

Youth as Frontline Peacebuilders: Integrating Intergroup Contact and Social Capital to Prevent Religious Conflict in Central Java

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Abstract

Religious conflicts in Central Java continue to manifest through social tensions, opposition to the establishment of places of worship, and identity-based disputes. Nevertheless, systematic studies that examine how youth organisations develop preventive peace-building strategies at the local level remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining youth-led initiatives through the combined lenses of Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design using multiple case studies in Temanggung, Purworejo, Kudus, Jepara, and Semarang, Central Java. Data were collected from interviews, observations of interfaith activities and documentation from civil society organizations. Thematic analysis was used to identify cross-case patterns of youth intervention. The findings indicate three key results. First, youth act as social mediators who facilitate intergroup dialogue and de-escalate tensions in cases involving blasphemy accusations, inter-organizational disputes, and contested burial practices. Second, youth initiatives such as Peace School, Peace Cottage, and interfaith youth forums strengthen bridging social capital and create structured intergroup contact that reduces prejudice. Third, youth networks contribute to policy shifts at the district level, including more inclusive procedures for worship-house permits. These findings demonstrate that youth are central actors in grassroots conflict prevention, not merely beneficiaries of state-led moderation programs. The study concludes that integrating intergroup contact and social capital provides a robust framework for understanding youth-based peacebuilding and recommends that local governments institutionalize youth participation in early warning and conflict-prevention mechanisms.

Keywords: Intergroup contact, social capital, peacebuilding, Indonesia, youth



Abstrak

Konflik keagamaan di Jawa Tengah terus muncul melalui ketegangan sosial, penolakan rumah ibadah, dan sengketa berbasis identitas. Namun demikian, kajian yang secara sistematis menganalisis bagaimana organisasi kepemudaan mengembangkan strategi pembangunan perdamaian yang bersifat preventif di tingkat lokal masih terbatas. Studi ini mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menelaah inisiatif pemuda melalui pendekatan gabungan Teori Kontak Antarkelompok dan Teori Modal Sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dengan studi multi-kasus di Temanggung, Purworejo, Kudus, Jepara, dan Semarang. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi kegiatan lintas iman, serta dokumentasi dari organisasi masyarakat sipil. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi pola intervensi pemuda lintas kasus. Temuan menunjukkan tiga hasil utama. Pertama, pemuda berperan sebagai mediator sosial yang memfasilitasi dialog antarkelompok dan meredakan ketegangan dalam kasus tuduhan penistaan agama, perselisihan antarorganisasi, dan praktik pemakaman yang diperdebatkan. Kedua, inisiatif seperti Sekolah Damai, Pondok Damai, dan forum pemuda lintas iman memperkuat modal sosial bridging dan menciptakan kontak antarkelompok yang terstruktur sehingga mengurangi prasangka. Ketiga, jejaring pemuda berkontribusi pada perubahan kebijakan di tingkat kabupaten, termasuk prosedur perizinan rumah ibadah yang lebih inklusif. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa pemuda merupakan aktor kunci dalam pencegahan konflik berbasis komunitas, bukan sekadar penerima manfaat program moderasi negara. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi kontak antar kelompok dan modal sosial merupakan kerangka yang kuat untuk memahami pembangunan perdamaian berbasis pemuda dan merekomendasikan agar pemerintah daerah menginstitusikan partisipasi pemuda dalam mekanisme deteksi dini dan pencegahan konflik.

Kata kunci: Kontak antar kelompok, modal sosial, Indonesia, pemuda, perdamaian.

INTRODUCTION

From a phenomenological perspective, religion is understood as a value system that binds humans to truth and contains fundamental teachings such as peace and tolerance (Saada, 2023). However, this idealism is often not reflected in reality, as religious conflicts from local to global levels continue to occur (Novebri et al., 2021; Suyadi et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that religion and culture can indeed be factors in conflict when understood narrowly or used to justify particular interests. The challenge lies in understanding the subtle interactions between cultural factors, religion, and socio-economic conditions. As Burton emphasizes, conflict is not inherent in human nature but arises from unequal social relations and unmet basic needs, including on issues related to religious values.

Religious conflict remains a challenge in various parts of the world, from sectarian tensions in the Middle East, ethno-religious discrimination in South Asia, to identity-based conflicts in Africa. In Indonesia, similar dynamics are evident in the rejection of houses of worship, the rise in hate speech, and friction between religious organizations (Adamovic & Molines, 2023). Central Java is a region frequently experiencing high-profile cases, such as the 2011 Temanggung riots, the conflict between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Islamic Defenders Front (MTA) in Purworejo, the rejection of a Muslim convert's burial in Kudus, and disputes over houses of worship in Jepara and Semarang. These cases demonstrate that religious harmony remains fragile and is heavily influenced by prejudice, information gaps, and local political dynamics.

In this context, the younger generation holds a strategic yet vulnerable position. They have the potential to become agents of dialogue, peace education, and conflict mediators, yet are simultaneously exposed to digital polarization, identity-based provocation, and mass mobilization on sensitive religious issues. Several youth organizations, such as eLSA, Pelita, Gusdurian, GEMA FKUB, Lab Kebinekaan, and Islam Santun, have developed various peace initiatives through interfaith dialogue, tolerance education, and monitoring potential conflicts. However, the effectiveness of these youth strategies has not been systematically studied, particularly at the district/city level, which have diverse social characteristics. (Alam & Miah, 2024).

Previous research has extensively discussed the role of religious moderation and state policy in resolving religious conflicts, as well as examining the impact of institutional policies on interreligious tensions (Kanas et al., 2016; Logie et al., 2023; Mckeown et al., 2025; Saada, 2023; Umara & Faqih, 2022). Several studies have also examined the role of youth in peacebuilding, particularly in the context of education and interreligious dialogue (Kusuma & Susilo, 2020). However, most of these studies are limited to post-conflict contexts and do not specifically examine the role of youth strategies in preventing religious conflict at the local level. Furthermore, most studies still focus on separate theoretical approaches, such as Intergroup Contact Theory or Social Capital Theory, without simultaneously integrating the two to analyze the dynamics of youth interactions in preventing conflict escalation (Anoraga, 2023; Fitrianita, 2025; Robertus et al., 2023). While numerous studies have addressed religious harmony and state-led conflict management, there has been no comprehensive, multi-site analysis examining how youth organizations operationalize preventive peacebuilding strategies at the local level in Central Java. This study fills this gap by developing a multi-site typology of youth-based conflict resolution strategies, focusing on conflict prevention rather than post-conflict. Furthermore, this study offers novelty by simultaneously integrating Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory, providing empirical evidence that positive and collaborative social interactions can strengthen religious conflict prevention at the community level.

To fill this gap, this study utilizes two key theories relevant to the dynamics of community-based peacebuilding. First, Intergroup Contact Theory states that positive, structured contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and strengthen cooperative relationships. In the context of religious conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, interfaith collaborative activities, and regular interactions among youth serve to create an atmosphere of equality that allows for the reduction of stereotypes and tensions. Second, Social Capital Theory emphasizes the importance of networks, norms, and trust in facilitating collective action (Novebri & Pratiwi, 2021). Strong social capital within youth networks improves coordination in crisis responses, facilitates cross-community

collaboration, and strengthens local reconciliation capacity. The combination of these two theories creates an analytical framework that explains how social interaction and community networks strengthen youth capacity in peacebuilding in Central Java (Darmayenti et al., 2021; Kasdi et al., 2020). Thus, intergroup contact can be understood as a trigger for the formation of bridging and linking social capital, which in turn explains the effectiveness of youth organizations' strategies in preventing conflict escalation.

Based on this framework, this study develops theoretical, empirical, and policy contributions. This study is novel because: first, it develops a typology of youth-based conflict resolution strategies across various local contexts in Central Java; second, it simultaneously tests Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory to analyze the effectiveness of interfaith activities carried out by youth networks such as eLSA, Pelita, Gusdurian, and GEMA FKUB a combination of approaches not previously studied; and third, it presents multi-site empirical evidence on community-based conflict prevention practices that demonstrate how youth build harmony through dialogue, peace education, and collaborative networks. This novelty reflects the simultaneous integration of local context, theoretical approaches, and empirical findings.

In line with this background, this study aims to: (1) identify and analyze the strategies used by youth organizations in Central Java in preventing and resolving religious conflict; (2) examine how intergroup contact and social capital influence the effectiveness of these strategies; and (3) explore contextual factors that enable or hinder the success of youth initiatives in preventing conflict escalation. This study is important for the Harmony agenda and strengthening harmony in Indonesia, because it shows that youth are not only objects of moderation programs, but key actors in building preventive peace mechanisms at the grassroots level. These findings are expected to enrich harmony studies and provide an empirical and conceptual basis for the formulation of community-based conflict prevention policies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design to investigate how youth organizations develop strategies to prevent and resolve religious conflict in Central Java. This design was selected because the research questions require an in-depth understanding of social processes, actor experiences, and contextual variations across different conflict settings. The multiple case study approach enables systematic comparison across regions and supports the identification of recurring patterns as well as context-specific dynamics that shape the effectiveness of youth-led peacebuilding initiatives, which aligns with the analytical strengths of case-based inquiry (Ridder, 2017).

The research was conducted from January to November 2024 in Temanggung, Purworejo, Kudus, Jepara, and Semarang. These sites were

purposively selected because each represents a distinct type of religious conflict, including riots, inter-organizational tensions, contested burial practices, and disputes over worship-house permits. The presence of active interfaith youth networks such as Gusdurian, eLSA, Pelita, GEMA FKUB, Lab Kebinekaan, and Islam Santun further strengthened the relevance of these locations for examining youth-based peacebuilding.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The target population consisted of young leaders aged 18 to 35 who had been actively involved for at least one year in interfaith dialogue or conflict prevention programs. Inclusion criteria required prior participation in harmony-related initiatives at the local level, while individuals without direct engagement in such activities were excluded. A total of 15 informants, representing diverse gender and religious backgrounds, were interviewed until data saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new themes in the thirteenth to fifteenth interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis. Interviews were conducted in two to three sessions per informant and explored youth strategies, interfaith contact experiences, and enabling or inhibiting factors. Observations were carried out during eight interfaith activities, capturing interaction patterns and relational dynamics. Documentation included program reports, training modules, meeting minutes, organizational social media posts, and local news archives from 2020 to 2024, selected based on their proximity to conflict events or youth activities (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021).

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis, which consists of six stages: familiarization, open coding, categorization, theme development, theme refinement, and final theme definition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis combined inductive coding derived from participant narratives with deductive interpretation guided by Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory. NVivo 12 Plus was used to organize data, manage coding, and construct comparative matrices across regions.

Research validity was strengthened through source and method triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and the maintenance of an audit trail documenting the research process. Ethical procedures included institutional approval, informed consent, anonymity, and secure data storage. Reflexive practices were applied throughout the study to minimize researcher bias, supported by reflective note-taking and regular analytical discussions with co-researchers. The study acknowledges limitations related to the predominance of youth-initiative actors in the sample, which may not fully capture more skeptical or conservative perspectives.

RESULTS

Typology of religious conflict in Central Java: Mediation strategies and dialogic people young

Each case studied demonstrates common patterns related to key actors, conflict points, youth roles, and the impact of their interventions. The table provides a comprehensive overview of how youth, through mediation and dialogue, can contribute to reducing intergroup tensions and creating peaceful solutions at the local level during 2024 (see table 1). Through the patterns observed in each case, we can gain a deeper understanding of the strategic role of youth in conflict prevention and community-based peacebuilding.

Table 1.
Patterns of Youth Intervention in Religious Conflict Resolution in Central Java up to 2024

Case	Main Actor	Conflict Point	The Role of Youth	Impact of Intervention
Temanggung	Mass, Antonius Richmond Bawengan (ARB)	Blasphemy charges and riots in court	Social mediator, dialogue facilitator, calming the crowd	Reduce the escalation of violence, slow down conflict, encourage peaceful resolution processes
Purworejo	Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Al-Quran Interpretation Council (MTA)	MTA's preaching mocks NU's religious practices	Inter-group mediator, organizing dialogue	Reducing tensions between groups, strengthening tolerance, and wiser preaching policies
Holy	Fredy Family, Muslim Community, Youth	Differences of opinion on the funeral of Fredy, the convert to Islam	Mediator, arranges meetings between parties	Peaceful resolution in funeral, strengthening interfaith relations
Jepara	GITJ Congregation, FSMD Muslim Group, Government	Rejection of GITJ church and building permit	Mediator, organizing meetings between groups	Obtaining building permits for churches, creating more inclusive policies

The case in Temanggung

The conflict in Temanggung stemmed from accusations of blasphemy against Antonius Richmond Bawengan (ARB), which sparked mass anger and violence around the courthouse. Youth from the Pelita and Gusdurian organizations played a key role in defusing tensions by organizing dialogue between the warring parties. They attempted to calm the crowd and facilitate communication to reach a peaceful resolution. Although the riots were not entirely prevented, the youth intervention successfully slowed the escalation of violence, reduced tensions, and encouraged a more constructive resolution process at the local level. These findings add important insights into the role of youth as mediators in religious conflicts and demonstrate an effective prevention mechanism, with youth acting as a communication channel that can reduce further violence.

Case in Purworejo

In Purworejo, a conflict arose between the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Quran Interpretation Council (MTA) over MTA's preaching, which was perceived as mocking NU's religious practices. Youth from Pelita and Gusdurian acted as mediators, organizing a dialogue between the two parties. They helped create a communication space that allowed each party to express their views openly and understand each other. As a result, tensions between the two groups eased, and MTA began delivering preaching with a more sensitive approach to local traditions and beliefs, strengthening tolerance in the area. These findings add to our understanding of how dialogue between youth can serve as an early warning mechanism to identify and defuse tensions before they escalate into violence.

Case in Kudus

The conflict in Kudus arose from differing views on the funeral of Fredy, a convert to Islam, whose family wanted to follow Catholic traditions, while the Muslim community wanted a burial according to Islamic teachings. Youth from Pelita acted as mediators, arranging a meeting between Fredy's family and religious leaders from both sides. The youth intervention successfully resolved the conflict, agreeing that the funeral would be conducted according to Islamic teachings, a practice accepted by all parties. This success strengthened interfaith relations and demonstrated the important role of youth in peacefully resolving religious conflicts. These findings contribute to the field of digital mediation, where online platforms are used to expedite communication between the parties involved, thus accelerating conflict resolution at the local level.

Case in Jepara

The conflict in Jepara stemmed from opposition to the Tanah Jawa Evangelical Church (GITJ) in Dermolo Village, which lacked a valid building permit. Youth from Gusdurian, Pelita, and other civil society organizations acted as mediators, organizing meetings between the church congregation, the Muslim group FSMD, and the local government. They successfully obtained a building permit for the church and introduced more inclusive policies regarding religious diversity. The positive impact of this youth intervention was the creation of more open policies regarding religious diversity and the avoidance of potential further tensions in the community. These findings provide insight into the role of youth in building social networks that connect diverse communities and demonstrate how digital mediation can accelerate dialogue between conflicting groups.

Table 2. Youth Peacebuilding Strategies and Results

Types of Strategy	Examples of Initiatives	Results	Data Sources	Theoretical Link
Dialogic Approach	Peace Cottage (Pelita), Interfaith Dialogue	Improving interfaith communication	Interview P1-P5, 2024	Intergroup Contact Theory
Educational Approach	Peace School (Wahid Foundation & ELSA)	Strengthening the peace curriculum in schools	Observation, documents	Social Capital (Bonding, Bridging)
Network-Based Collaboration	GEMA FKUB Youth Forum	Strengthening the interfaith youth coalition	Interview P2, 2024	Social Capital (Bridging)
Digital Monitoring	Anti-Hate Campaign	Reducing online religious provocation	Documentation, FKUB reports	Social Capital (Bridging)
Community empowerment	Diversity Lab (Wonosobo)	Improvement of local tolerance indicators	Interview P6, 2024	Social Capital (Bonding)

The table 2 shows that youth strategies in mediation and peacebuilding utilize approaches based on dialogue, education, and collaboration. Each initiative has more concrete results, such as increased tolerance and awareness of diversity, reflected in community testimonies and a decrease in incidents of rejection of places of worship. For example, the Peace School, implemented by the Wahid Foundation and ELSA, adopted a peace curriculum that was eventually expanded

to many schools in Central Java, as part of an effort to empower young people to maintain peace. The link with social capital (bonding and bridging) is also very clear, where youth not only strengthen bonds within their own groups but also bridge different groups to build greater cooperation at the community level (Gede Agung et al., 2024).

Based on the results, several identifiable outcomes indicate significant changes in interfaith relations and policies related to diversity. In Dermolo, Jepara, after intensive mediation by youth, a church finally obtained permission to resume worship services in 2020. This decision reflects a policy shift at the local government level, one that is more open to religious diversity and more inclusive and sensitive to the right to worship. This change also demonstrates the implementation of more transparent policies in the permitting process for houses of worship, aimed at avoiding similar tensions in the future.

Furthermore, in various regions such as Temanggung and Semarang, despite initial tensions, youth intervention successfully de-escalated the violence. In the case of Semarang, despite opposition to church construction, permission to proceed was finally granted in 2020. The reduction in the frequency of similar incidents in the future can be attributed to increased public awareness of the importance of legal permitting processes and respect for the right to worship.

The frequency of interfaith dialogue has also increased significantly across the region, with youth actively facilitating open communication between conflicting groups. In Purworejo, for example, to address tensions between Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muslim Brotherhood Association (MTA), youth organized numerous meetings between the two groups. These dialogues significantly reduced tensions, and while differences of opinion persisted, providing a space for discussion reduced the potential for violence. Youth dialogues serve as a means of fostering mutual understanding and respect between different faiths.

Many residents experienced significant changes in interfaith relations after youth intervention. In the Kudus case, Fredy's family, a convert to Islam, finally accepted a burial according to Islamic teachings, which had previously been a source of tension. Testimonials from Fredy's family indicate that the youth's mediation made them more accepting of the burial process. Residents who had previously been reluctant to discuss religious differences finally began to realize the importance of tolerance and respect for differences. As one informant from Pelita expressed, "We succeeded in facilitating interfaith communication, and ultimately both parties were able to accept the existing solution" (P3, Pelita, 2024).

These results can be analyzed through Intergroup Contact Theory, which states that positive interactions between different groups can reduce tension and promote mutual understanding. In each case, the role of youth as mediators serves to bring previously separated groups together, creating space for better

communication, and reducing prejudice and hatred between groups. Youth, as "positive contacts," play a crucial role in creating attitudinal change among groups involved in conflict and fostering more harmonious relationships within the community.

DISCUSSION

Intergroup contact and youth-based peacebuilding in Central Java

The findings of this study show that youth in Central Java consistently act as mediators who create structured spaces for intergroup dialogue and de-escalation. This pattern reinforces the central proposition of Intergroup Contact Theory that cooperative and equal-status interactions reduce prejudice and foster more positive intergroup attitudes. The ability of youth to facilitate such interactions, even in tense and emotionally charged situations, demonstrates that contact does not need to be orchestrated by formal institutions to be effective. Instead, it can emerge organically through community actors who possess social legitimacy and relational proximity to conflicting groups. This observation aligns with Jannah et al. (2023), who argue that structured contact can diminish intergroup anxiety and strengthen social cohesion, particularly when facilitated by trusted local actors.

Furthermore, the youth-led mediation documented in this study supports Kardana et al. (2022), who emphasize that equal-status encounters are essential for reducing tensions. Youth actors in Central Java were able to create these conditions despite lacking formal authority, relying instead on their credibility within community networks. This finding complements Coffey and Kanai (2023), who highlight the transformative potential of youth-led engagement in plural societies, especially when young people serve as cultural brokers capable of bridging identity divides. Rather than contradicting previous studies, the present findings extend them by showing how intergroup contact is operationalized not only through face-to-face dialogue but also through digital monitoring, rapid-response communication, and online rumor control. These digital forms of contact broaden the scope of the theory by demonstrating that meaningful intergroup engagement can occur across multiple modalities.

Beyond reducing prejudice, youth-facilitated contact in this study produced attitudinal and behavioral changes within schools and communities. These changes were not limited to the immediate resolution of conflict but also contributed to longer-term shifts in how communities perceive religious difference. This resonates with Peng et al. (2024), who found that sustainable pluralism in Indonesia depends on empowering local actors to mediate tensions

through civic engagement. The present study strengthens this argument by demonstrating that youth networks can institutionalize repeated cooperative contact, which in turn builds empathy, reduces interfaith anxiety, and fosters a culture of dialogue. In this sense, the findings reinforce the theoretical claim that intergroup contact is most effective when embedded in ongoing community practices rather than isolated interventions.

Social capital and youth networks

The study also shows that youth organizations build social capital through bonding, bridging, and linking networks, each contributing to conflict prevention in distinct yet interconnected ways. Bonding capital strengthens internal cohesion and trust within youth groups, providing a stable foundation for collective action. This pattern is consistent with Jannah et al. (2023), who identify bonding capital as essential for maintaining solidarity and shared purpose. The bridging capital observed in cross-organizational collaboration among youth groups aligns with Jelisejevs (2021), who argues that intergroup networks expand opportunities for cooperation across identity boundaries. In the Central Java context, bridging capital enabled youth organizations from different religious backgrounds to coordinate responses, share resources, and jointly facilitate interfaith activities.

Meanwhile, the linking capital that connects youth actors to government institutions mirrors Johansson et al. (2023), who emphasize that sustainable peace requires vertical relationships that enable communities to influence policy. The present findings support this view by showing how youth networks were able to communicate field-level insights to local authorities, advocate for more inclusive policies, and ensure that community concerns were addressed in administrative decisions. This demonstrates that linking capital is not merely a channel for upward communication but also a mechanism for legitimizing youth-led peacebuilding efforts.

These results also highlight the challenges faced by youth organizations, including limited funding, inconsistent government coordination, and generational gaps between youth and community elders. While Johansson et al. (2023) argue that community-driven peacebuilding is more sustainable than top-down approaches, the present study nuances this claim by showing that community initiatives still require institutional support to maintain long-term impact. Thus, the findings complement existing literature by demonstrating that youth social capital can be highly effective, but its sustainability depends on

stronger integration with provincial policy frameworks and more consistent support from formal institutions.

Extending Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory

The findings contribute theoretically by demonstrating that youth actors, rather than formal institutions, can generate Allport's optimal conditions for intergroup contact, including equality, shared goals, cooperation, and normative support. This extends the work of Allport as interpreted by Jannah et al. (2023) and Kardana et al. (2022), who focus primarily on institutional or school-based contact. The present study shows that informal youth networks can independently create these conditions, even in contexts where state institutions are absent or ineffective. This suggests that the theory may need to account more explicitly for the role of non-institutional actors in facilitating meaningful intergroup engagement.

Furthermore, the emergence of digital contact as a mechanism for early conflict detection expands the scope of Intergroup Contact Theory, which traditionally emphasizes face-to-face interaction. The use of digital platforms for monitoring hate speech, countering misinformation, and coordinating rapid responses illustrates how contact can occur in hybrid forms that combine online and offline engagement. This observation enriches the literature by demonstrating that digital contact can complement physical interaction, particularly in contexts where face-to-face dialogue is difficult or risky.

Similarly, the findings extend Social Capital Theory by illustrating how bonding, bridging, and linking capital interact dynamically within youth networks. While Putnam's framework, as applied by Jannah et al. (2023), often treats these forms of capital separately, the present study shows that their synergy is essential for effective peacebuilding. This supports Cayreyre et al. (2024), who argue that social capital can function as a protective mechanism against conflict escalation. The concept of relational resilience emerging from this study integrates interpersonal and structural dimensions, offering a more holistic understanding of how communities maintain peace through repeated cross-identity interactions and trust-based collaboration.

The findings underscore the need for stronger integration between government programs, school curricula, and youth-led initiatives. While Nazir-Ali (2023) and Cheng (2024) argue that peacebuilding is more sustainable when driven by communities, the present study shows that youth initiatives benefit significantly from institutional recognition and resource support. This aligns with

Saada (2023), who highlights the importance of empowering local actors to mediate religious tensions through dialogue and education. The study therefore complements existing literature by demonstrating how youth networks can operationalize these principles at the grassroots level, but also reveals the structural constraints that limit their long-term sustainability.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that youth in Central Java play a decisive role in preventing and resolving religious conflict by facilitating dialogue, mediating tensions, and utilizing digital tools for early detection. Their initiatives strengthen intergroup contact and build trust-based networks that reduce prejudice and prevent escalation. These findings directly answer the research questions by showing that youth-led strategies, grounded in structured contact and collaborative social capital, form an effective and contextually adaptive model of preventive peacebuilding.

Methodologically, the study is limited by its focus on five districts in Central Java and its reliance on youth networks that may not fully represent more conservative or skeptical actors. The cross-case design also restricts the ability to assess long-term outcomes. Future studies should therefore expand to additional provinces or Southeast Asian contexts, incorporate longitudinal designs to evaluate the durability of youth interventions, and explore how digital mediation evolves as online polarization intensifies. Comparative research between regions with strong institutional support and those with weaker governance structures would also deepen understanding of the conditions that enable youth-led peacebuilding to flourish.

Overall, this research contributes to the field by demonstrating how intergroup contact and social capital operate synergistically through youth networks to produce relational resilience in plural societies. It offers a grounded model of grassroots peacebuilding that positions youth not as passive beneficiaries but as central architects of social harmony. These insights enrich theoretical debates on community-based peacebuilding and provide a replicable framework for scholars and policymakers seeking to institutionalize youth participation in sustaining interreligious peace.

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