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Negotiating the Religious Identity of Bahá'í Youth in Majority Education Settings in Medan

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the experiences of young Bahá'í individuals in accessing education and understanding the process of negotiating their religious identity in an academic environment dominated by majority religious groups in Asam Kumbang Village, Medan City. The research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to uncover the informants' lived experiences in pursuing education, interacting with the academic environment, and maintaining their religious identity. There are 10 informants selected through purposive sampling, consisting of six main informants and four supporting informants. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, then analyzed phenomenologically through epoche, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, theme formation, and synthesis of the essence of the experience. Research results show that being Bahá'í is not a direct barrier to accessing and attending education. The informants are able to participate in learning, interact with peers, and take part in academic activities relatively normally. The challenges they face mainly relate to adapting to a new environment, the limited understanding some people have about the Bahá'í faith, and the need to explain their religious identity in certain situations. The academic environment is seen relatively positively because there is space to learn and interact without overt rejection of one's religious identity. Identity negotiation happens in an adaptive and accommodating way through self-adjustment, communication, managing how open they are about their identity, and mutual respect, allowing the informants to maintain their religious identity while taking part in academic life. This study emphasizes that access to education for minority groups is not just about formal opportunities to learn, but also about having social spaces that allow them to maintain their religious identity equally. Therefore, developing inclusive education needs to consider both interpersonal acceptance and structural aspects, including policies, educational practices, and meeting the religious needs of minority groups.

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Introduction

Education is a basic right for every individual and plays an important role in enhancing knowledge, skills, as well as shaping the social identity and personality of young people. In a society with diverse religions, cultures, and social backgrounds, education should be an open space that provides equal opportunities for everyone. The academic environment is not just a place for learning, but also a space for social interaction that brings together individuals with various identities and backgrounds (Iskandar, Thalal, Sari, & Azhari, 2026).

Diversity in educational environments can be a strength in building attitudes of tolerance and appreciation for differences. However, when an academic setting is dominated by a particular religious or cultural group, minority groups may have different experiences in carrying out their education. These differences can be seen in interaction patterns, academic activities, friendships, and how individuals express their religious identity (Song, Ahmed, Borr, & Antonio, 2025). This situation makes education an important space to see how minority groups maintain their identity while also adapting to the majority environment.

This situation is relevant to the experiences of young Bahá'ís in Asam Kumbang Village, Medan City. As part of a religious minority group, young Bahá'ís go through their education in social and academic settings where the majority have different beliefs. This can shape certain experiences in interacting with peers, teachers, and the broader community at school. They may face the need to explain their religious identity, adapt to their environment, while also holding on to the values and beliefs that are part of who they are.

In that context, the concept of identity negotiation becomes important for understanding the experiences of young Bahá'ís. Identity negotiation is the process in which individuals adjust how they present and maintain their identity based on the social situations they face. This process doesn't always show up as conflict or discrimination; it can also happen through communication, adjusting behavior, choosing social circles, and being open about expressing their religious identity. In this way, young Bahá'ís can be seen as active participants in building and maintaining their identity within a dominant academic environment.

Access to education in this study is also understood not just as the opportunity to enter educational institutions, but also includes the chance to learn, interact, participate in academic activities, and receive equal treatment. An inclusive educational experience allows minority groups to exercise their right to education without having to give up their religious identity. Therefore, it's important to see how young Bahá'ís experience the educational process, the kinds of challenges they face, and the strategies they use to adapt to the academic environment without abandoning their religious identity.

Based on this explanation, the study "Identity Negotiation: The Experiences of Bahá'í Youth in Accessing Education in a Dominant Academic Environment in Asam Kumbang Village, Medan City" is important to carry out to understand the direct experiences of Bahá'í young people in their educational journey. This research is expected to illustrate the forms of identity negotiation, challenges, adaptation strategies, as well as experiences of acceptance they go through in the academic environment. Additionally, this study is

expected to contribute to the development of a more inclusive, tolerant, and respectful education that values religious identity diversity in society.

Research (Harshe, 2024) regarding the Bahá'í community in Banyuwangi shows that the Bahá'í group as a religious minority develops communal strategies to maintain its existence and identity within the majority society. However, the research focuses more on the community dynamics in general and has not examined the experiences of the younger generation in educational settings. Research (Aryee, 2025) also discusses the position of the Bahá'í as a minority group in Indonesia, especially regarding social acceptance and relations with the majority group. Meanwhile, the research (Marshall, Costanzo, Davis, Meier, & Samson, 2026) Regarding the survival strategy of the Bahá'í community in Klaten, it shows a social adaptation process to maintain religious identity. These three studies provide an important basis about the identity and strategies of the Bahá'í group, but they haven't specifically discussed the process of identity negotiation among the youth group.

This research gap becomes even more important when linked to the Baha'i youth in Medan City. As a minority religious group, they are in an educational space that is socially and demographically dominated by other religious groups. This situation allows for complex social experiences to emerge, such as explaining their beliefs to friends, dealing with questions about religion, determining how open they want to be about their identity, and adapting to social practices that develop in the educational environment. Research on religious minorities in Indonesia so far has mostly focused on issues of tolerance, religious freedom, discrimination, and majority-minority relations, whereas the subjective experiences of young Baha'is in managing their daily religious identity have not been studied in depth. In fact, identity negotiation can be an important mechanism for minority groups to maintain their beliefs while also building constructive social relationships with the majority group.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to explore how Bahá'í youth actively negotiate their religious identity in a majority educational environment, rather than just describing their position as a minority group. This negotiation is understood as a process that includes how individuals present their identity, reveal or limit information about their beliefs, respond to stereotypes and religious questions, make social adjustments, and build shared understanding with peers. This approach positions Bahá'í youth as actors with agency in shaping their religious experiences. This perspective aligns with the understanding that religious identity can be dynamic and negotiated depending on the social context in which individuals are. Thus, this research fills a gap by linking issues of religious identity, youth, minority groups, and educational experiences within a single analytical framework.

Contextually, this study also offers something new by focusing on Medan City as a plural social space, which can show how minority religious identities are negotiated in concrete educational life. This research is expected to provide an understanding that religious diversity is not only about issues of acceptance or rejection between groups, but also about individuals' ability to manage their identities and build social relationships amid differences. The findings can enrich studies in the sociology of religion, multicultural education, and identity research by showing the ways Bahá'í youth exercise agency to maintain their religious identity while adapting to a majority environment. Practically, the

results can serve as a basis for developing educational settings that are more inclusive, dialogical, and respectful of the freedom of religious identity for minority groups.

Method

The study titled “Identity Negotiation: The Experiences of Bahá’í Youth in Accessing Education in a Majority Academic Environment in Asam Kumbang Village, Medan City” uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the life experiences of Bahá’í youth in accessing and going through education in an academic environment dominated by majority religious groups. The phenomenological design allows the researcher to explore subjective experiences, perceptions, adaptation processes, and the meanings that informants assign to their experiences in maintaining and negotiating their religious identity. Hence, the research is not intended to produce statistical generalizations, but to find the meaning and essence of the experiences experienced by informants in specific social and educational contexts (Creswell, 2018).

The research was carried out in Asam Kumbang Village, Medan City, with 10 informants selected using purposive sampling. The informants included six main informants, who were young Bahá’ís currently pursuing formal education, and four supporting informants who had knowledge of and direct involvement in the educational, social, and Bahá’í community life. The six main informants consisted of three high school students and three university students, which made it possible for the study to compare identity negotiation experiences across the two educational levels. Two pre-determined informants, Eka Yuli Yana, 23 years old, a final semester college student, and Ayomi Irmnara Haifanada, 16 years old, an 11th-grade student, were part of the main informant group. Four other main informants were selected based on the same criteria to ensure a variety of experiences. Meanwhile, the four supporting informants consisted of parents or guardians, Bahá’í community leaders or officers, educators, and community figures who understand the social and educational conditions at the research site.

The selection of key informants was based on several criteria, namely: (1) being adherents of Bahá’í; (2) being part of the youth group; (3) currently pursuing formal education at the high school or college level; (4) having direct experience interacting with educational environments where the majority follow different religions; (5) having experience related to the disclosure, maintenance, adjustment, or negotiation of religious identity; (6) being able to express their experiences and interpretations in depth; and (7) being willing to participate voluntarily in the research. Meanwhile, supporting informants were chosen based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in social life, education, and the Bahá’í community. The number of informants was determined by considering the sufficiency of information and meaning saturation, which is the condition where the data collection process no longer yields new substantial meanings or themes relevant to the research focus (Sugiyono, 2022). Thus, the number of 10 informants is not meant as a statistical representation, but to gain depth of experience as well as sufficient variation of perspectives in phenomenological research.

Research data was collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation (Moleong, 2024). In-depth interviews were the main technique used to gather data about informants’ experiences in accessing education,

interacting with peers and educators, dealing with religious differences, expressing their Bahá'í identity, experiencing acceptance or obstacles, and making adjustments and negotiating their identity. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, giving informants the space to freely and deeply share their experiences. Non-participant observation is used to get an idea of the educational environment and social interaction patterns that can be directly observed. The observation is done without the researcher getting involved in the informants' activities and is focused on aspects of communication, social interaction, responses to differences, and environmental situations related to religious identity. Documentation is used as supplementary data in the form of field notes, photos of activities that have received permission, and other documents relevant to the research. Data obtained through observation is only used to describe conditions or behaviors that are actually observed, while subjective experiences such as feelings, perceptions, and past experiences are obtained through interviews.

Data analysis was carried out phenomenologically by referring to the stages (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2024). The first stage is carried out through epoché, where the researcher tries to suspend personal assumptions and biases toward the informants' experiences. Next, horizontalization is done by identifying significant statements that are directly related to the experience of identity negotiation. These statements are then grouped into units of meaning and themes that are interconnected. The following analysis produces a textural description of what the informants experienced and a structural description of how these experiences occur within the educational context. The analysis is first done individually for each main informant, and then followed by a cross-level phenomenological comparison between high school students and university students. Supporting informants are used to enrich context and perform triangulation, not to replace the lived experiences of the main informants.

The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity. Source triangulation was done by comparing information from six main informants with information from four supporting informants. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was done by giving informants the chance to clarify information and interpretations related to their experiences (Arikunto, 2021). The researchers also kept reflective notes during the research process to identify possible influences of personal assumptions on data collection and interpretation. These steps were taken to boost the credibility, consistency, and traceability of the research process.

The ethical aspects of the research received special attention because the study discusses the religious identity of minority groups and involves informants under the age of 18. Before the research was conducted, all informants were given explanations about the research objectives, interview procedures, use of data, confidentiality of information, and the right to refuse to answer questions or stop participating at any time. For informants aged 16, participation in the research was done after obtaining parental/guardian consent from their parents or guardians and participant assent from the informants themselves. To maintain confidentiality and safety of the informants, especially since the research relates to minority religious identities, informant names in the presentation of research results were anonymized using codes P1–P6 for main informants and SI1–SI4 for supporting

informants. School or university identities, as well as other information that could reveal the informant, are also disguised if they might disclose personal identity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With this procedure, the study tries to maintain the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, protection of informants, and respect for the rights and experiences of each participant.

Results

Bahá'í Youth Experiences in Accessing Education

Observation results show that the presence of Bahá'í youth as a religious minority group does not directly hinder them from participating in education in academic settings dominated by the majority religion. Bahá'í youth can take part in learning activities, interact with peers, and join various educational activities just like other students. Religious differences are more noticeable in certain situations, especially when their religious identity is known to those around them, when there are questions about the Bahá'í faith, or when they encounter religious education practices dominated by majority beliefs.

In the school environment, it can be seen that the process of Bahá'í youth adjusting when they first enter the educational setting is mostly related to social adaptation, such as building relationships with new friends, understanding the habits of the environment, and adjusting to school rules. There is no evidence of treatment that openly limits their involvement in educational activities because of their religious identity. As interactions continue, they can build social relationships with peers and participate in academic activities relatively normally. This situation shows that religious identity is not always a factor that hinders the social integration process in the educational environment.

In the university environment, a similar pattern can also be seen. Young Bahá'ís can attend lectures, engage in discussions, collaborate in academic activities, and interact with students from different religious backgrounds. Differences in understanding about the Bahá'í faith sometimes show up in the form of questions or curiosity from those around them. These situations become opportunities for the informants to openly explain their religious identity and build understanding with others. Thus, identity negotiation doesn't happen through rejecting the environment, but through communication and adjustment in everyday social interactions. The observations also align with the findings from the interviews, which the researcher presents below.

Table 1. Interview Results with Informants on the Religious Identity Negotiation of Bahá'í Youth in Majority Education Environments in the City of Medan

Informant Status	Interview Results
Final-Semester Student	"Throughout my studies, I have been able to attend lectures just like other students. Some friends did not know about the Bahá'í Faith, but when they asked, I explained it to them. So far, it has not been a problem for me in pursuing my education."
Grade 11 Student	"When I first started school, I was a little shy. However, no one really made an issue out of my religion. I was still able to attend school and make friends as usual."
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	"At first, many of my friends did not know that I was Bahá'í. After they found out, some of them asked questions about my religion. I answered

	as best as I could, and after that, everything was normal. We continued to be friends and study together.”
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	“At school, I do not feel that I am treated differently because of my religion. There are activities or religious lessons that differ from my beliefs, but I still participate in school activities and respect my friends who have different religions.”
University Student	“There are many friends from different religious backgrounds on campus, so I think it is normal to interact with people who have different beliefs. If someone asks about the Bahá’í Faith, I explain it. The important thing is that we respect each other and do not impose our beliefs on others.”
University Student	“During my time as a university student, I have not experienced any serious problems because of my religion. Sometimes, friends do not know what the Bahá’í Faith is, so they ask questions. I do not feel the need to hide my religion, but I also do not always talk about it if no one asks.”
Parent/Guardian	“In my opinion, education is still important and should be accessible to children regardless of their religion. They should also be able to interact with everyone while maintaining their beliefs and respecting others.”
Bahá’í Community Leader/Member	“The challenge may arise when people do not understand the Bahá’í Faith, which can sometimes lead to questions or misunderstandings. However, as long as there is communication and mutual respect, these differences do not become barriers to accessing education.”
Educator	“In an educational environment, religious differences are not actually a problem as long as students respect one another. If someone does not understand the Bahá’í Faith, communication is usually needed to prevent misunderstandings.”
Community Leader	“Bahá’í children are also part of society and have the same right to receive an education. Religious differences should not prevent them from interacting with others. What is important is mutual respect and maintaining good relationships.”

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that Bahá’í youths are relatively able to access and participate in education without facing direct obstacles because of their religious identity. The process of negotiating identity mostly happens through social adaptation, open communication, explaining the Bahá’í faith, and mutual respect. Even though there are still some limitations in understanding or questions from the surrounding environment, religious differences are not a major barrier to educational activities. These findings show that Bahá’í youths are able to maintain their religious identity while also building harmonious social relationships in educational settings where most people follow different religions.

Understanding the Academic Environment

The observation results show that the academic environment is seen positively as a social space that allows Bahá’í youth to follow the learning process and interact with the surrounding environment fairly normally. During the observation, the informants appeared able to keep up with learning activities, communicate with peers, and participate in academic activities without showing any obstacles directly related to their religious identity.

The observation results also showed a relatively open and mutually respectful interaction pattern. Religious differences didn’t appear to be a source of conflict in daily interactions, but rather became part of the diversity of the educational environment. Informants could adapt to academic habits and rules without having to give up their

religious identity. In some situations, differences in understanding about Bahá'í appeared through questions or curiosity from those around them, but it didn't turn into open rejection. The observation results also align with the interview findings, and the researcher presents the interview results below.

Table 2. Results of Interviews with Informants on How Bahá'í Youth Perceive the Academic Environment in Medan

Informant Status	Interview Results
Final-Semester Student	"In my opinion, the campus environment is quite good. I can participate in academic activities and interact with my friends as usual. Not everyone understands the Bahá'í Faith, but so far, I have not felt that anyone has directly rejected or disturbed me because of my religion."
Grade 11 Student	"I see it as normal, just like school in general. At first, I was a little shy because I was a new student, but my friends did not make an issue out of my religion. I can study and make friends as usual."
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	"I feel quite comfortable at school. I can study and participate in activities with my friends. If someone asks about the Bahá'í Faith, I simply answer politely because they may genuinely not know about it."
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	"In my opinion, the school environment is quite accepting. I can still participate in school activities and socialize with friends from different religious backgrounds. Religious differences do not make it difficult for me to participate in learning activities."
University Student	"In my opinion, the campus environment is quite open because students come from different religious backgrounds. I can discuss and work together with them without any problems. If someone does not understand the Bahá'í Faith, they usually just ask questions."
University Student	"During my studies, I have felt that everything is quite normal. I can still attend lectures and interact with my friends. I do not feel that I have to hide my religion, but I also do not always talk about it if no one asks."
Parent/Guardian	"In my opinion, the educational environment already provides sufficient space for them to study and socialize. The important thing is that they can follow the rules of the school or university while continuing to respect friends who have different religions."
Bahá'í Community Leader/Member	"So far, they have been able to pursue their education just like other children. There are still people who do not understand the Bahá'í Faith, but this is mainly because they are not familiar with it. With good communication, it usually does not become a problem."
Educator	"Religious differences do not appear to be an obstacle to educational activities. They continue to participate in learning and interact with their friends. When there are differences in understanding, communication and mutual respect become important."
Community Leader	"I see that they are able to study and interact with the community like other children. Religious differences are part of diversity. As long as there is mutual respect, social relationships can function well."

Based on research findings, the academic environment is seen positively by young Bahá'ís because it provides a space to learn, interact, and participate without open rejection of their religious identity. Religious differences are mostly managed through communication, self-adjustment, and mutual respect, so Bahá'í identity can still be maintained in academic life.

Negotiating Identity in Educational Experiences

Observation results show that the negotiation of identity for young Bahá'ís in educational settings happens through a process of adapting to the social and academic environment. When first entering the educational setting, the informants seemed more cautious in building interactions with peers and in observing the environment's response to their presence and religious identity differences.

As interactions increased and no open rejection was encountered, informants appeared more comfortable participating in learning activities and interacting with those around them. This process happened gradually through adjustments in behavior, communication, and involvement in academic activities. Their religious identity remained a part of their lives, but it didn't seem to hinder them from forming social relationships.

The observations also showed that the informants were able to place their Bahá'í identity appropriately within educational life. They followed rules and academic activities, interacted with people from different religious backgrounds, and showed mutual respect. Thus, the identity negotiation seen during the observation was more accommodating, meaning they maintained their religious identity while also adapting to a diverse educational environment. The observation results also align with the findings from the interviews, which the researcher presents below.

Table 3. Interview Results on Identity Negotiation in Educational Experiences

Informant Status	Interview Results
Final-Semester Student	"At first, I mostly observed how my friends accepted me and how I should behave. After I felt that they could accept differences, I became more comfortable interacting with them. I remain committed to my beliefs while also respecting friends who have different religions."
Grade 11 Student	"At first, I was shy and observed the situation because I did not know my friends yet. After I started socializing with them and no one made an issue out of my religion, I became more comfortable. I continued going to school and making friends as usual without having to hide my religion."
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	"When I first entered school, I mostly tried to adapt to my friends. I first observed how they interacted with one another and how they accepted differences. Once I felt comfortable, I was able to interact normally while continuing to practice my beliefs."
Senior High School Student/Equivalent	"I continue to participate in school activities like my other friends. When there are religious differences, I try to respect them, and they also respect me. Therefore, I do not feel that I have to abandon my beliefs just to be able to make friends."
University Student	"At the beginning of university, I was more cautious in socializing because I did not know how my friends would understand my religion. After interacting with them more often, I felt more comfortable. I can remain myself and do not feel the need to hide my Bahá'í identity."
University Student	"If a friend asks about my religion, I explain it politely. I think the important thing is mutual respect. I can maintain my beliefs while still cooperating and socializing with friends from different religious backgrounds."
Parent/Guardian	"They should be able to adapt to their environment, but that does not mean they have to abandon their beliefs. What is important is that they respect others and continue to practice their beliefs properly. When differences arise, they should be addressed through communication and mutual respect."

Bahá'í Leader/Member	Community	"They do need to adapt when they are in different environments. However, adaptation does not mean hiding or abandoning their religion. They can still express their beliefs in a good manner while respecting others."
Educator		"In an educational environment, students need to adapt to the existing rules and customs. Religious differences do not have to become barriers to interaction. As long as there is communication and mutual respect, students can participate in educational activities well."
Community Leader		"In my opinion, they do need to know how to conduct themselves because they live in diverse environments. They can maintain their beliefs, but in social interactions, they should respect one another. If someone does not yet understand the Bahá'í Faith, it can be explained properly to prevent misunderstandings."

Based on the research results, young Bahá'ís negotiate their identities in a more accommodating way through self-adjustment, communication, and mutual respect. They maintain their religious identity while adapting to a diverse educational environment, so religious differences don't become a major obstacle in building interactions and participating in educational activities..

Discussion

Bahá'í Youth Experiences in Accessing Education

Research results show that Bahá'í youth can go through the education process, interact with peers, and participate in academic activities without facing direct obstacles caused by their religious identity. Religious differences mostly appear in the form of questions, limited understanding of Bahá'í, and the need to adapt to an educational environment where most people are of a different religion. These findings indicate that being a religious minority group does not automatically lead to social exclusion. From a social construction perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), Social reality is shaped through the process of interaction that takes place in everyday life. Society not only acts as an environment that shapes individual behavior, but also serves as a space where individuals create and give meaning to the social reality they face. In this way, the experiences of Bahá'í youth in educational settings can be understood as the result of a dialectical relationship between personal identity and social reality formed through interaction with the majority group.

This process can be seen when young Bahá'ís enter a new educational environment. At first, they tend to observe social situations, understand the personalities of their peers, and see how the environment responds to their religious identity. After gaining relatively positive interaction experiences, they become more comfortable participating in learning activities and building social relationships. This situation can be explained through three main processes in social construction. (Zrudlo & Rushdy, 2026), These are externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Through externalization, individuals express themselves in social life; through objectivation, repeated patterns of interaction form a social reality that is considered relatively stable; while through internalization, individuals understand and accept that social reality as part of their subjective experience. In this study, communication and interaction between Bahá'í youth and their peers become a process that allows the formation of an understanding that religious differences can be accepted in educational life. The concept also shows that the social reality of education is not

something entirely fixed, but is continuously produced and maintained through social interaction.

Research findings also show that educational environments are an important space in shaping the understanding of religious identity. The informants did not show any tendency to leave their Bahá'í identity to be accepted in the academic environment. On the contrary, they maintained their beliefs while adjusting the way they interact with different environments. This situation shows that religious identity is not only formed through internal processes within a religious community but also through social experiences outside the community. In this context, Bahá'í identity gains new meaning when interacting with friends, educators, school rules, and the college environment. In other words, the educational environment becomes one of the arenas for the social construction of identity because experiences of acceptance, questioning, and interaction with the majority group help shape how the informants understand their position as members of a minority religion.

These findings can be further explained through Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (INT). This theory sees identity as something multidimensional, covering both personal identity and social membership identity, including spiritual or religious identity. Identity isn't just something individuals have, but also gains meaning through communication and the exchange of messages with others (Ting-Toomey, 2017). In this study, being Bahá'í is an important part of the informants' personal and social identity. However, the way this identity is expressed in educational settings depends on the situation. Informants might explain their Bahá'í faith when asked by friends, but they don't always make their religious identity the main topic in interactions. This pattern shows that they manage how their identity is displayed according to the communication context.

The process is clearly seen in the experience of informants who stated that they still hold on to their beliefs but respect friends who have different religions. This attitude shows an effort to achieve a balance between identity connection and social acceptance. (Shahidi, 2025) It explains that identity negotiation is about how individuals manage their social membership identity and personal identity in intergroup interactions. This process doesn't always happen through conflict, but can take the form of adjustment, clarification, openness, and creating mutual understanding. In this study, when friends or the environment didn't understand the Bahá'í faith, the informants explained the religion they followed. In this way, communication becomes an important mechanism to reduce misunderstanding while maintaining religious identity.

The finding aligns with the research (Pourshafie & Orrel, 2025) which shows that identity negotiation in intergroup communication is a complex process and can lead to various communication strategies to maintain and integrate identity. The study shows that individuals can develop certain communication strategies when dealing with environments that have different cultural identities. In the context of Bahá'í youth, these strategies are seen through openness when asked about their religion, caution when first entering a new environment, adaptation to educational rules, and respect for other religious groups. This indicates that Bahá'í youth are not just recipients of the social constructs from the majority environment, but also have the agency to decide how their religious identity is displayed and negotiated in academic life.

When linked to research findings, the identity negotiation done by Bahá'í youth can be categorized as a form of adaptive and accommodative identity negotiation. They don't

withdraw from the educational environment nor erase their religious identity. On the contrary, they engage in learning, build friendships, collaborate in academic activities, explain their Bahá'í identity when needed, and respect differences in beliefs. This situation shows that successful identity negotiation is not marked by the disappearance of differences, but by the ability of individuals and their environment to manage differences constructively. (Scoggin & Davis, 2026) emphasizing the importance of validation of personal identity and social group membership identity in creating high-quality intergroup interactions. Thus, the positive experiences of young Bahá'ís are influenced not only by their ability to adapt, but also by environmental responses that provide space for the existence of different identities.

If both theories are placed together, it looks like (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) explaining the process of how social reality is formed, while (Ting-Toomey, 2017) explaining how individuals manage their identity within that social reality. The educational environment becomes a space where understanding of minority religions is shaped through daily interactions, while Bahá'í youth actively negotiate their identity positions through communication, adaptation, and openness. Thus, the educational experiences of Bahá'í youth cannot be understood solely based on majority and minority categories, but need to be seen as an interaction process that allows the formation of understanding, acceptance, and recognition of identity. This finding shows that access to education for minority groups is not only about formal opportunities to receive education, but also about the ability of the educational environment to create a social space that allows individuals to maintain their religious identity while participating equally in academic life.

The Experiences of Young Bahá'ís in Making Sense of the Academic Environment

The research results show that Bahá'í youth view the academic environment relatively positively because they get a space to learn, interact, and participate in educational activities without facing open rejection due to their religious identity. These findings show that the academic environment is not just understood as a formal learning space, but also as a social space where identity and intergroup relationships are formed through everyday interactions. This view aligns with Berger and Luckmann's social construction theory, which sees social reality as something shaped and maintained through human interaction in daily life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of this research, a positive understanding of the academic environment is formed through the informants' concrete experiences when communicating, studying, making friends, and collaborating with individuals from different religious backgrounds.

This process can be understood through the concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is seen when young Bahá'ís enter educational environments and start building interactions with peers and educators. Through repeated interactions, religious differences are not always seen as a threat, but can become part of the diversity of academic life. These interaction patterns then take shape as a social reality that is relatively accepted or objectivized. Furthermore, these experiences of acceptance are internalized by the informants, so the academic environment is understood as a space that allows them to pursue education without having to give up their Bahá'í identity. This kind of social construction process shows that the meaning attached to minority religions is not only determined by the majority-minority

demographic positions, but also by the interactive experiences that shape shared knowledge and understanding. Kajian (Razavi, 2025) It also shows that Berger and Luckmann's social construction approach is relevant for understanding how knowledge and meaning about religion are produced in specific social, historical, and material contexts.

Research findings also show that acceptance of young Bahá'ís mainly occurs at the level of everyday social interactions. Informants can participate in learning, discussion, collaboration, and friendship with people from different religions. When there is a limited understanding of the Bahá'í Faith, this situation tends to appear more through questions and curiosity rather than outright rejection. These findings align with previous research. (Rahming, 2026) about Muslim students in Catholic religious education in Indonesia. The study found that minority students go through a process of negotiating their identity, marked by initial uncertainty, adaptive participation, and selective engagement, while a dialogical and non-coercive learning approach can help students understand religious differences without abandoning their own beliefs. These similarities suggest that educational spaces that provide opportunities for communication and appreciation of differences can help minority groups build a more inclusive educational experience.

A positive understanding of the academic environment can be further explained through Stella Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (INT). This theory sees identity as something multidimensional, covering personal identity and social membership identity, including spiritual or religious identity. Identity gains meaning through communication and the co-construction of meaning in intergroup interactions (Ting-Toomey, 2017). In this study, being Bahá'í is an important part of the informants' identity, but its meaning in an academic setting is shaped through relationships with friends, teachers, and the social environment. When informants say they can participate in educational activities without having to hide their religion, it shows that their Bahá'í identity is maintained while also being negotiated to exist naturally in a majority setting.

The informants' statement that they don't feel the need to hide their religion, but also don't always talk about it unless asked, shows that they manage their identity situationally. Informants decide when their religious identity needs to be explained and when it is enough to just be a part of themselves. In this framework (Montaño, 2025), Identity negotiation happens through exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages that allow individuals to maintain, adjust, or gain recognition of their social and personal identities. So, explaining the Bahá'í religion when asked isn't just about sharing information—it's also a communication strategy to build understanding and keep your identity present in social interactions.

The results of this study also align with previous research (Scialdone, 2025) which shows that identity negotiation in intergroup communication is a complex experience and can result in certain communication strategies, including the formation of a more integrated identity as well as strategies for protecting identity. In the context of Baha'i youth, these strategies are seen through openness when asked about religion, the ability to adapt to the academic environment, and still maintaining personal beliefs while respecting other religious groups. In other words, the social acceptance felt by the informants is not only a result of the environment's attitude, but also related to their ability

to manage communication and position their religious identity appropriately in different social situations.

The findings show that positive meaning towards the academic environment is the result of a process of social construction as well as identity negotiation. From the perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), repeated interaction experiences shape the social reality that religious differences can be accepted in educational life. Meanwhile, the perspective (Ting-Toomey, 2017) explaining how Bahá'í youth actively manage that identity through communication, adaptation, openness, and respect for other people's identities. Both perspectives show that Bahá'í youth are not just objects of the majority-minority structure, but actors who help shape the social environment through the way they interact and negotiate their identities.

Thus, the academic environment in the experiences of young Bahá'ís can be understood as a relatively accommodating space for negotiating identity. This environment allows informants to maintain their religious identity while participating in academic life with groups of different faiths. However, findings about social acceptance in daily interactions cannot automatically be equated with structural inclusivity across the entire educational institution. As shown in research on education in minority contexts, the quality of social relationships, pedagogical practices, and environmental support can determine whether religious differences become a source of alienation or instead a space for learning and social cohesion. Therefore, positive perceptions of the academic environment in this study mainly reflect the social experiences observed and felt by the informants, while aspects like policy, administration, curriculum, and accommodation of religious needs still need to be examined more specifically.

Bahá'í Youth Experiences in Negotiating Identity in Educational Experiences

The research results show that the negotiation of Bahá'í youth identity in educational settings occurs gradually through observing the environment, self-adjustment, communication, and social interaction. When first entering the educational environment, informants tend to be cautious to see how their peers and the academic setting respond to their religious identity. After gaining relatively positive interaction experiences, informants become more comfortable participating in learning and building social relationships. These findings indicate that religious identity is not static but continually gains meaning through an individual's relationships with their social environment. From a social construction perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), Social reality is shaped through the process of interactions that take place in everyday life. The identity that an individual carries then gains meaning, recognition, or even certain limits through those social experiences. Study (Japheth, Gbule, & Opara, 2025) emphasizing that Berger and Luckmann's social construction approach can be used to understand how knowledge and meaning about religion are formed through social, historical, and material contexts.

The process can be explained through three dialectical moments in social construction, namely externalization, objectification, and internalization (Vlach, Leija, & Johnson, 2025). Externalization is seen when young Bahá'ís enter educational settings and begin to express themselves through learning activities, friendships, and communication with groups of different religions. Repeated interactions then create patterns of social relationships that are relatively accepting of their presence as Bahá'ís. These patterns

become increasingly real when religious differences are understood as part of the diversity of the educational environment, rather than as a reason to limit interaction. Furthermore, this experience of acceptance is internalized by the informants, so they perceive the educational environment as a relatively safe space to maintain their religious identity while interacting with the majority group. Thus, the informants' experiences show that the social reality regarding minority religious groups is shaped through interaction processes, not just determined by the majority-minority structure demographically.

The findings are in line with the research (Ramadhan, Menzelthe, Novianti, Widjanarko, & Sutikna, 2025) Regarding the social construction of British Muslim identity. The research shows that the religious identity of young people is shaped through the interaction between inherited religious socialization and the broader social environment. Thus, identity is not only the result of transmitting religious values, but also formed through individual experiences when facing different social environments. A similar pattern is seen in this study. Young Bahá'ís carry their religious identity from their community environment, but the meaning of that identity undergoes reinforcement and adjustment when they interact with friends, teachers, lecturers, and educational settings where the majority have different religions. In other words, the educational environment becomes one of the key arenas in the process of constructing and reconstructing religious identity.

The research findings can also be explained through the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) developed by (Ting-Toomey, 2017). This theory sees identity as something multidimensional, covering personal, social, cultural, relational, as well as spiritual or religious identity. In intergroup communication, individuals are constantly negotiating how others perceive their identity while also understanding themselves. (Vega, 2026) emphasizing that identity negotiation is related to the process of giving meaning, redefining identity, and determining boundaries between oneself and other groups in cross-cultural or intergroup communication experiences. The theory also highlights the importance of validating social and personal identity in building quality intergroup interactions.

In the context of this research, this process can be seen when the informants said that when they first entered school or college, they would 'observe first' how their friends accepted them. This attitude shows that there's a process of reading the social situation before deciding how to present their religious identity. After receiving relatively positive responses, the informants became more open and comfortable interacting. This shows that identity negotiation doesn't always happen in the form of conflict or rejection, but can take place through communication adjustments and managing identity disclosure. The informants still maintained their beliefs, but at the same time adjusted the way they interacted with the educational environment. So, the Bahá'í identity isn't erased, but rather placed contextually within social relationships.

That pattern aligns with the research (Veliz, Gao, & Campos, 2025) about identity negotiation and intergroup communication. The study found that identity negotiation is a complex experience and can result in various communication strategies, including the formation of an integrated identity, specific communication practices, and identity protection strategies. In this study, similar strategies were seen through being cautious when first entering a new environment, being open when questions about the Bahá'í came up, the ability to adapt to educational rules, and showing respect for others' beliefs. Informants stated that they didn't need to hide their Bahá'í identity, but they also wouldn't

always talk about it unless asked, showing that identity is managed according to the interaction context. These strategies allow informants to maintain their religious identity without creating social distance from the majority group.

The research findings also align with the study (Cummins & Hennig, 2025) Regarding the negotiation of Muslim students' socio-religious identity in Catholic religious education in Indonesia. The study found that there was an initial period of uncertainty, adaptive participation, and selective engagement with religious material, while a dialogical and non-coercive learning approach allowed students to understand differences without compromising their beliefs. Similar patterns were seen in the experiences of young Bahá'ís, who also showed caution at the early stage, then adapted and built comfort through interaction. The difference is that this study shows the experiences of the Bahá'í group as a religious minority community in a majority education environment, so identity negotiation is not only about religious learning but also relates to social and academic life more broadly.

The same thing appears in research (Rifo & Poblete, 2026) Regarding non-Muslim students in Indonesian Islamic universities, the study specifically looks at educational institutions as spaces for adapting to and negotiating identity for students who are in a different religious environment. The findings support this research by showing that educational settings can be a contact zone, a space where different identities meet and allow individuals to adjust without losing their original identity. In this way, the experiences of young Bahá'ís show that being in a majority environment doesn't necessarily lead to assimilation or losing one's identity. On the contrary, open interactions can lead to a more reflective and adaptive form of identity.

Based on these two perspectives, the negotiation of identity among young Bahá'ís in this study can be understood as a constructive and accommodating process. (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) helps explain how everyday interaction experiences shape the social reality regarding the acceptance and existence of the Bahá'í community in educational settings, while (Ting-Toomey, 2017) explaining how individuals actively manage that identity through communication and intergroup interaction. In other words, Bahá'í youth are not just objects of the social constructions of the majority environment, but also actors who have agency in constructing and negotiating their identity. This process can be seen in their ability to maintain their beliefs, adapt to their surroundings, explain their identity when needed, and build social relationships with groups of different religions.

Thus, the research results show that identity negotiation in educational experiences doesn't happen by choosing between keeping one's identity or adapting, but by being able to do both at the same time. Bahá'í identity is maintained as part of the informants' selves, while communication patterns and behavior are adjusted to fit the educational environment. This process creates a relatively harmonious form of identity negotiation, marked by adaptation, communication, recognition, and appreciation of differences. The findings show that education can be an important space for building interfaith relationships when the environment allows minority groups to keep their identity while also participating equally in academic life.

Conclusion

Based on the research results, Bahá'í youth are relatively able to access education and interact in majority academic environments without facing direct obstacles because of their religious identity. Identity negotiation happens in an adaptive way through self-adjustment, communication, openness, and mutual respect, so that Bahá'í identity can still be maintained while allowing informants to participate harmoniously in academic life. These findings imply the importance of developing educational environments that are inclusive and respect the diversity of religious identities. However, research is still limited to subjective experiences in certain contexts and hasn't deeply explored structural aspects like policies, curriculum, administration, and accommodations for religious needs. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the range of informants and locations, compare educational levels, and examine institutional policies and practices to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how minority groups negotiate their religious identities in education.

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