

FROM STEREOTYPES TO SENTIMENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MILLENNIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MUSLIMS AND THEIR ROOT CAUSES



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From Stereotypes to Sentiments: A Qualitative Study on Millennial Attitudes towards Muslims and their Root Causes

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the millennials attitudes towards Muslims and their root causes. Phenomenological approach was used to analyze the experiences of millennials towards Muslims and the root causes of their negative attitudes and perceptions. The participants in this study were the millennials. The study was conducted in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat located along the mountainous coastal part of the province of Sultan Kudarat. Eligible roles may include but are not limited to school teachers and staff, out of school youth, registered business owner establishments, registered farmers and fishermen, livelihood program beneficiaries of Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and Local Government Unit employees. A total of ten (10) millennial participants voluntarily consented to participate in this study. The researchers used open-ended questions through an in-depth interview to effectively get the primary data. The study highlights themes such as trust and unpleasant experiences with a sub-theme of mistrust of differences, encounter with a Muslim, and injustice; stereotyping and terrorism perception with a sub-theme of terrorist act on media and Muslims practice terrorism; peace building with a sub-theme of no equal representation, and leader's attitude; Muslim attributes with a sub-theme of traitor, unwelcoming, and audacious. These finding suggest that respondents' negative sentiments and attitudes towards Muslims stem from a variety of factors. First, there's an underlying theme of mistrust and differences, indicating a lack of understanding or acceptance of cultural or religious diversity. Additionally, negative encounters with Muslims, characterized as "sad encounters," seem to have contributed to the negative perceptions. Furthermore, perceptions of injustice perpetrated by Muslims, possibly in personal or societal contexts, have influenced attitudes. Media portrayal linking Muslims and Islam to terrorist acts appears to have played a significant role in shaping negative perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes and biases. Moreover, the association of Muslims with specific terrorist groups has likely fueled fear and prejudice. Lack of equal representation in elected positions suggests a systemic issue of underrepresentation, which can exacerbate feelings of marginalization or discrimination. The attitudes and behaviors of Muslim leaders also seem to have impacted respondents' perceptions, possibly indicating a lack of positive role models or leadership. Terms like "traitor," "unwelcoming," and "audacious" further highlight the negative connotations associated with Muslims, suggesting perceived betrayal, hostility, or arrogance.

Keywords: *millennial, attitudes towards Muslims, phenomenological*

Introduction

In contemporary society, attitudes towards Muslims have become a focal point of discussion, often entangled with complex socio-political narratives and cultural biases. Particularly among millennials, the attitudes towards Muslims hold significant implications for social cohesion, interfaith relations, and the perpetuation or alleviation of stereotypes. This qualitative study aims to delve into the nuanced perspectives of millennials regarding Muslims and to unravel the root causes behind these attitudes.

Over the past decade, numerous studies have explored the perception of Muslims in Western societies, highlighting prevalent stereotypes, discrimination, and Islamophobia. However, while quantitative analyses provide valuable insights into the prevalence and intensity of negative attitudes, they often fail to capture the depth and underlying reasons for these sentiments. This research seeks to address this gap by employing a qualitative approach, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding attitudes towards Muslims among millennials.

Millennials, have grown up in an era characterized by rapid globalization, technological advancements, and shifting cultural landscapes. Their attitudes towards Muslims are shaped not only by media portrayals and societal discourse but also by personal interactions, educational experiences, and familial influences. By focusing on this demographic group, this study aims to uncover the multifaceted nature of attitudes towards Muslims and to identify the underlying factors that contribute to the formation and perpetuation of stereotypes.

Moreover, while existing literature has examined the manifestation of negative attitudes towards Muslims, there remains a paucity of research that systematically explores the root causes of these sentiments. Understanding the underlying factors is essential for devising effective interventions aimed at fostering tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect among diverse communities. By conducting in-depth interviews and thematic analyses, this study seeks to shed light on the underlying mechanisms that shape millennial attitudes towards Muslims, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of intergroup relations in contemporary society.

In this context, this research endeavors to bridge the gap in existing literature by conducting a qualitative exploration of millennial attitudes towards Muslims and elucidating the root causes behind these sentiments. By delving into the lived experiences of millennials,

this study aims to inform strategies for promoting interfaith understanding, countering stereotypes, and fostering inclusive communities.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the millennial attitudes towards Muslims and elucidate the root causes behind these sentiments. specifically, this study sought to answer the question:

1. What are the causes of the negative feelings and attitudes of millennials toward Muslims?

Literature Review

People's Perception: Different Misconceptions and Prejudiced Remarks toward Muslim

A growing body of work exists on the link between fear and Muslim and Islamic views. Several studies have revealed that unfavourable opinions against Muslims relate to greater dread and anxiety. Various factors, such as media depictions, personal experiences, and political beliefs influence these sentiments.

Cadeno (2019) states that ensuing prejudice could significantly affect individuals' behavior. Even though many empirical studies use the integrated threat theory, very few focus on how biases against Muslims or Islam are formed. González et al. (2008) stress the opinions of Dutch teenage participants as a basis for their study, which supported the integrated threat theory's general applicability for explaining anti-Muslim attitudes. Nevertheless, they emphasized the greater relevance of stereotypes and symbolic threats as anti-Muslim prejudice mediators over real-world dangers.

Hayes et al. (2013) discovered that unfavorable opinions about Muslims were linked to increased fear and anxiety about terrorism. The unfavorable opinions about Muslims might contribute to an environment of dread fueled by security and safety concerns.

Ghaffar and colleagues (2018) conducted another study on the association between views of Islam and the fear of Muslims in Australia. The authors discovered unfavorable impressions of Islam, such as the impression that Islam is a dangerous or intolerant religion was linked to increased fear of Muslims. The unfavorable views about Islam might contribute to bad opinions of Muslims while also increasing fear and anxiety.

It is universally eminent that prejudiced remarks against Muslims exist. However, we cannot end our conversation without widening our understanding of Islam; how we interact with Muslims depends on our various experiences.

Those experiences could potentially influence our views about Islam, whether they could be negative or positive. Islam is a religion that promotes peace and love (Akhter et al., 2017). However, the different news that bluntly spread misconceptions about Muslims that connect them to infamous terrorist and extremist groups have influenced non-Muslims to shape a negative perception of Islam.

In the recent study by Cardeno (2019), the trust of different ethnic groups in Isulan in the peacebuilding model. Prejudiced remarks against Muslims as the respondent asserted that he feared for his life every time he passed by a Muslim community, as he might get nabbed or killed. Some employers shape mistrust and negative stereotypes against Muslim applicants, and those applicants tend to change their names and religious affiliations for them to get the job.

Methodology

This study utilized the qualitative research, particularly the phenomenological approach to ascertain the experiences of millennials towards Muslims and determine the root causes behind these sentiments. Creswell (2018), defined phenomenology as a research approach of inquiry where the researchers pinpoint the essence of participants' descriptions of human encounters with a phenomenon. The researchers chose phenomenology because it is more appropriate to study the experiences of millennials towards Muslims. Using the phenomenology, all the gathered data to be used for analysis, interpretation, and understanding of the phenomenon would be emphasized in this study. This approach enabled researchers to explore the millennials attitudes towards Muslims and its root cause which may offer insightful information that may be used for promoting interfaith understanding, countering stereotypes, and fostering inclusive communities.

Millennials were purposively selected as participant of this study. (ages 25 to 40) in 2021. The study was conducted in Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat located along the mountainous coastal part of the province of Sultan Kudarat. Eligible roles may include but are not limited to school teachers and staff, out of school youth, registered business owner establishments, registered farmers and fishermen, livelihood program beneficiaries of Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), and Local Government Unit employees. A total of ten (10) millennial participants voluntarily consented to participate in this study for the in-depth interview. . their identities were concealed throughout the conduct of the study.

The researchers used open-ended questions through an in-depth interview to effectively get the primary data. Moreover, researchers used notetaking and audio recording to avoid overlooking of data. Guide questions were validate by the five (5) subject experts.

In analysing the data, researchers employed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts like interview transcripts. The purpose of thematic analysis is to recognize themes

that are important and interesting and that are useful sources in answering the study or saying something about the problem.

Results and Discussion

Trust and Unpleasant Experiences

Theme 1: Mistrust of Differences

On the other hand, only one participant shook her head when asked about trusting a Muslim. She pointed out that you need time to trust someone, whether they are a Muslim or a Christian. The reason why she finds it hard to trust Muslims is that:

"First, their religion, then their belief. They tend to isolate themselves because they think they are right. That is why I have quite a prejudice toward them. They speak different languages. They have a lot of ethnic groups."

She feels that Muslims speaking different languages affects her trust in them because communication is crucial in building relationships. She believes that if you cannot understand what others are saying, you can barely trust them.

Theme 2: Encounter with a Muslim

Although some participants did not have negative experiences with a Muslim leader, one of them shared that a misunderstanding with a Maguindanaon led him into issues of trust with that particular person, whom he concluded to have a bad attitude and who frightened him not much but prompted him to quit his job in that area. He said:

"I am not generalizing that all Muslims are like that. Nevertheless, the fear developed in me just because of a simple misunderstanding. Because it was my first time encountering such." to the point that there was a fear of attacking him anytime if he was misunderstood again, so he was adjusting for it not to happen again.

Notwithstanding the political experience of one of the key informants with her previous Muslim boss, which had given her a phobia towards that person, her views about Muslims had not been negatively influenced. She was afraid of him, as manifested in her statement:

"You know, I am afraid of looking at him, at his face, because his face is not gentle." I am really afraid of his looks. Even now, I cannot see his face. "I cannot stay longer even looking at his picture; he seems like a villain in a movie,"

However, she is not afraid of other Muslims. Her fear is for that particular person only, not for Muslims at large, since she grew up with Muslims, has a harmonious relationship with them, and has not experienced violence from them.

On the other hand, one participant admitted that fear could not be taken away from a person because it is normal to feel frightened, especially when you have had various unpleasant experiences with Muslims. He enumerated his confrontations with several Muslims, which mostly involved psychological warfare, threatening and showing him a gun during their encounters. He also witnessed the war in the Muslim area where he was. That is why, although he trusted his Muslim friends, he was vigilant in dealing with other Muslims because, according to him:

"That is when I could tell myself that the principle of people in Palimbang is at the muzzle." "They will already present you with a rifle at your slightest mistake." That could, of course, frighten anyone else.

He further stated that, despite his negative experiences with some Muslims, his relationship with most of them has been positive thus far. He appreciated how these people accepted him and considered him a family member regardless of their religious differences.

Another research participant shared that he trusted Muslims because, during his college days, most of his friends were also trustworthy. However, during high school, he despises Muslims because, as he rejoined:

"I have experienced bullying during my high school days." Those Muslim classmates of mine who had nothing to do in life but trip up, especially those who have gangs," which contributed to his unfavorable feelings towards Muslims other than his Muslim friends.

Theme 3: Injustice

Another sentiment toward Muslims that he mentioned was:

"There are a lot of Christians, Bisaya, that were killed without justice, and my father was one of them." My mother knew who the murderer was, but we just kept silent so they would not return to us. Possibly, we could leave here, so we just opted to remain silent. That was after the election. He trusts Muslims but is convinced that they are somewhat unjust toward Christians.

Other research participants were also able to mention injustices among Muslims that led to their negative impressions of them. One described an incident where he saw a man being shot in his workplace with his own eyes. Still, when he was brought to the police station for an investigation, he denied it because their barangay chairman had warned him that anyone who witnessed the crime would also be killed. To avoid complications, he shut his mouth and acted as if he had seen nothing then.

Another participant narrated that she had experienced a motorcycle accident caused by a Muslim commander. The accident caused too much damage on their part, but when they were settled in the barangay hall, they were obliged to pay the commander for the damages.

Although it was unfair to them, the barangay chairman told them to do so if they wanted a peaceful life. If they insist on their rights, surely, they will suffer more damage. These are some of the reasons why one of the participants wished:

"Hopefully, there will already be justice in Palimbang." "Many crimes occur, but there is no justice."

Stereotyping and Terrorism Perception

According to the study of Hall (2010), it is safe to conclude that some Christians have fed into stereotypes that Muslims are dangerous and dirty.

This research asked the participants about their perceptions of Muslims being terrorists, and they found that they had different stands. The participants' proposition on terrorism is based on their understanding of Islamic teaching and experiences with Muslims.

In the literature, it was explained that Islam is a religion that promotes peace and love (Akhter et al., 2017). However, the different news that has bluntly spread misconceptions about Muslims that connect them to infamous terrorist and extremist groups has influenced non-Muslims to shape a negative perception of Islam.

Theme 1: Terrorist Act on Media

The participant confessed that he had heard and read a lot on social media and television almost daily about Muslims committing terrorism. Still, after living with most of them, he realized that Muslims are not what the media portrays them. He commented that mass media should not use the term:

"Muslim" in their reports to avoid generalizing these religious groups of people that are stereotyped as terrorists. Because according to him, "They are not terrorists in the sense that if they are true Muslims, based on my perspective, they should not be leading any terrorist group because they should submit themselves to Allah. Terrorism is against the teachings of the Qur'an."

As remarked by one of the participants that Muslims are not terrorists. They were only stereotyped as such. She mentioned that there was also a war before that was led by the ILAGA (Ilonggo Land Grabbing Association), and this group of people were not Muslims, but they also caused the war. Another participant also said almost the same:

"For me, not only Muslims, there are a lot; there are also Christians involved there." Some Christian groups also practice terrorism, not only Muslims.

Moreover, another participant explained that if they mention Muslims or say Muslims on social media, they will already be judged as a tribe of terrorists. However, they must not generalize because not only Muslims are terrorists; there are also Christians, he added.

Furthermore, another commented that Muslims are not terrorists. They are simply part of the minority group. She explained that sometimes if you are part of the minority, you are not noticed. For her, these Muslims causing terror just want to catch the government's attention, but she does not consider them terrorists. According to her, sometimes they use the words "they are Muslim" and "create chaos" to be noticed.

Hence, this group of research participants did not believe that Muslims could commit terrorism based on their understanding of Islam and their observation of how Muslims treated them well.

Theme 2: Muslims Practice Terrorism

On the other hand, some research participants believe that Muslims are practicing terrorism. In connection to Morales (2014) gives points to a potent tool of media as partisan and particularly hyped in the sense of sparking Islamophobia, to call it the "enemy of the day."

He cited different groups (Abu Sayyaf, MNLF, MILF, BIFF) in the Philippines that threaten national security and influence the sense of Islamophobia towards media that breeds fear of non-Muslims. This phobia has been a source of discrimination and inequality towards Muslims; it holds a strong sense of negative perception towards Islam. The research participants in this study mentioned the news about terrorism, pointing to Muslim-led groups in the country that convinced them to believe that Muslims are terrorists.

Eventually, they declared that they had not just heard or read about terrorism carried out by Muslims but had witnessed it themselves. That is why they agree that Muslims, like ISIS, are terrorists. One participant pointed out that:

"To be honest, I have not heard of a Christian who is a terrorist." "Most of what we heard were, indeed, Muslims. It seems we could believe that they are terrorists." He supported his statement with his point of view: if shooting is the topic, you could not tell a thing that they would not know. You can see the posts about the war on Facebook. Then, he also witnessed the war between Muslims in Palimbang.

Peace Building Efforts

Different views arose when the participants were asked if they thought Muslim and Christian leaders should work together to achieve peace in the Philippines.

Theme 1: No Equal Representation

However, most research participants responded negatively to the statement about leaders working together. They argue that if there is an imbalance in representation in the government, how can Muslim and Christian leaders work together to achieve peace in the Philippines? They set Palembang as an example. One of the participants stressed that in his almost forty years of existence in this place, he knows of no one who is a non-Muslim counselor. He even added that he had not encountered Muslim or non-Muslim leaders conversing about making the Philippines a peaceful place to live. Another participant asserted that:

"Muslim and non-Muslim leaders working together for peace is impossible because there are no elected officials today who are non-Muslim." She said it is the cry of the Christians in the municipality of Palembang because Christians do not have representatives in the local government. She was unsure if it was stereotyping, but she had heard from the people that they needed to elect some Christian leaders to become their voice regarding community development and peace-building initiatives.

When she was asked about what could be the reason why there is no Christian representation in the legislative body of the local government of Palembang, she narrated that long ago, they had a neighbor who was elected as a municipal counselor. Still, he was shot to death when planning to run for mayor. She presumed that perhaps Christians might refuse to join politics because they fear such a scenario. Her remarks were supported by another participant's statement that Christians are afraid to run because there is no justice in the place.

It was noted that some attempted to become part of the legislation, but they did not win because Christians are the minority here. According to another participant, even if 100% of the Christian population in the municipality voted for at least one Christian electoral candidate, they would still lose because of the number of Muslims in the place.

Another research participant mentioned that no municipal counselor was Christian in her workplace. All of them are Muslims. She further stated that there should be at least one representative from the Christian community so that working together for peace is possible.

Theme 2: Leader's Attitude

Furthermore, another participant said peace could still be achieved even though no Christian leaders are in the area. He noted that it depends on the leader. Example: If the leader is a Muslim and their subordinates are Christians, it depends on their attitude to the Christian. If there is an anti-Christian leader, how can these Christians respect and follow them if they are emotionally far from them? He added that as a leader if you are showing your goodness to others, whether Muslim or Christian, there will be no problem arising.

Muslim Attributes

During the face-to-face interview, the research participants were also asked if they had Muslim friends, and all said they did. This research further inquired about the attributes of Muslims that trigger their negative feelings and attitudes toward them.

Theme 1: Traitor

On the other hand, some participants shared negative attributes they had observed among other Muslims. It was noted that being a traitor is mostly cited. Muslims are traitors in the sense that, even if you are friends with them, they will still side with their Muslim brothers and sisters when the worst happens, especially when religion is subject.

Theme 2: Unwelcoming

Muslims are unwelcoming of those not by their religion. They insist they are on the right religion and resist welcoming other beliefs. They do not welcome others' points of view or practices because they adhere to the teachings of Islam.

In support of this, one participant said that if you are a member of an LGBT community, it will be hard for you to be friends with them, except for those who are also LGBT Muslims. They seem to loathe lesbians and gays, for it is forbidden in their religion.

Moreover, some Muslims keep debating or arguing about religion, which causes a division between Muslims and Christians, as noted by the participants.

It was finally noted by one of the participants' observations that the good relationship between Muslims and Christians has gradually been restored. He said so because before when he was already here in 1980, it was forbidden for Christians and Muslims to get married. However, it is already okay. Muslims and Christians have compromised.

Theme 3: Audacious

Another participant commented that Muslims are very brave. They are bold, and that is what she doesn't like about them. She mentioned that:

"Some people take a long time to pay their debt and get angry when charged. She further said that some Muslims are boastful and imposing, like "I am the king here." Styles like that are very arrogant."

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the findings of the study suggests that respondents' negative sentiments and attitudes towards Muslims stem from a variety of factors. First, there's an underlying theme of mistrust and differences, indicating a lack of understanding or acceptance of cultural or religious diversity. Additionally, negative encounters with Muslims, characterized as "sad encounters," seem to have contributed to the negative perceptions.

Furthermore, perceptions of injustice perpetrated by Muslims, possibly in personal or societal contexts, have influenced attitudes. Media portrayal linking Muslims and Islam to terrorist acts appears to have played a significant role in shaping negative perceptions, reinforcing stereotypes and biases.

Moreover, the association of Muslims with specific terrorist groups has likely fueled fear and prejudice. Lack of equal representation in elected positions suggests a systemic issue of underrepresentation, which can exacerbate feelings of marginalization or discrimination.

The attitudes and behaviors of Muslim leaders also seem to have impacted respondents' perceptions, possibly indicating a lack of positive role models or leadership. Terms like "traitor," "unwelcoming," and "audacious" further highlight the negative connotations associated with Muslims, suggesting perceived betrayal, hostility, or arrogance.

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