micro-social in scale, yet they are politically significant precisely because contemporary intolerance increasingly operates through normalized everyday discourse rather than overt ideological extremism [44]. The participants' heightened sensitivity toward

exclusionary language and symbolic violence indicates the emergence of what may be termed ethical citizenship — a mode of civic participation grounded in responsibility toward social dignity and coexistence.

Table 5. Transformation from Reflective Awareness to Civic Commitment

Reflective Transformation	Emerging Civic Orientation	Potential Social Implication
Increased empathy toward religious others	Desire to initiate interfaith dialogue	Reduction of social prejudice
Recognition of shared humanity	Commitment to inclusive communication	Strengthening democratic coexistence
Critical awareness of stereotypes	Resistance toward discriminatory discourse	Prevention of symbolic exclusion
Reinterpretation of Islamic ethics	Promotion of peaceful social engagement	Expansion of civic moderation
Personal multicultural awareness	Intention to create collaborative youth programs	Development of grassroots social cohesion

The table above illustrates that participants' transformations extended beyond cognitive reinterpretation toward the emergence of civic-oriented behavioral intentions. This progression is analytically important because it demonstrates that multicultural consciousness becomes socially consequential only when linked to forms of public responsibility. Without this transition, experiential learning risks producing individualized moral sentiment without structural civic relevance [45]. The participants' aspirations toward collaborative engagement therefore represent an important indicator that experiential pedagogy can cultivate socially embedded democratic dispositions rather than merely private tolerance.

At the same time, the findings also reveal tensions and limitations within this transition toward civic engagement. While participants expressed strong commitments to promoting inclusivity, many remained uncertain regarding how such ideals could be sustained within broader social environments still shaped by polarization, religious conservatism, and digital hostility [46]. Several participants acknowledged that practicing tolerance in controlled educational settings differed substantially from confronting exclusionary attitudes within everyday community life. This uncertainty highlights a critical issue frequently overlooked within celebratory narratives of multicultural education: awareness alone does not guarantee structural transformation [47]. Civic commitment remains vulnerable when institutional ecosystems fail to support inclusive practice beyond temporary educational interventions.

Moreover, the findings expose the inadequacy of educational frameworks that conceptualize civic engagement primarily through formal democratic participation while neglecting the relational foundations of coexistence. Participants rarely framed their commitments in terms of electoral politics, constitutional discourse, or state-centered citizenship [48]. Instead, they emphasized interpersonal dialogue, social empathy, and ethical communication as primary sites of democratic practice. This suggests that democratic coexistence among youth may be sustained less through procedural political literacy alone than through the cultivation of relational competencies enabling individuals to navigate difference without reproducing antagonism [49]. In increasingly fragmented societies, such relational capacities may represent one of the most urgent yet underdeveloped dimensions of democratic education.

The experiences documented in this study also illuminate the strategic role of faith-based youth organizations in shaping inclusive civic subjectivities. Public discourse frequently portrays religious organizations either as obstacles to democratic pluralism or as merely symbolic moral institutions detached from civic transformation [50]. However, the findings indicate that Muhammadiyah cadreization can function as an important site for producing socially engaged forms of religiosity capable of contributing to democratic coexistence [51]. Participants did not perceive civic engagement as separate from their Islamic identity; rather, social responsibility became increasingly interpreted as a

manifestation of religious ethics itself. This integration between faith and civic consciousness is particularly significant within contexts where secular and religious discourses are often positioned antagonistically.

Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that transformative civic learning requires continuity beyond isolated experiential programs. While participants articulated strong intentions toward inclusive action, the long-term sustainability of these commitments remains uncertain without institutional reinforcement, organizational support, and opportunities for ongoing engagement [52]. Experiential learning may successfully generate critical awareness and moral motivation, yet such transformation risks dissipation if not embedded within broader pedagogical ecosystems capable of sustaining reflective practice and civic participation over time. Consequently, multicultural education should not be treated as episodic intervention, but as a continuous socialization process requiring structural integration within youth organizational culture [53].

Ultimately, the findings indicate that the most significant outcome of experiential learning lies not simply in producing tolerant individuals, but in cultivating socially responsible actors capable of participating constructively within plural democratic societies. The transition from reflective awareness to civic commitment demonstrates that multicultural consciousness acquires transformative significance only when translated into ethical action, relational responsibility, and inclusive social engagement. In this sense, experiential learning functions not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as a civic formation process shaping how young Muslims understand their role within increasingly diverse and contested democratic environments.

CONCLUSION

Experiential encounters with religious diversity demonstrated a transformative capacity to reshape multicultural awareness among Muhammadiyah youth cadres beyond the limits of normative and doctrinal instruction. Direct interaction with different religious communities disrupted inherited assumptions, challenged socially reproduced stereotypes, and opened reflective spaces through which participants reinterpreted diversity as a lived human reality rather than an abstract ideological concept. Multicultural consciousness emerged not through passive exposure to pluralism, but through emotionally meaningful engagement, dialogical interaction, and sustained reflective negotiation. The findings therefore affirm that tolerance is not merely a cognitive disposition acquired through formal teaching, but a relational and experiential process rooted in embodied social encounters.

The negotiation between Islamic identity and democratic coexistence further revealed that multicultural engagement did not weaken participants' religious commitments. Instead, experiential learning encouraged more reflexive and ethically grounded interpretations of Islamic values within plural democratic contexts. Concepts such as *wasathiyah*, *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, and civic responsibility became increasingly meaningful when connected to concrete social interaction rather than confined to abstract theological discourse. The findings challenge binary assumptions positioning religiosity and multiculturalism as inherently contradictory categories, demonstrating instead that democratic coexistence can emerge through critical reinterpretation of religious ethics and social responsibility.

Equally important, the transformation experienced by participants extended beyond reflective awareness toward emerging forms of civic and social commitment. Participants articulated intentions to promote interfaith dialogue, resist discriminatory discourse, and cultivate inclusive engagement within their communities and digital environments. Such commitments indicate that experiential learning possesses broader significance as a process of civic formation capable of nurturing socially engaged and democratically oriented Muslim youth. In increasingly polarized societies marked by identity fragmentation and mediated prejudice, experiential multicultural education becomes strategically important not only for strengthening interpersonal tolerance, but also for sustaining inclusive democratic coexistence and social cohesion in plural societies.

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Author Contribution

Azmi Izuddin contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. Farhan Alif Ujilast contributed to data collection, field observation, participant coordination, and the organization of empirical findings. Panji Tegar Wikantama contributed to the literature review, methodological refinement, and interpretation of the phenomenological data. Syafiq Rahman bin Ismail contributed to critical review, theoretical enrichment, manuscript editing, and final validation of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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