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Religious Diversity and Interfaith Relations in Abuja: Contact, Trust, Tolerance and Social Integration

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Abstract

Nigeria's capital, Abuja, brings Christians, Muslims and adherents of traditional religions into daily contact, yet little systematic evidence exists on how this diversity translates into social integration. This study examines how interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance shape social integration in Abuja. It uses a convergent mixed-methods design that combines a survey of 400 residents in six districts, analysed by multiple regression, with 25 in-depth interviews with religious leaders and community members, analysed thematically. Contact (β = 0.26), trust (β = 0.32) and tolerance (β = 0.18) all significantly predict social integration and together explain 42 per cent of its variance, with trust the strongest predictor. Mean tolerance exceeds mean trust, indicating that residents accept religious others more readily than they trust them. The interviews show that markets, friendships, joint community projects and religious leaders sustain cooperation, while politicians' use of religion during elections creates tension. The findings extend contact and social capital theory to an African capital city and support institutionalised interfaith dialogue, trust-building in shared spaces and stronger enforcement against divisive religious campaigning.

Keywords: *Interfaith relations; Social integration; Interreligious trust; Religious tolerance; Abuja*

1. Introduction

Religious diversity is a defining feature of contemporary Nigeria. It shapes everyday social relations, political competition and the integration of migrants into cities. Afrobarometer data show both the promise and the limits of this diversity: 83 per cent of Nigerians say they would like, or would not mind, having a neighbour of a different religion, yet only 51 per cent say they trust people of other faiths "somewhat" or "a lot". Religious leaders, meanwhile, are trusted by 60 per cent of

citizens, far more than the president or the National Assembly.[1] Nigerians thus appear more willing to *tolerate* religious others than to *trust* them, and religious authorities remain central to social life. Both patterns matter for understanding how religious diversity becomes either a basis for cohesion or a source of conflict.

Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), is a particularly instructive setting for examining these dynamics. The decision in 1976 to move the capital from Lagos to a new, centrally located city was itself a political project of national unity.[2] Today Abuja concentrates a wide range of ethnic, regional and religious identities within a relatively small urban area. As the seat of federal government and a destination for internal migration, the city brings Christians, Muslims and adherents of African traditional religions into frequent contact in markets, neighbourhoods, workplaces and civic institutions. The National Mosque and the National Christian Centre, which face each other across the city's central district, symbolise this coexistence. Yet these encounters create both opportunities for cooperation and points of friction.

Scholarship on Christian–Muslim relations in Nigeria has long focused on violence, particularly in Kaduna, Jos and other cities of the north and Middle Belt.[3] More recent work shows that peaceful coexistence and local collaboration are widespread but understudied,[4] and that some communities have actively prevented violence even amid communal war.[5] Religion can also serve both to consolidate democracy and peace and to polarise politics, depending on how leaders and institutions use it.[6] What remains less clear is *which* features of everyday interfaith relations (contact, trust or tolerance) contribute most to social integration, and how these features interact with the political use of religion.

This study addresses these questions in Abuja. It asks: (1) How do interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance relate to social integration among Abuja residents? (2) Which of these factors is the strongest predictor of integration? (3) Through what everyday practices and institutions is coexistence sustained or undermined? To answer these questions, the study uses a convergent mixed-methods design. A structured survey of 400 residents in six districts measures contact, trust, tolerance and integration, and multiple regression estimates their relationships. Twenty-five in-depth interviews with imams, pastors, traditional leaders, women and youth representatives explain the mechanisms behind the statistical patterns. The analysis draws on the intergroup contact hypothesis, social capital theory and theories of toleration.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides survey-based evidence on interfaith relations in Nigeria's capital, a city that has received far less attention than the conflict-affected north or the syncretic religious culture of Lagos. Theoretically, it separates tolerance from

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1 Raphael Mbaegbu, *Nigerians View Religious Leaders as More Trustworthy, Less Corrupt than Public Institutions*, Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 900 (Accra: Afrobarometer, 14 November 2024), https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad900-nigerians-view-religious-leaders-as-more-trustworthy-less-corrupt-than-public-institutions/.

2 Jonathan Moore, "The Political History of Nigeria's New Capital," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 22, no. 1 (1984): 167–175, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00056846.

3 Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, eds., *Creed & Grievance: Muslim–Christian Relations & Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2018).

4 Emmanuel Chiwetalu Ossai, "The Social Dynamics of Peaceful Christian–Muslim Relations in Nigeria," *Religion Compass* 18, no. 9 (2024): e70001, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.70001.

5 Jana Krause, *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

6 Victoria Jatau and Kangdim Dingji Maza, "Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?," *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 1305, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101305.

trust and shows that trust, not tolerance alone, is the stronger foundation of integration. Practically, it identifies everyday spaces and actors that policymakers can strengthen to consolidate coexistence. The remainder of the paper reviews the literature and develops hypotheses (Section 2), describes the methodology (Section 3), presents quantitative and qualitative results (Section 4), discusses their implications (Section 5) and concludes (Section 6).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Religious Diversity and Coexistence in Nigeria

Nigeria's religious landscape is not monolithic. Christianity, Islam and African traditional religions coexist in varied regional and local configurations, so that both conflict and accommodation can be observed within short distances. Research on northern Nigeria shows that religious tensions are bound up with disputes over legal pluralism, land, political representation and economic competition, and that peacebuilding has succeeded where both top-down and bottom-up initiatives engage local actors.[7] Ossai's review of the literature documents numerous "zones of peace" in which Christians and Muslims cooperate through shared institutions, kinship ties and everyday exchange.[8] Krause's comparative study of Jos shows that civilian agency, in the form of local leaders' and residents' deliberate efforts to manage threats and prevent mobilisation, explains why some communities remained non-violent while others did not.[9] These studies caution against reading national-level violence or rhetoric as a full explanation of everyday interfaith relations.

2.2 Everyday Coexistence in Plural Cities

A second strand of scholarship examines the everyday practices that sustain coexistence in plural cities. Janson's ethnography of Chrislam in Lagos shows how syncretic practices, informal networks and shared economic spaces create durable forms of mutual accommodation, even where elite rhetoric stresses division.[10] Comparative research on Hindu–Muslim relations in India finds that cities with dense intercommunal civic networks, both formal associations and everyday engagement such as joint business and neighbourhood activities, are far less prone to communal violence than cities where such networks are absent.[11] In northern Nigeria, Meagher shows that informal economic ties between Muslim and Christian traders can create complementarity and mutual interest, but that competition over markets can also harden religious boundaries.[12] Economic interdependence is therefore a potential, but not automatic, source of interfaith cooperation.

2.3 Intergroup Contact

The intergroup contact hypothesis holds that contact between members of different groups reduces prejudice when it occurs under conditions of equal status, common goals, intergroup

[7] Mustapha and Ehrhardt, *Creed & Grievance*.
[8] Ossai, "Social Dynamics of Peaceful Christian–Muslim Relations."
[9] Krause, *Resilient Communities*.
[10] Marloes Janson, "Unity through Diversity: A Case Study of Chrislam in Lagos," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 86, no. 4 (2016): 646–672, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972016000607.
[11] Ashutosh Varshney, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society: India and Beyond," *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001): 362–398, https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2001.0012.
[12] Kate Meagher, "Complementarity, Competition and Conflict: Informal Enterprise and Religious Conflict in Northern Nigeria," in Mustapha and Ehrhardt, *Creed & Grievance*.

cooperation and support from authorities.[13] A meta-analysis of more than 500 studies confirms that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice, and that its effects generalise beyond the individuals involved.[14] Nigerian evidence adds nuance. In a field experiment in Kaduna, Scacco and Warren found that sustained contact between Christian and Muslim young men in a vocational training programme reduced discriminatory behaviour but did not significantly change self-reported prejudice.[15] Contact may therefore improve practical cooperation even where attitudes change slowly, which makes it important to distinguish behavioural integration from attitudinal measures.

2.4 Trust, Social Capital and Tolerance

Social capital theory distinguishes *bonding* social capital, which links people within the same group, from *bridging* social capital, which connects people across social divides.[16] Interreligious trust is a core form of bridging social capital: it allows people to cooperate, trade and solve collective problems with members of other faiths. Diversity can, however, depress trust in the short run, as people "hunker down" and withdraw from social life.[17] Research on ethnic diversity in Africa similarly finds that diversity can undermine public goods provision when trust and shared norms across groups are weak.[18] Cross-national evidence shows that religious belief is associated with prosocial preferences such as trust and reciprocity, especially where formal institutions are weak, suggesting that religious networks can either reinforce or substitute for state institutions in sustaining cooperation.[19]

Tolerance is conceptually distinct from trust. In political theory, toleration means accepting or "putting up with" beliefs and practices that one may disapprove of, without seeking to suppress them.[20] Tolerance is thus a relatively thin, permissive attitude, whereas trust involves a positive expectation that others will act fairly and reciprocally.[21] The Afrobarometer gap between Nigerians' willingness to accept neighbours of other faiths and their lower trust in members of other religions suggests that the two should be measured separately.[22]

2.5 The Political Instrumentalisation of Religion

A recurrent theme in the literature is the politicisation of religion. Comparative research shows that electoral competition can give politicians incentives to provoke or tolerate communal tension when polarising identity mobilises their supporters.[23] In Nigeria, political actors have invoked religious frames in electoral campaigns, resource struggles and debates over sharia, and these appeals feed

[13] Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954), 281.

[14] Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–783, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751.

[15] Alexandra Scacco and Shana S. Warren, "Can Social Contact Reduce Prejudice and Discrimination? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Nigeria," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 654–677, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000151.

[16] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22–23.

[17] Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 137–174, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x.

[18] James Habyarimana et al., "Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 709–725, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055407070499; Alberto Alesina and Eliana La Ferrara, "Ethnic Diversity and Economic Performance," *Journal of Economic Literature* 43, no. 3 (2005): 762–800, https://doi.org/10.1257/002205105774431243.

[19] Felipe Valencia Caicedo, Thomas Dohmen, and Andreas Pondorfer, "Religion and Cooperation across the Globe," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 215 (2023): 479–489, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.09.025.

[20] Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[21] Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[22] Mbaegbu, *Nigerians View Religious Leaders*.

[23] Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

perceptions of group discrimination.[24] Jatau and Maza argue that the same religious institutions that can promote inclusion and rights-based governance can also become vehicles for divisive politics.[25] Everyday interfaith relations must therefore be understood in relation to perceptions of fairness and to the behaviour of political elites and state institutions.

2.6 Research Gap, Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The literature reveals three gaps. First, most research focuses on conflict-prone northern cities or on Lagos; few systematic studies examine Abuja, despite its distinctive status as a planned federal capital. Second, few studies distinguish empirically between tolerance and trust, or compare their contributions to integration. Third, few combine survey measures with qualitative evidence on the mechanisms through which coexistence is sustained.

Drawing on the theories reviewed above, this study proposes the framework shown in Figure 1. Interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance are expected to promote social integration, defined as residents' participation in shared social, economic and civic life across religious lines and their sense of belonging to a common community. The contact hypothesis predicts that more frequent and cooperative contact will increase integration; social capital theory predicts that bridging trust will facilitate cooperation; and theories of toleration predict that acceptance of religious difference will reduce barriers to participation. Because these factors are mutually reinforcing, they are also expected to have a strong joint effect. The political instrumentalisation of religion is treated as a contextual factor that may weaken these relationships and is explored through the qualitative data. The study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Interfaith contact has a positive and significant effect on social integration.

H2: Interreligious trust has a positive and significant effect on social integration.

H3: Religious tolerance has a positive and significant effect on social integration.

H4: Interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance jointly have a significant effect on social integration.

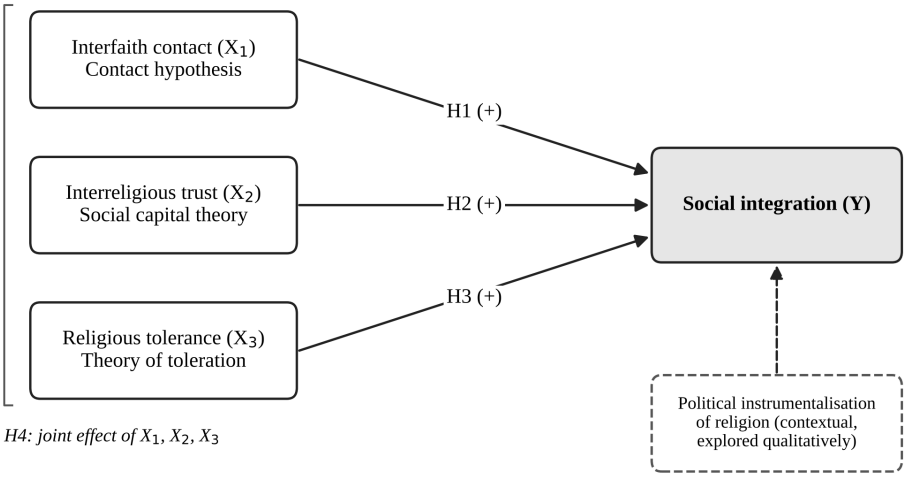

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Source: Author's construction.

[24] Mustapha and Ehrhardt, *Creed & Grievance*.
[25] Jatau and Maza, "Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria."

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel, analysed separately and integrated at the interpretation stage.[26] This design is appropriate because coexistence, tolerance and integration are complex phenomena that a single method cannot adequately capture. The quantitative strand measures the strength of relationships among key variables across a large sample, while the qualitative strand captures the contextual meanings, experiences and mechanisms underlying those relationships. Integrating the two strands strengthens the validity of the findings and allows statistical associations to be interpreted in light of residents' own accounts.[27]

3.2 Study Area, Population and Sampling

The study population comprised adult residents of Abuja. Six districts were purposively selected to reflect the city's ethnic, socio-economic and religious heterogeneity: Garki and Wuse (central administrative and commercial districts), Gwarinpa (a large planned residential estate), Kubwa and Nyanya (high-density satellite towns within the FCT), and Karu (a fast-growing settlement on Abuja's eastern edge). Within each district, respondents were selected by stratified random sampling by religious affiliation, to ensure adequate representation of Christians, Muslims and adherents of traditional religions, with attention to diversity in gender, age and occupation. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula:[28]

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} \qquad (1)$$

where n is the required sample size, N is the population size and e is the margin of error (0.05). For a population as large as Abuja's, the formula yields approximately 400. Questionnaires were allocated to districts in proportion to their estimated populations, and 400 valid responses were included in the analysis. The biographic characteristics of the 400 respondents included in the study of religious diversity and interfaith relations in Abuja. Regarding religious affiliation, Christians constitute the largest group, with 220 respondents (55.0%), followed by Muslims, with 164 respondents (41.0%), and adherents of traditional religions, with 16 respondents (4.0%). The gender distribution comprises 220 males (55.0%) and 180 females (45.0%), indicating a relatively balanced representation of both genders. In terms of age, respondents aged 30–39 years form the largest category, accounting for 128 individuals (32.0%), followed by those aged 18–29 years, with 112 (28.0%). Respondents aged 40–49 years represent 88 (22.0%), while those aged 50 years and above account for 72 (18.0%). Regarding educational attainment, 176 respondents (44.0%) hold a bachelor's degree or equivalent, 120 (30.0%) possess a master's degree, 64 (16.0%) have secondary education or below, and 40 (10.0%) hold doctoral qualifications.

[26] John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018).

[27] Michael D. Fetters, Leslie A. Curry, and John W. Creswell, "Achieving Integration in Mixed Methods Designs—Principles and Practices," *Health Services Research* 48, no. 6, pt. 2 (2013): 2134–2156, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12117.

[28] Taro Yamane, *Statistics: An Introductory Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

3.3 Survey Instrument and Measures

The structured questionnaire measured four constructs on five-point Likert-type scales (1 = very low or strongly disagree; 5 = very high or strongly agree). *Interfaith contact* (X_1) captured the frequency and quality of interaction with members of other religions in neighbourhoods, markets, workplaces and social events. *Interreligious trust* (X_2) captured confidence that members of other religions would act fairly, honestly and reciprocally. *Religious tolerance* (X_3) captured acceptance of other religions' beliefs, practices and public expression. *Social integration* (Y) captured participation in shared social, economic and civic activities across religious lines and a sense of belonging to a common community. The survey instrument measured four constructs: interfaith contact, interreligious trust, religious tolerance, and social integration. Each construct was assessed using five items. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.76, 0.86, 0.80, and 0.71, respectively, indicating acceptable to good reliability. The instrument was pre-tested with a small group of respondents in Garki, and question wording and structure were refined in light of their feedback.

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitivity of religious identity in Nigeria, questionnaires were anonymous, interviewees were pseudonymised, and data were stored securely.

3.4 Qualitative Component

Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected religious leaders and community members across the six districts, including imams, pastors, traditional religious leaders, women leaders and youth representatives. The semi-structured interview guide covered everyday interfaith interactions, experiences of religious tension, mechanisms of conflict resolution and strategies for promoting peaceful coexistence. Interviews were conducted in English and Hausa, recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim, with Hausa interviews translated into English. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and reporting.[29] Coding was conducted manually and in NVivo Version 14, and a second coder independently coded a subset of transcripts to check consistency using the Cohen's kappa.[30] Cohen's kappa coefficients of 0.74, 0.83, 0.78, and 0.69 indicate moderate to substantial agreement between the two coders beyond chance. Specifically, the coefficients of 0.74, 0.83, and 0.78 demonstrate substantial agreement, while 0.69 indicates moderate agreement. These findings suggest that the coding framework was generally applied consistently across the transcripts, supporting the reliability of the qualitative analysis. Participants are identified only by role, religion and district.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS version 28 using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression.[31] The regression model is:

[29] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

[30] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2021): 328–352, https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238.

[31] Andy Field, *Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics*, 5th ed. (London: SAGE, 2018).

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \beta_3 X_{3i} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where Y_i is social integration for respondent i; X_1, X_2 and X_3 are interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance; β_0 is the intercept; β_1 to β_3 are coefficients; and ε_i is the error term. H1–H3 were tested with the t-statistics of the individual coefficients and H4 with the overall F-test. Regression assumptions were checked, including multicollinearity, normality and homoscedasticity of residuals. The multicollinearity test revealed that the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were 1.64 for interfaith contact, 1.82 for interreligious trust, and 1.47 for religious tolerance, with a mean VIF of 1.64. These values are below the commonly accepted threshold , indicating that multicollinearity is unlikely to pose a serious concern in estimating the effects of the independent variables on social integration.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the study variables. Mean scores for interfaith contact (3.42), religious tolerance (3.68) and social integration (3.54) are above the scale midpoint, indicating that respondents generally report positive intergroup experiences. Interreligious trust has the lowest mean (3.15). The gap between tolerance and trust mirrors the national Afrobarometer pattern:[32] Abuja residents appear more willing to accept religious others than to trust them. Coexistence is widespread, but bridging trust across religious lines remains comparatively fragile.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Interfaith contact (X_1)	3.42	0.87	1	5
Interreligious trust (X_2)	3.15	0.91	1	5
Religious tolerance (X_3)	3.68	0.74	1	5
Social integration (Y)	3.54	0.81	1	5

Note: N = 400; all variables measured on five-point scales. *Source:* Author's survey data.

4.2 Regression Results

Table 2 reports the multiple regression results. The model is statistically significant, $F(3, 396) = 94.67$, $p < 0.001$, and explains 42 per cent of the variance in social integration ($R^2 = 0.42$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.41$). All three predictors have positive and significant effects. Interreligious trust is the strongest predictor (B = 0.35, β = 0.32, $p < 0.001$), followed by interfaith contact (B = 0.28, β = 0.26, $p < 0.001$) and religious tolerance (B = 0.22, β = 0.18, $p = 0.015$). Holding the other variables constant, a one-point increase in interreligious trust is associated with a 0.35-point increase in social integration.

Table 2. Multiple regression predicting social integration

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Intercept	1.12	0.18	—	6.22	<0.001
Interfaith contact (X_1)	0.28	0.07	0.26	3.99	<0.001

[32] Mbaegbu, *Nigerians View Religious Leaders*.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Interreligious trust (X_2)	0.35	0.06	0.32	5.83	<0.001
Religious tolerance (X_3)	0.22	0.09	0.18	2.44	0.015

Note: Dependent variable: social integration. $R^2 = 0.42$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.41$; $F(3, 396) = 94.67$, $p < 0.001$; $N = 400$. B = unstandardised coefficient; β = standardised coefficient. *Source:* Author's estimation from survey data.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 summarises the hypothesis tests. All four hypotheses are supported. Interfaith contact (H1), interreligious trust (H2) and religious tolerance (H3) each have a positive and significant effect on social integration, and the three factors jointly explain a substantial share of its variance (H4).

Table 3. Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Path	Test statistic	p	Decision
H1	Interfaith contact → Social integration	β = 0.26; t = 3.99	<0.001	Supported
H2	Interreligious trust → Social integration	β = 0.32; t = 5.83	<0.001	Supported
H3	Religious tolerance → Social integration	β = 0.18; t = 2.44	0.015	Supported
H4	Joint effect of X_1, X_2 and X_3	$R^2 = 0.42$; $F = 94.67$	<0.001	Supported

Source: Author's estimation from survey data.

4.4 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified five themes, summarised in Table 4. They help explain the statistical relationships and reveal a threat to coexistence that the survey measures did not capture directly.

Table 4. Themes from in-depth interviews on interfaith relations in Abuja

Theme	Description	Illustrative quotation
Everyday interactions in markets	Markets serve as neutral spaces where members of different religions cooperate in trade and daily life.	"In the market, you cannot ask a customer's religion before selling; we all need each other." (Christian trader, Wuse)
Role of religious leaders	Leaders mediate disputes and promote dialogue to prevent conflicts from escalating.	"When youths from different groups clash, it is usually pastors and imams who calm the situation." (Muslim leader, Nyanya)
Interfaith friendships	Personal relationships across religious lines foster tolerance and reduce prejudice.	"My closest friend is Muslim, and we celebrate each other's festivals together." (Christian youth, Kubwa)
Shared community projects	Joint activities such as neighbourhood clean-ups and security committees strengthen integration.	"When we do things together, like keeping the streets safe, religion doesn't matter." (Muslim youth, Gwarinpa)
Political instrumentalisation of religion	Politicians exploit religion during elections, heightening tensions among residents.	"The real problem comes when politicians play the religion card; ordinary people don't quarrel like that." (Traditional leader, Karu)

Source: Author's interview data.

Markets as shared spaces. Interviewees consistently described markets as places where economic interdependence takes precedence over religious difference. Traders depend on customers, suppliers and neighbouring stallholders of all faiths, and repeated transactions build familiarity and practical trust. This theme helps explain the positive effect of interfaith contact in the regression model.

Religious leaders as mediators. Imams, pastors and traditional leaders were described as the first line of conflict management, particularly when disputes among young people risk taking on a religious character. Leaders' ability to calm tensions depends on their standing within their own communities and on relationships with leaders of other faiths. This theme is consistent with the national finding that religious leaders are among Nigeria's most trusted figures.[33]

Friendships and shared projects. Personal friendships, including participation in each other's festivals, and joint community activities such as neighbourhood security committees and sanitation exercises, were described as the means by which acquaintance becomes trust. Such activities create common goals and cooperative interdependence, the conditions under which the contact hypothesis predicts the strongest effects.

Political instrumentalisation. Interviewees across all three religious traditions distinguished sharply between ordinary residents, whom they described as generally peaceful, and politicians who "play the religion card" during elections. Several described election periods as times of heightened suspicion, rumour and caution in interfaith relations. This theme points to an external threat that can weaken the trust and cooperation built through everyday contact.

5. Discussion

5.1 Trust as the Foundation of Integration

The finding that interreligious trust is the strongest predictor of social integration supports social capital theory. Bridging trust allows residents to cooperate across religious lines, enter joint economic activities and take part in shared civic institutions. Trust also has economic value: cross-national evidence shows that societies with higher levels of generalised trust tend to have higher growth and investment, because trust lowers the cost of transactions and enforcement.[34] At the same time, trust is the weakest of the four variables in absolute terms. This combination, in which trust matters most but is least developed, identifies trust-building as the area where interventions are likely to yield the largest gains.

5.2 Contact in Everyday Spaces

The positive effect of interfaith contact supports the contact hypothesis, and the qualitative findings show where such contact occurs: in markets, workplaces, friendships and neighbourhood projects. These are precisely the kinds of everyday and associational networks that comparative research has linked to the prevention of communal violence.[35] The Abuja evidence also qualifies the Nigerian experimental findings of Scacco and Warren. Whereas a short-term programme changed

[33] Mbaegbu, *Nigerians View Religious Leaders*.
[34] Stephen Knack and Philip Keefer, "Does Social Capital Have an Economic Payoff? A Cross-Country Investigation," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112, no. 4 (1997): 1251–1288, https://doi.org/10.1162/003355300555475.
[35] Varshney, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil Society."

behaviour more than attitudes,[36] the sustained, voluntary contact of urban life appears to be associated with both behavioural integration and positive intergroup attitudes. Contact that occurs under conditions of common goals and interdependence, as in markets and community security committees, is likely to be particularly effective.

5.3 Tolerance Without Trust

Religious tolerance has the highest mean score but the weakest effect on integration. This pattern is consistent with the conceptual distinction between toleration and trust. Tolerance, understood as accepting the presence and practices of others, is a necessary condition for coexistence, but it does not by itself create the positive expectations of fairness and reciprocity that drive cooperation.[37] Abuja residents broadly accept religious diversity, but acceptance has not yet been fully converted into the bridging trust that sustains deeper integration. Programmes that promote tolerance through awareness campaigns alone are therefore likely to have limited effects unless they also create opportunities for cooperative interaction.

5.4 Political Instrumentalisation as a Threat to Coexistence

The qualitative evidence shows that the main perceived threat to interfaith relations in Abuja comes not from ordinary residents but from political elites who mobilise religious identity for electoral advantage. This finding is consistent with comparative research on the electoral incentives for communal polarisation[38] and with Nigerian research on the politicisation of religion.[39] It suggests a dual reality. Grassroots practices generate coexistence, while elite strategies periodically reintroduce fragility. Because election-related tension can close markets, disrupt livelihoods and damage property, the costs of religious polarisation fall heavily on the residents whose everyday cooperation sustains peace.

5.5 Policy and Practical Implications

The findings suggest four sets of interventions. First, because contact, trust and tolerance jointly predict integration, programmes should be multi-pronged rather than relying on a single approach. Urban planning and housing policy in the FCT can promote mixed residential estates, shared community centres and inclusive public spaces that increase opportunities for everyday interaction. Inclusive market and trade associations can strengthen the cooperative contact that markets already provide.

Second, trust-building should be a priority. Interfaith councils institutionalised within the FCT's area councils and community structures could provide platforms for dialogue, early warning and the mediation of disputes before they escalate. Such councils should include women, young people and adherents of traditional religions as well as senior Christian and Muslim clergy, so that they reflect the full diversity of Abuja's communities.

[36] Scacco and Warren, "Can Social Contact Reduce Prejudice."
[37] Walzer, *On Toleration*; Uslaner, *Moral Foundations of Trust*.
[38] Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*.
[39] Jatau and Maza, "Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria"; Mustapha and Ehrhardt, *Creed & Grievance*.

Third, tolerance-building should be linked to cooperation. Civic and interfaith education in schools can normalise religious diversity from an early age, but it is likely to be most effective when it includes joint activities that bring students of different faiths together around common goals.

Fourth, policy must address the political use of religion. Section 92 of the Electoral Act 2022 already prohibits campaign language likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings and bars the use of places of worship for political campaigns.[40] Stronger enforcement of these provisions by the Independent National Electoral Commission, together with monitoring by civil society, religious bodies and the media, would help protect the trust that residents have built.

5.6 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference; trust and integration may reinforce each other, and integrated residents may seek out more interfaith contact. Second, all variables were self-reported, which raises the possibility of social desirability bias on a sensitive subject such as religion, as well as common-method variance.[41] Third, the six districts were purposively selected, and the findings may not generalise to rural areas or to regions with more entrenched histories of religious conflict. Fourth, the survey did not measure perceptions of political instrumentalisation directly, so this factor could be examined only qualitatively. Future research should use longitudinal designs that track interfaith relations across election cycles, compare cities in different geopolitical zones, include behavioural measures of trust and cooperation, and examine the growing role of digital platforms in interfaith relations.

6. Conclusion

This study examined religious diversity and interfaith relations in Abuja through a mixed-methods design combining a survey of 400 residents with 25 in-depth interviews. The quantitative results show that interfaith contact, interreligious trust and religious tolerance all significantly predict social integration and together explain 42 per cent of its variance, with trust the strongest predictor. Tolerance is widespread but has the weakest effect, indicating that acceptance of religious others does not automatically produce integration. The qualitative findings show that markets, friendships, shared community projects and religious leaders sustain coexistence, while the political instrumentalisation of religion during elections threatens it.

These findings contribute to theory in three ways. They support the contact hypothesis in an African urban setting, showing that sustained everyday contact is associated with integration. They confirm the central role of bridging social capital, in the form of interreligious trust, in plural societies. And they demonstrate empirically that tolerance and trust are distinct, with trust the stronger foundation for integration.

The policy message is that coexistence in Abuja rests on strong grassroots foundations that remain vulnerable to elite manipulation. Strengthening shared spaces, institutionalising interfaith dialogue, linking tolerance education to cooperation and enforcing existing electoral rules against

[40] Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Electoral Act, 2022* (Abuja: Federal Government of Nigeria, 2022), sec. 92.

[41] Ivar Krumpal, "Determinants of Social Desirability Bias in Sensitive Surveys: A Literature Review," *Quality & Quantity* 47, no. 4 (2013): 2025–2047, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9640-9; Philip M. Podsakoff et al., "Common Method Biases in Behavioral Research: A Critical Review of the Literature and Recommended Remedies," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88, no. 5 (2003): 879–903, https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879.

divisive religious campaigning can help transform Abuja's religious diversity into a durable basis for peace, social cohesion and inclusive development.

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