

Intergroup Beliefs, Emotional Responses and Social Experiences as Exploration of Religious Social Distance Among Young Adults: A Mixed-Methods Study in India.

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ABSTRACT:

India is a society of religious diversity, but the extent and structure of social distance across religious groups is uneven, especially among young adults. The present cross sectional sequential mixed methods study examined interreligious social distance among individuals aged 18 to 30 years ($M = 24.3$, $SD = 2.2$). A total of 60 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with an equal representation across four religious groups: Hindu (Group 1), Muslim (Group 2), Christian (Group 3), and Buddhist (Group 4). Quantitative data were gathered using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925) and analysed using the Kruskal Wallis H test. Qualitative data were collected through semi structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework. The results showed statistically significant differences in social distance between all four groups, thus indicating that interreligious attitudes are not randomly distributed but are systematically structured. Patterns of acceptance varied between communities, with some groups positioned at greater relational distance. Thematic analysis identified three inter-related processes shaping these attitudes. Participants first regulated proximity by differentiating between functional interactions and intimate relationships, allowing openness in professional contexts but restricting personal inclusion such as marriage. Second, cognitive and emotional drivers, such as perceived threat, media influenced associations, and inherited belief systems, played a central role in structuring out group evaluations. Third, lived social experiences, especially early exposure to diversity and the quality of intergroup contact, either attenuated or reinforced distancing tendencies. These findings indicate that interreligious social distance among young adults is a layered construct influenced by cognitive, emotional,

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT: Copyright: © 2026 Authors. Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).	and experiential factors, not just overt prejudice. By combining quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, the study offers a more grounded account of how intergroup boundaries are maintained and negotiated in a contemporary plural society. Keywords: Emerging adults; intergroup contact; mixed-methods research; religious diversity; social distance..
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Introduction

India is one of the few societies in the world where religious diversity is not an exception but the structural condition of everyday life. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains live side by side on the streets, in the markets, schools and neighbourhoods across a country that is constitutionally secular but historically soaked in communal tensions.

For the generation that grew up in the post-liberalisation 1990s and the social media boom of the 2010s, this complexity is not background noise. It is the medium by which they form identities and relationships and moral boundaries. Hence, the ways in which young adults in India comprehend, feel about, and decide to connect with members of other religious communities is only an academic question. It touches on civic culture, democratic participation and the long-term fabric of social cohesion. The concept of social distance as originally proposed by Bogardus (1925) is deceptively simple. It refers to the degree of closeness or acceptance that an individual is willing to extend to members of an out-group, operationalised as a graduated willingness to accept those members into more and more intimate social roles – from the broad recognition of citizenship to the intimacy of friendship and marriage. The analytical power of the construct lies exactly in this graduated quality: it is not a binary switch between prejudice and tolerance, but a spectrum that reveals the organisation of social life across domains of functional cooperation and intimate belonging.

You might be perfectly comfortable working with a person of a different faith, but draw the

line at sharing a household or bringing that person into the family. The distinction between functional proximity and intimate proximity has been verified in the context of caste, class, disability and ethnicity in settings far beyond the American immigrant communities in which Bogardus originally developed the framework (Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005; Deshpande, 2010). Specifically in India, where caste and religion interact in ways that are not easily categorized, the scale has given researchers a structured vocabulary for social boundaries that otherwise might be impossible to measure systematically (Wark & Galliher, 2007).

Three theoretical frameworks inform our understanding of what drives these boundaries. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) holds that belonging to a group motivates individuals toward in-group favouritism and out-group derogation, not because they necessarily dislike the out-group, but because positive distinctiveness for their own group is psychologically rewarding. In the Indian context, where religious identity intersects with caste, language, region, and political affiliation, this dynamic produces distancing patterns that are often asymmetrical: majority and minority communities do not occupy equivalent structural positions, and the psychological distance that flows in each direction reflects those inequalities. Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) offers the most widely tested corrective: meaningful interaction between members of different groups, under conditions of equal status, shared goals, and institutional support, reduces prejudice and the social distance that accompanies it. Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of over 500 studies

confirmed this effect across group types and national contexts, and further showed that even contact that falls short of Allport's optimal conditions tends to reduce prejudice, if more modestly. Extended contact effects have also been established: simply knowing that someone in your own group has a close cross-group friendship is sufficient to reduce one's own social distance, even without direct contact (Wright et al., 1997). Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) adds a cognitive-emotional layer by identifying four proximal drivers of prejudice: realistic threats rooted in perceived competition over material resources, symbolic threats arising from perceived incompatibility of values and worldviews, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotyping. In the context of interreligious attitudes in India, symbolic threat is particularly salient: individuals who experience another faith tradition as ideologically alien tend to report elevated social distance even in the absence of any personal negative encounter (Verkuyten, 2007).

These three frameworks do not operate in isolation from one another; together they constitute a multi-level architecture for understanding interreligious distance. Social Identity Theory supplies the motivational logic: the need for positive in-group distinctiveness creates a structural incentive for out-group derogation that is prior to, and partly independent of, any specific encounter. Integrated Threat Theory then specifies the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which this motivation takes shape, through threat perceptions, anxiety, and stereotyping, and shows how those mechanisms are amplified by particular informational environments. Contact Theory identifies the primary situational condition under which these processes can be interrupted or reversed, while also clarifying why contact so frequently fails: when it occurs without equal status, shared purpose, or institutional legitimacy, it may intensify rather than dissolve anxiety (Schmid, Ramiah, & Hewstone, 2014). Taken together, the three frameworks suggest that interreligious social distance is neither a simple expression of

cultural discomfort nor a straightforward product of negative experience, but a multilayered disposition shaped by identity needs, perceived threat, socialisation, and the quality of cross-group encounter. This integrated reading forms the theoretical rationale of the present study: any adequate investigation of social distance must attend simultaneously to the motivational, cognitive-emotional, and relational conditions that produce and sustain it.

These frameworks converge on an empirical picture that is both robust and complicated. Varshney's (2002) comparative study of Indian cities showed that dense interreligious civic engagement, including shared associational life, trade networks, and institutional participation, was a stronger predictor of communal peace than residential proximity alone. More recent survey-based research confirms that young Indians with religiously diverse social networks report lower intergroup hostility, consistent with contact theory predictions (Iyer, 2018). Varshney (2002) demonstrated that young adults raised in socially enclosed religious environments maintained higher social distance even after controlling for personal contact experience, suggesting that inherited group orientations carry some autonomy from individual encounter. Research also documents that distinguishing between a religious system and its individual adherents serves as a partial cognitive buffer against wholesale prejudice, a distinction that is not uniformly available when media narratives flatten entire communities into monolithic images (Hall et al., 2010).

More recent scholarship sharpens and complicates this picture in ways that are directly relevant to an Indian youth sample. Large-scale survey data from the Lokniti-CSDS Social and Political Barometer (2023) documented a significant increase in expressed willingness to exclude members of minority religious communities from various social roles, a pattern most pronounced among respondents who reported high social media use and low direct interreligious contact. Sharma and Sivakumar (2023), drawing on in-depth interviews with veteran journalists, documented how

algorithmically driven social media platforms in India are increasingly segmenting political and religious discourse along communal lines, intensifying symbolic threat perceptions and reducing the circulation of disconfirming information. The political mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist discourse since 2014, and its intensification following the 2019 general election, has transformed the climate of interreligious relations in ways that survey research conducted a decade earlier may not adequately capture (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2020). Conceptually, these findings point toward a shared insight: the mechanisms that sustain social distance among young adults in contemporary India are not reducible to personal negative experience or inherited cultural prejudice alone. They are also reproduced through digital information environments, political discourse, and the perceived social climate in which attitudes are formed. Social distance, in other words, is not only a product of what individuals have encountered directly; it is equally shaped by the symbolic and informational landscape surrounding them.

The picture becomes considerably more complicated when examined against conditions of political provocation and sustained media exposure. Dhattiwala and Biggs (2012) found that residential proximity between Hindu and Muslim communities was in some contexts associated with communal violence rather than protective against it, particularly when civic intergroup engagement was absent. Brass (2003) showed that professional agitators systematically exploit everyday coexistence to manufacture conflict, demonstrating the fragility of informal tolerance in the face of deliberate mobilisation. Among youth specifically, Palshikar (2015) cautioned against any assumption that younger generations are uniformly more pluralist, finding significant levels of majoritarian religious nationalism in this demographic. The evidence, in other words, resists any simple narrative of generational progress toward tolerance.

Against this backdrop, the present study is motivated by three convergent gaps in the

existing literature that together make the case for a new kind of inquiry. Methodologically, the dominant approach in Indian intergroup research remains the large-scale survey, which maps distributional patterns without illuminating the psychological mechanisms that produce them; qualitative accounts exist but tend to sacrifice systematicity for depth, and methodologically integrated designs that hold both demands in productive tension remain rare, particularly in the Indian context. Substantively, research disproportionately focuses on the Hindu-Muslim dyad, which, while understandable given the historical weight of that relationship, leaves the full multi-community landscape underexplored; attitudes toward and from Christian and Buddhist communities, shaped by quite different historical and cultural dynamics, have received far less attention than the complexity of India's religious landscape warrants. Temporally, the acceleration of political and digital change since 2019 means that much of the existing empirical literature predates the most significant transformations of the interreligious climate in which today's young adults have come of age. The present study responds to all three gaps. By employing the Bogardus Social Distance Scale across multiple religious out-groups simultaneously, it enables comparative analysis that single-dyad research cannot provide. By integrating reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative interview data with quantitative pattern-mapping, it investigates the affective, narrative, and relational dimensions of interreligious experience that survey instruments cannot adequately represent. And by situating its findings within the current political and media environment, it aims to produce an account of interreligious social distance among Indian youth that is simultaneously empirically grounded, psychologically rich, and contextually sensitive.

Three research questions organise the inquiry. First, do levels of social distance toward different religious communities differ significantly among young adults in India, and do these patterns vary by the respondent's own religious background? Second, what cognitive

and emotional processes, including threat perceptions, identity salience, media exposure, and family socialisation, mediate these attitudes? Third, what role does the nature and quality of interreligious contact play in either reinforcing or attenuating social distance? The broad aim is both empirical and theoretical: to map the distribution of interreligious social distance among Indian youth and to advance understanding of the specific mechanisms through which young people in a plural democracy come to feel more or less at ease with those who pray differently from themselves.

2. Method

2.1 Aim of the study

The study aimed to examine interreligious social distance among young adults from diverse religious backgrounds in India and to explore the cognitive, emotional, and experiential processes underlying these attitudes, with particular emphasis on the roles of socialisation and intergroup contact in shaping social boundaries.

2.2 Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

2.2.1 To measure levels of social distance toward Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist groups among young adults using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale.

2.2.2 To examine whether levels of social distance differ significantly across the four religious groups using the Kruskal–Wallis H test.

2.2.3 To explore how young adults interpret and regulate interreligious relationships across functional and intimate social contexts.

2.2.4 To identify cognitive and emotional factors including perceived threat, media exposure, and personal belief systems that shape intergroup attitudes.

2.2.5 To analyse the role of lived social experiences, particularly early socialisation and intergroup contact, in reinforcing or reducing

social distance.

2.2.6 To integrate quantitative patterns with qualitative themes in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how interreligious social distance is formed and maintained.

2.3 Hypotheses and Research Propositions

In keeping with the mixed-methods design of the study, the research framework includes one quantitative null hypothesis testable through inferential statistics and four qualitative research propositions that articulate the interpretive assumptions guiding the qualitative strand of inquiry.

2.3.1 Quantitative Hypothesis

H_{01} (Null Hypothesis): There will be no statistically significant differences in mean social distance scores toward Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist groups among young adults.

2.3.2 Research Propositions

Qualitative research does not seek to test falsifiable hypotheses but is instead oriented by theoretically informed propositions, working assumptions about the social world that guide purposive sampling, data collection, and thematic interpretation. The following four propositions frame the qualitative strand of this study:

● Proposition 1 — Contextual Differentiation of Social Distance

Young adults are expected to distinguish between functional and intimate forms of interreligious relationships, demonstrating differential levels of acceptance depending on the social context in question such as co-working, friendship, or marriage. This contextual variability in acceptance reflects the layered architecture of social distance as conceptualised in the Bogardus framework.

● □ Proposition 2 — Cognitive and Emotional Determinants of Intergroup Attitudes

It is assumed that cognitive and emotional

factors including perceived symbolic or realistic threat, exposure to religious outgroups through media, internalised stereotypes, and the prescriptive norms of personal belief systems will meaningfully shape the attitudes young adults hold toward members of other religious communities.

• **□ Proposition 3 — The Role of Lived Experience in Shaping or Reducing Social Distance**

It is assumed that lived social experiences, particularly the values transmitted through early family socialisation and the nature and quality of direct intergroup contact during formative years, will contribute either to the entrenchment or the attenuation of interreligious social distance among young adults.

• **□ Proposition 4 — Methodological Complementarity of Mixed-Methods Integration**

It is assumed that the integration of quantitative findings derived from Bogardus scale scores and Kruskal–Wallis testing with qualitative themes generated through in-depth interviews or focus groups will yield a richer, more contextually grounded understanding of interreligious social distance than either methodological approach could achieve independently.

2.4 Research design

The study adopted an explanatory and comparative study with cross-sectional sequential mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the first phase, quantitative data on interreligious social distance were collected using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale and analysed using the Kruskal Wallis H test to examine group differences across Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist participants. In the second phase, qualitative data were gathered through semi structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six phase framework. The qualitative phase was designed to elaborate and contextualise the quantitative findings, thereby facilitating methodological triangulation and

deeper interpretation.

2.5 Participants

The study included 60 young adults aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 24.31$, $SD = 2.224$). Participants were recruited through selective sampling to offer equitable representation among four religious groups: Hindu ($n = 15$), Muslim ($n = 15$), Christian ($n = 15$), and Buddhist ($n = 15$). The sample was gender-balanced, containing 30 male and 30 female participants. Participants were picked from many states in India, guaranteeing a level of regional variety within the sample. All participants indicated appropriate proficiency in English or Bengali to satisfy the measures and engage in interviews.

The sample largely consisted students and young adults. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was gained prior to data collection.

2.6 Tools

Informed Consent Form: Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with an informed consent form detailing the objectives of the study, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to maintain confidentiality. Consent was obtained from each participant before the commencement of data collection.

Sociodemographic Data Sheet: A self-report sociodemographic questionnaire was administered to gather background information on participants, including age, gender, religious affiliation, educational status, and state of residence. These data were used to describe the characteristics of the sample and to examine representation across groups.

Bogardus Social Distance Scale: Interreligious social distance was assessed using the Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1925). The scale measures the extent to which individuals are willing to accept members of other groups at varying levels of social closeness, ranging from casual social contact to more intimate forms of association such as marriage. Owing to its long-standing use in social science research, the

instrument is widely recognised for its utility in examining prejudice and intergroup acceptance and possesses satisfactory face and construct validity. Nevertheless, certain limitations have been noted, including reduced sensitivity to nuanced attitudinal variations, dependence on a cumulative Guttman-type structure, and limited capacity to capture ambivalent or non-hierarchical responses.

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule and Thematic Analysis: Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring participants' experiences and perceptions of interreligious interactions. The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions addressing views on religious diversity, experiences of intergroup contact, social relationships, media influences, and perceptions of social boundaries. The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in accordance with the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and the psychological processes underlying participants' accounts.

2.7 Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were computed to summarise group level trends. Quantitative data were analysed using non parametric statistical techniques appropriate for ordinal scale measurements. Given the ordinal nature of the data and the violation of parametric assumptions, the Kruskal–Wallis H test was selected as an appropriate non-parametric alternative to one-way ANOVA, employed to examine differences in social distance scores across the four religious groups (Hindu, Muslim,

Christian, and Buddhist).

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The procedure involved familiarisation with the interview transcripts, inductive generation of initial codes, systematic development and refinement of themes, and the final definition and naming of thematic categories. This analytic approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' experiences and perceptions, facilitating the identification of key psychological processes shaping interreligious attitudes and social distance.

2.8 Procedure

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling across different states in India. After initial contact, individuals were provided with an informed consent form detailing the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study. Upon consent, participants completed the sociodemographic data sheet followed by the Bogardus Social Distance Scale to assess interreligious attitudes.

Subsequently, semi structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and reasoning underlying their responses. Interviews were conducted in English or Bengali, audio recorded with permission, and later transcribed for analysis. Quantitative data were compiled for statistical analysis, while qualitative responses were systematically coded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and underlying psychological processes.

3. Results:

Table 3.1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Social Distance Scores Across Religious Groups

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD
Social distancing	Hindu	60	5.38	1.949
	Muslim	60	4.92	1.700

	Christian	60	5.67	1.653
	Buddhist	60	4.35	2.543

Table 3.1 presents the mean and standard deviation of social distance scores across the four religious groups. Among the groups, Christians reported the highest mean social distance ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.65$), followed by Hindus ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.95$). Muslims showed a comparatively lower mean score ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.70$), while Buddhists reported the lowest

mean social distance ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 2.54$). The standard deviation values indicate some variability within each group, with the Buddhist group showing the highest variability in responses. Overall, the table suggests that levels of social distance differ across religious groups, with noticeable variation in both central tendency and dispersion.

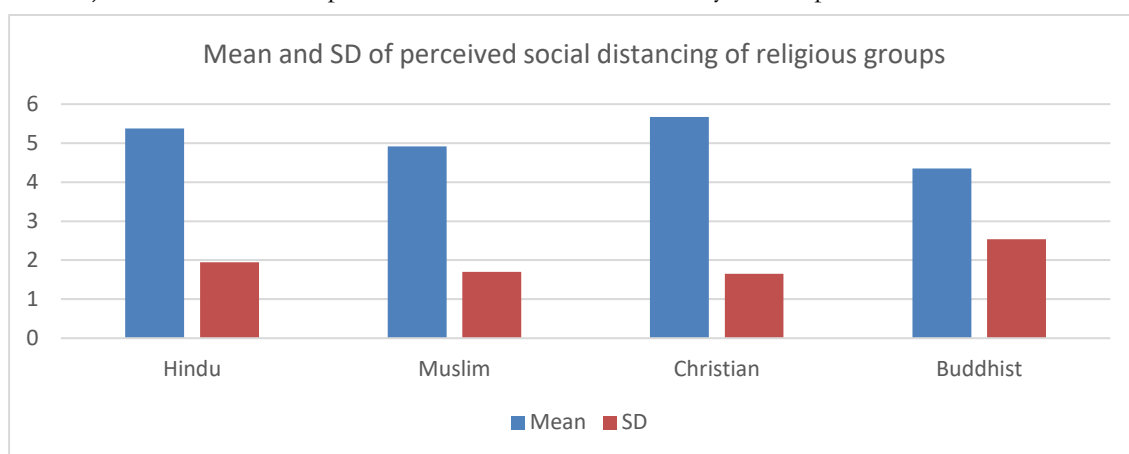


Fig. 3.1: Graphical representation of Mean and Standard Deviation of Social Distance Scores Across Religious Groups

Table 3.2: Mean Rank Distribution of Social Distance Scores Across Religious Groups (Kruskal-Wallis Test Analysis)

	Group	Mean Rank	dF	p- value (Asymp. Sig.)
Hindu	Hindu	48.50	3	0.00
	Muslim	14.37	3	0.00
	Christian	22.03	3	0.00
	Buddhist	37.10	3	0.00
Muslim	Hindu	18.97	3	0.00
	Muslim	52.50	3	0.00
	Christian	30.17	3	0.00
	Buddhist	20.37	3	0.00
Christian	Hindu	34.80	3	0.00
	Muslim	9.00	3	0.00
	Christian	46.00	3	0.00
	Buddhist	32.20	3	0.00
Buddhist	Hindu	39.60	3	0.00
	Muslim	11.03	3	0.00

	Christian	23.40	3	0.00
	Buddhist	47.97	3	0.00

Table 3.2 presents the mean rank distribution of social distance scores across religious groups based on the Kruskal–Wallis analysis. Hindu participants assigned the highest mean rank to Hindus (48.50), followed by Buddhists (37.10), Christians (22.03), and Muslims (14.37). Muslim participants similarly ranked Muslims highest (52.50), followed by Christians (30.17), Buddhists (20.37), and Hindus (18.97). Christians gave the

highest rank to Christians (46.00), while Buddhists ranked Buddhists highest (47.97).

Overall, participants consistently assigned the highest rankings to members of their own religious group, indicating a pattern of in-group preference. The Muslim group generally received lower mean ranks from members of other religious groups, suggesting comparatively greater social distance.

Table 3.3: Summarise Code and theme Table for Thematic Analysis

Code	Definition	Example (Participant)	Quote	Theme
Relational Boundary Regulation	Managing levels of closeness or distance with members of different religious groups depending on context	"I prefer to get to know them on a professional level."		Relational Boundary Regulation
Endogamy Enforcement	Preference for marriage within the same religion to maintain cultural compatibility	"I can't marry somebody who is not of my religion."		Relational Boundary Regulation
Selective Pluralism	Acceptance of multiple religious groups while maintaining distance from specific groups	"I don't have any problem with Hinduism, Christianity or Buddhism, but I feel uncomfortable with Islam."		Relational Boundary Regulation
In-group Homophily	Preference for interacting primarily with members of one's own religious or cultural group	"Mostly us Hindu people hanging out together... we prefer it this way."		Relational Boundary Regulation
Social Distancing	Maintaining emotional or relational distance from a particular group	"I wouldn't want to marry into a Muslim family."		Relational Boundary Regulation
Media-Induced Perception	Attitudes toward religious groups shaped by news or social media narratives	"When the same religion's name keeps coming again and again in the news, it stays in your head."		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Terrorism–Faith Linkage	Associating a religion with global violence or conflict due to media exposure	"Every time there is some attack... it's always linked to Islamic groups."		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Confirmation Bias (Media)	Tendency to interpret media information in ways that	"What I read and hear in the news makes me think the		Cognitive & Emotional

Code	Definition	Example (Participant)	Quote	Theme
	reinforce existing beliefs	same thing again.”		Drivers
Authority-Based Knowledge	Reliance on parents, elders, or religious leaders as primary sources of religious understanding	“I only trust what my elders and scholars say.”		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Information Isolation	Limited exposure to alternative viewpoints about religion or other communities	“My mother says we should not think too much about other religions.”		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Ideological Evaluation	Judging a religion based on perceived ideological compatibility with modern values	“I feel their religion doesn’t fit with modern values.”		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Gender-Based Moral Evaluation	Evaluating a religion based on perceived gender roles and treatment of women.	“When I see how women are treated... it clashes with modern values.”		Cognitive & Emotional Drivers
Early Exposure to Diversity	Growing up in diverse social environments that normalize intergroup contact	“Most of my friends are Hindus because I grew up in a Hindu school.”		Social Experience & Contact
Cross-Religious Participation	Engaging in religious or cultural activities of other groups	“They invite me to their temple and they also come to my church.”		Social Experience & Contact
Intergroup Curiosity	Interest in learning about practices and beliefs of other religions	“I want to know more about their religious practices.”		Social Experience & Contact
Positive Intergroup Experience	Personal experiences that foster comfort with members of other religions	“My neighbors are very kind and good people.”		Social Experience & Contact
Humanistic Commonality	Belief that people share similar concerns regardless of religion	“People’s concerns and vulnerabilities are strikingly similar.”		Social Experience & Contact
Identity Neutrality	Minimizing the importance of religious identity in social relationships	“Religion has not been a marker... I have friends from many religions.”		Social Experience & Contact

This table presents the coding framework derived from the thematic analysis, linking codes with definitions, example quotes, and broader themes. The findings are organised into three main themes. Relational Boundary Regulation reflects how participants manage closeness with different religious groups, often allowing functional

interactions but restricting intimate relationships such as marriage, indicating context dependent social distance. Cognitive and Emotional Drivers capture internal processes shaping attitudes, including media influence, perceived threat, confirmation bias, and reliance on authority, along with evaluations based on ideology and gender

norms. Social Experience and Contact highlights the role of lived experience, where early exposure to diversity, cross religious interactions, and positive contact reduce distance, while humanistic perspectives and identity neutrality promote

inclusive attitudes. Overall, the table shows that social distance is shaped by a combination of behavioural regulation, cognitive processes, and social experience.

Table 3.4: Thematic Structure of Social Distance: Themes, Sub-themes, and Representative Codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Codes
Theme 1: Relational Boundary Regulation (Social Distance)	Functional vs. Intimate Proximity	Professional interaction comfort, workplace neutrality, casual intergroup interaction, intimacy hesitation, relational filtering
	Endogamy as Conflict Avoidance	Marriage boundary, religious endogamy, value-clash avoidance, family expectation, cultural compatibility
	Selective Pluralism	Differential group acceptance, selective tolerance, ideological distance, compatibility-based acceptance
Theme 2: Cognitive and Emotional Drivers of Social Distance	Media-Influenced Perceptions	Media-induced fear, availability heuristic, confirmation bias, terrorism association, news-driven stereotypes
	Authority-Based Knowledge & Information Isolation	Reliance on family authority, religious elder influence, epistemic dependency, information siloing, distrust of external information
	Ideological Evaluation of Religious Systems	Doctrine-based appraisal, ideology vs individual distinction, perceived rigidity of belief systems, moral evaluation of doctrines
Theme 3: Social Experience and Intergroup Contact	Early Exposure to Diversity	Diverse schooling, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, cross-religious friendships, early normalization of difference
	Experiential Reinforcement of Attitudes	Positive intergroup interaction, stigma experiences, intergroup comfort, contact-based attitude formation

The analysis identified three main themes. Relational Boundary Regulation shows that participants allow functional interactions but restrict intimate relationships, often using endogamy to avoid value conflicts and practicing selective acceptance of groups.

Cognitive and Emotional Drivers highlight the influence of media, perceived threat, and

reliance on authority, along with ideological evaluations of religions that shape attitudes.

Social Experience and Intergroup Contact indicates that early exposure to diversity and direct interactions reduce social distance, while negative or limited experiences reinforce it. Overall, social distance emerges from the interaction of behavioural boundaries, cognitive

perceptions, and lived experiences.

4. Discussion:

That each religious organization in this study accorded the highest mean rank to its own community is not, in itself, remarkable. What the rank distribution makes obvious, however, is the underlying reasoning underneath that preference, and it is more lopsided than a simple in-group bias account would predict. Hindu participants rated Muslims lowest out of all groups (mean rank = 14.37), Muslim participants returned a comparably low ranking for Hindus (18.97), and Buddhist and Christian participants also positioned Muslims toward the floor of their respective rank orders (11.03 and 9.00 respectively). It is important to note at the outset that these patterns are drawn from a purposively recruited sample of 60 young adults and are not intended to support generalisations about broader Indian society; they represent analytically informative configurations that warrant careful interpretation within the scope of this study. The prominence of the Muslim group as a target across rank orders is a pattern that must be read with particular caution: it may reflect the specific composition and recruitment context of this sample as much as any broader social reality, and it should not be taken to imply that such asymmetry is uniform or inevitable across Indian youth populations. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) gives a starting explanation: group membership appears related with impulses toward positive distinctiveness for one's own community, which may involve some degree of unequal evaluation of out-groups. But positive uniqueness alone does not fully account for why one particular out-group occurs at the floor of rank orders across practically every group in this sample. The qualitative data offer interpretive traction here. Participants did not define Muslims as simply foreign or culturally different; they tended to generate a unique emotional register involving perceived threat, ideological incompatibility, and relationship risk. The selectivity of that reaction reveals something more than routine categorisation: within this sample, the out-group in question appears to have been formed, through

participants' reported media exposure and socialisation experiences, as categorically more frightening than others. The quantitative imbalance in the rank data may therefore indicate a pattern of attitudinal orientation that Social Identity Theory anticipated in form but cannot completely account for in content.

The process most closely related with the poor ranking accorded to the Muslim group is best understood through Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), notably the contrast between realistic and symbolic dangers. Realistic threats, such as perceived competition for resources, jobs, or political representation, emerged in the data but were not the dominant register. What recurred considerably more often was symbolic threat: the idea that Islamic practice is conceptually incompatible with certain principles, notably those addressing gender. Participants across groups mentioned the treatment of women, triple talaq, and the veil as moral rather than cultural indicators. This tendency is interesting because it shows that social distance in this population may be based mostly around perceived ideological incompatibility rather than actual unpleasant personal experience. Most participants who felt the greatest distance from Muslims reported, in their own accounts, limited or no meaningful personal contact with Muslim individuals. Their evaluations appear to have drawn significantly on material from media representations, which tend to make scary imagery disproportionately cognitively available (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Sharma and Sivakumar (2023), drawing on interviews with veteran Indian journalists, documented how social media platforms in India are increasingly associated with the segmentation of political and religious discourse along communal lines, which participants attributed to algorithmic curation that prioritises engagement over accuracy. Large-scale survey data from the Lokniti-CSDS Social and Political Barometer (2023) similarly found that high social media use was associated with greater expressed willingness to exclude minority community members from various social roles, a pattern that was most pronounced among

respondents reporting low direct interreligious contact. Consistent with these general tendencies, participants in this survey described news exposure as establishing a perceived relationship between Islam and violence, while also noting that this association did not reflect their own limited personal contacts. That tension between knowledge and feeling is congruent with what scholars have defined as affect-laden attitude development, considered to be resistant to purposeful revision (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) precisely because it acts below the threshold of reflective thinking.

Beneath the group-level variations in the quantitative data is a more fine-grained behavioural logic that the theme analysis brought into relief. Social distance among these participants is not uniform across social contexts but rather adjusted to relational domain. The same individuals who felt comfort working with colleagues of various faiths drew distinct and frequently harsh boundaries around marriage, shared home life, and profound emotional connection. This pattern, accepting functional proximity while prohibiting intimate contact, maps onto the graded structure that Bogardus (1925) originally constructed into the scale, but the qualitative data clarify the reasons behind it. Participants did not often describe endogamy as prejudice; they framed it as pragmatism, using language like value compatibility, conflict avoidance, and the practical management of shared existence. One person put it plainly: I can't marry somebody who is not of my religion, or else anything is acceptable. This style of construction, vast tolerance at the outside edges paired with strong limitation at the intimate heart, is what the theme analysis characterizes as selective pluralism. It permits individuals to preserve a self-image of openness while preserving the most crucial intergroup border, that around kinship and family formation. The consequences for social distance studies are not trivial. A measure that captures only surface-level willingness to interact may systematically underestimate the depth of boundary maintenance operating at the level of intimate life, while overestimating the probability that

functional contact translates into genuine intergroup acceptance (Dixon et al., 2005). Jaffrelot and Tillin (2020) have noted that the intensification of identity politics in contemporary India appears associated with a sharpening of precisely these intimate boundaries, even among individuals who express functional openness in professional and civic contexts, suggesting that identity-protective motivations and surface-level tolerance can coexist without contradiction.

The findings most immediately relevant to Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) come from the third theme, and they challenge the theory's more hopeful reading in ways that are theoretically informative. Participants who described early and sustained exposure to religiously diverse social environments, including mixed schools, multi-ethnic localities, and cross-religious friendships formed during childhood, consistently reported lower intergroup anxiety, higher comfort across religious lines, and a more differentiated understanding of out-group members. This tendency is consistent with Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analytic result that contact, especially under non-optimal conditions, is often related with decreasing prejudice over time. The current results, however, also reveal the limits of that association. Several participants with clearly favorable personal interactions with Muslim persons yet indicated distance from Islam as a system, frequently through a unique discursive move: divorcing the individual from the religion. Variants of the phrasing I have no problem with the individuals; it is the ideology I trouble with recurred across several interviews. This person-versus-system distinction appears to serve as a partial cognitive barrier (Hall et al., 2010), one that facilitates a form of symbolic exclusion that coexists with surface-level warmth. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) noted that the prejudice-reducing effects of contact are substantially weakened when early socialisation has instilled strong in-group enclosure, and a broadly similar pattern is apparent here: positive contact appears associated with reduced interpersonal anxiety without necessarily engaging the

evaluative structures through which the out-group's belief system is appraised. Varshney (2002) suggested that it is the quality and institutional depth of intergroup participation, not simply residential proximity or casual acquaintance, that is most closely connected with genuine communal harmony. These findings are essentially consistent with that view: contact that remains at the level of neighbourly pleasantness or professional politeness appears to keep the underlying architecture of perceived symbolic threat and ideological judgment substantially intact.

A finding that has received comparatively little attention in Indian intergroup research but emerges with some consistency from the rank data concerns the positioning of Christian and Buddhist communities, both as objects of social distance and as groups whose members express particular rank-ordering patterns of their own. Among the four communities, Christians and Buddhists occupied an intermediate place in other groups' rank orders, ranked above Muslims but generally behind Hindus in the ratings of Hindu and Muslim participants. This intermediary posture is analytically noteworthy in its own right and requires more than cursory acknowledgment. The qualitative findings reveal two broad interpretative lines. First, participants from the Hindu majority tended to associate Christianity with a perceived proximity to Western values and, relatedly, with concerns about conversion, a theme that maps onto symbolic threat in Stephan and Stephan's (2000) framework but is distinct in character from the threat attributed to Islam. Allusions to missionary activities, the perceived foreignness of Christian practice, and fears about the erosion of Hindu cultural dominance surfaced throughout multiple interviewees, albeit with less emotional intensity than allusions to Islam. This conversion-related anxiety has a documented historical dimension in India: the politics of religious conversion has been a site of legislative and social contestation for several decades, and its traces appear to persist in the attitudinal orientations of young adults even in the absence of any personal conversion-related

experience (Jaffrelet & Tillin, 2020). Second, participants from Buddhist and Christian backgrounds contributed a dimension that the majority-focused literature rarely centres: the experience of being on the receiving end of social distance. Several of these participants recalled navigating institutional and social situations in which minority religious identification was either invisible or a source of shame, and their own rank-ordering of out-groups appeared at least partly related with a sense of structural vulnerability. Yengde (2019) and Teltumbde (2017) have each argued, from different analytical positions, that social distance in India is not uniformly structured around the Hindu-Muslim axis, and that the minority experience itself is differentiated in ways that conventional survey designs tend to obscure; Dalit Buddhist communities in particular occupy a structurally distinct position that combines religious minority status with caste-based marginalisation, and this layered subordination appears associated with heightened in-group boundary maintenance rather than openness toward other minority groups. The Lokniti-CSDS Social and Political Barometer (2023) indicated that displays of exclusionary attitudes were not confined to majority group members, with minority respondents also indicating enhanced social distance under conditions of felt group-based danger. The present data are broadly consistent with this pattern, though the small number of participants in each minority group limits the weight that can be placed on these observations, and dedicated research with larger minority community samples is needed to examine these dynamics with appropriate rigour.

A related finding that warrants emphasis is the consistency of in-group preference across all four religious communities, including Buddhist and Christian participants, who are traditionally positioned in the literature as minority groups less likely to demonstrate substantial out-group derogation. Both groups placed co-religionists at the top of their rank orders, replicating the trend observed among Hindu and Muslim participants. Social Identity Theory's typical theory tends to stress majority group dynamics

and does not straightforwardly explain why minority societies would recreate this configuration. A more adequate interpretation may draw on the minoritisation experience itself: for communities that have historically occupied structurally subordinate positions, in-group cohesion and boundary maintenance may serve not simply as a source of positive self-esteem but as a functional resource for navigating a social environment in which their status is perceived as precarious. The qualitative data from participants in these groups includes allusions to majoritarian pressure and an understanding that prevailing religious discourse impacts public culture in ways that may marginalise minority practice. Identity salience, in other words, arises not as a fixed quality of religious belonging but as a response to perceived structural position. For minority communities in India's current political atmosphere, that salience looks to be intensifying rather than relaxing (Palshikar, 2015; Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2020). This discovery extends the Social Identity Theory paradigm in a direction pertinent to pluralistic democracies: the relational logic of in-group preference cannot be effectively understood without accounting for the structural inequalities within which group members function.

One of the key methodological commitments of this work is the argument that the quantitative and qualitative threads of inquiry are not only parallel but actually complementary: that each strand illuminates characteristics of the phenomena that the other cannot fully capture alone. It is worth making that integration apparent rather than leaving it implicit in the flow of the conversation. The Kruskal-Wallis H test confirmed statistically significant variations in social distance scores between religious groups, showing that the patterns found in the rank data are unlikely to reflect sampling variance alone. But the test, by nature, can only indicate that disparities exist; it cannot account for why the particular configuration observed, with Muslims ranked lowest across nearly all groups, takes the shape it does rather than any alternative. The qualitative data provide the

interpretive framework that gives the quantitative pattern its meaning: they suggest that the differential rank ordering is associated with a particular kind of perceived threat that is primarily symbolic and ideological in character, that it appears linked to media exposure and family socialisation rather than direct negative experience, and that it coexists with a broader orientation of functional tolerance that the rank scores alone would not disclose. Conversely, the qualitative interviews on their own could not have demonstrated that the patterns participants identified were systematically dispersed throughout groups rather than idiosyncratic to particular individuals or dyads. The rank data offer the structural scaffold within which the qualitative reports acquire collective analytical relevance. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) suggest that the integrative value of mixed-methods designs comes precisely in this capacity: each strand answers a question the other is not able to address. Morgan (2014) has similarly emphasized that in explanatory sequential designs, the qualitative strand is most effective not when it merely exhibits the quantitative findings but when it interrogates their fundamental logic. The present analysis attempts this more rigorous form of integration. The quantitative strand identified what patterns exist; the qualitative strand investigated the psychological and social processes with which those patterns appear associated, including perceived symbolic threat, selective pluralism, the person-versus-system distinction in contact experience, and the role of mediated information environments. Together, the two strands make a more full and more significant contribution than either could achieve separately.

Several restrictions qualify what can be concluded from these data and demand frank consideration. The sample of 60 individuals, albeit balanced across groups and genders, was obtained using purposive sampling, which implies generalisability cannot be assumed and all group-level observations should be viewed as exploratory rather than representative. A further constraint is that the comparatively small

number of participants within each minority religious community limits the analytical weight that can be placed on findings specific to Christian and Buddhist respondents; these observations are offered as interpretively suggestive rather than conclusive, and dedicated studies with larger minority samples would be needed to examine them with appropriate rigour. The study captures a cross-section of attitudes at a certain moment rather than tracking how those opinions develop over time or in reaction to specific occurrences. More crucially, the handling of media exposure as a contributing factor focuses on participant self-report and interpretive inference rather than independent assessment. Participants attributed attitudinal effects to their media environments, and those accounts are consistent with what research on the availability heuristic would predict, but the study did not independently assess media consumption habits, verify the content participants were actually exposed to, or control for the direction of any association between media use and attitudinal orientation. The attribution of attitudinal tendencies to media is consequently interpretative and associative rather than proved. A similar worry is social desirability bias in the interview data: participants were speaking in an academic situation, and this may have produced more moderate or introspective statements than they would deliver in other circumstances. The fact that some interviews contained candid displays of prejudice implies that this pressure was not universal, but it cannot be ruled out as a systematic influence across the sample. Finally, the qualitative salience of the Muslim group as a primary target of expressed social distance risks shaping the analysis in ways that may underrepresent variation in attitudes toward Christian and Buddhist communities, which received comparatively less textured discussion in many interviews. Future study would benefit from longitudinal designs, direct and independent measurement of media exposure, targeted oversampling of minority religious communities, and recruiting procedures that allow for greater geographic and socioeconomic variety within each group. Practically, the

findings show that contact-based therapies alone may be ineffective if symbolic threat perceptions and family-transmitted evaluative frameworks remain largely intact following positive interpersonal encounter. Programmes aimed at reducing interreligious distance may need to work at the level of narrative and informational environment, targeting the media ecosystems in which young adults form their ideas, alongside rather than instead of direct intergroup involvement.

5. Conclusion:

Interreligious social distance among young adults in India is not random nor just a residue of conventional prejudice. It is actively constructed through overlapping processes: the cognitive availability of threat-laden media narratives, socialisation within epistemically enclosed family environments, and the psychological labour of maintaining a pluralist self-image while drawing firm boundaries around intimate life. The Kruskal-Wallis results verified that these sentiments are systematically structured across religious groups, and the thematic analysis revealed why. Contact helps, but it works unevenly, and it rarely penetrates the ideological layer where the most durable distancing acts. What this study eventually illustrates is that social distance in a plural democracy like India is less about hostility in any raw sense and more about the quiet, rationalised management of who belongs where. Understanding that distinction is the first step toward addressing it.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings carry direct implications for peace education and community psychology practice. Interventions that rely solely on bringing young people into contact with religious others will remain limited if the broader information environment continues to supply threat-saturated narratives that override personal experience. Programmes need to work simultaneously at two levels: fostering meaningful, institutionally supported intergroup contact of the kind Allport (1954) specified, and building critical media literacy so that young

adults can recognise and interrogate the availability heuristics shaping their judgments. Schools, given their documented role in early-onset normalisation of diversity, are a particularly important site. Policy aimed at social cohesion should treat the algorithmic architecture of social media as a structural variable, not a background condition.

The findings have important implications for peace education, community psychology, and social cohesion initiatives. Given participants' frequent references to media influences, symbolic threat, and intergroup experiences, interventions designed to reduce social distance may need to extend beyond simple opportunities for contact. Consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), programmes that facilitate meaningful, sustained, and institutionally supported intergroup engagement may help reduce anxiety and foster greater understanding across religious groups. However, the present findings also suggest that contact alone may be insufficient when broader social and media narratives reinforce perceptions of difference or threat. Accordingly, interventions may benefit from incorporating critical media literacy components that encourage young adults to reflect on and evaluate the information sources shaping their

intergroup attitudes. Educational institutions, particularly schools and universities, represent important contexts for fostering both positive intergroup contact and critical engagement with diverse perspectives. More broadly, efforts to promote social cohesion may benefit from greater attention to the role of contemporary digital information environments in influencing perceptions of religious difference and social belonging.

LIMITATIONS

The study's purposive sample of 60 participants, while balanced across groups and genders, limits generalisability beyond the specific population sampled. The cross-sectional methodology measures sentiments at a particular point in time and cannot account for how they shift in response to political events or personal transformation. Media influence is portrayed as a causal process on the basis of participant self-report rather than independent measurement of exposure or content. Social desirability pressures in the interview environment, however varied among participants, may have moderated how some individuals communicated their views. Future research should involve longitudinal tracking, direct media consumption metrics, and broader geographic and socioeconomic sample within each faith community.

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