Formation and Benefits of Intercultural Friendships: The Role of Communication

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Abstract: This qualitative study provides novel insights into exploring factors that influence intercultural friendship formation and friendship benefits, focusing on the role of communication. A research gap has been addressed by focusing on Muslim women who wear the hijab and exploring what factors had influenced their friendship formation with people from culturally different backgrounds and what impact the friendship had on the self. Findings suggested that cultural, linguistic and religious similarity was deemed as not important for friendship formation. Instead, similar values, self-disclosure and respectful communication assisted intercultural friendship formation. Friendship barriers included cultural misconceptions and behavioral uncertainty. Clear evidence emerged that these intercultural friendships led to positive attitudinal changes of the individuals within and beyond the friendship. This included increased cultural understanding, acceptance and self-reflection. It was revealed that cultural misconceptions (and levels of Islamophobia) were eliminated and ethnocentrism was reduced.

Keywords: intercultural friendships, intercultural communication, friendship formation, Muslim, hijab, Islamophobia

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1. Introduction

In today's society, increased intercultural contact is more likely, due to globalization and increased migration. At the same time however, due to events in the past decade, intercultural conflict seems to be on the rise, with Islamophobia having received much scholarly and media attention (Awan 2010, Bouma, Cahill, Dellal & Zwartz 2011; Droogsma 2007; Krondorfer 2015; Markus 2011).

An often-overlooked topic in intercultural communication research, which has been described as "a kind of social glue'' (Helskog 2015, p. 227), is friendship: in particular, intercultural friendships. Although cultural diversity is recognized as having an impact on communication behavior (Gudykunst 1985; Sias, Drzewiecka, Meares et al. 2008), the phenomenon of intercultural friendships is highly under-researched (Chen & Nakazawa 2009; Sias et al. 2008). Its communicative complexity, where cultural and personal aspects are intertwined, might be one reason why limited research is available (Sias et al. 2008). The importance of friendship was highlighted by Gudykunst (1985) who contended that friendships form a vital part of human survival as they provide social contact and intimacy. Some research exists on friendship formation and influencing factors such as sociolinguistic and cultural variables; however, an emphasis has been placed on friendships between host nationals and international students with a majority of US-based studies (Arasaratnam & Banerjee 2007; Gareis, Merkin & Goldman 2011, Glass, Gomez & Urzua 2014).

Australia is a country known for its diverse population and for attracting an increasing number of temporary and permanent migrants (Parliament of Australia 2016), with around one-third of the population born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Consequently,

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Australian universities are particularly diverse social spaces. Australia strives to attract and recruit international students (Karuppan & Barari 2010). In 2018, around 320,000 international students were enrolled at higher education institutions in Australia with around 40,000 students studying in Queensland (Department of Education and Training 2019). These figures suggest that intercultural interaction at universities is highly likely, which makes them an ideal location to research intercultural friendships.

There is a clear gap in examining a specific type of intercultural friendship: that is, the formation of intercultural friendships between Muslim women wearing the *hijab*[2] and culturally different individuals. Given this gap, this Brisbane-based study explores communicative behavior in intercultural (and interfaith) friendship development within an under-researched cultural group, in order to gain contextual and subjective data. Available research on veiling Muslim women has strongly focused on identity negotiation and performance, as well as reasons for veiling. No prior studies seem to have linked these two research areas. This study investigates intercultural friendship formation within an Australian university setting and assesses the benefits of such friendships, looking into the role of communication in facilitating attitudinal changes. This includes exploring how one's acceptance of other cultures/religions may be affected while acknowledging that communication involves consistent negotiation of conflicting cognitive processes. It explores whether intercultural friendships could be a solution for overcoming cultural misconceptions.

Qualitative methods are particularly useful in gaining an insight into the very subjective and unique experience of intercultural friendships (Sias *et al.* 2008). With these aims in mind, the following open-ended research questions and sub-questions were used to inform this study:

RQ1: What factors influence intercultural friendship formation, in particular, for female Muslim students who wear the *hijab* and close intercultural friends? (Does religious, cultural or linguistic similarity play a role in friendship formation?)

RQ2: Are there any potential benefits of intercultural friendships? (How does the intercultural friendship impact the self and affect one's acceptance of other cultures/ religions? To what extent can intercultural friendships overcome misconceptions about culturally different people, and contemporary issues such as Islamophobia?)

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Islamophobia

Dislike and, at times, hatred towards people who are deemed different in comparison to the mainstream culture is increasing. As Jackson (1993: 395) formulated it, "dysfunctional intergroup relations are undoubtedly among the most crucial threats facing our species". A contemporary issue that has received much attention from scholars as well as the mainstream media is the rise of Islamophobia (Awan, 2010, Bouma *et al.* 2011, Krondorfer 2015, Markus 2011). Described as irrational fear and ideological hatred towards Muslims or the religion of Islam as a whole, it is based on misconceptions and is manifest in discriminatory practices (Awan 2010, Krondorfer 2015). Such hatred can be directed at the overall religion, be seen as attributing negative characteristics to Muslim individuals, be an attack on the culture (such as food, clothing) or target political representation of the religion (Krondorfer 2015). As a consequence of Islamophobia, Muslim individuals experience social exclusion, discrimination and verbal as well as physical assaults (Awan 2010, Krondorfer 2015).

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[2] For the purpose of this study, "hijab" is interchangeably used with "veiling" and refers to a form of head covering used for religious reasons. It is acknowledged that there are many forms of head coverings; however, only the word "hijab" will be used for consistency reasons.

2.2 Muslim women wearing the hijab

Existing literature on Muslim women wearing the *hijab* mostly discusses the experiences of hijab-wearing Muslim women who live in countries in which they form the minority, exploring concepts such as identity, (mis-)categorization and reasons for veiling (Cole & Ahmadi 2003, Hopkins & Greenwood 2013, Williams & Vashi 2007). This study does not focus on reasons for veiling and does not focus on the experience of being a minority in Australia; instead, it investigates the impact of veiling on friendship formation.

2.3 Friendship

Friendship, as it appears in interpersonal communication literature, is based on communicative processes; on the one hand, communication is the driving force of friendship formation and maintenance, and on the other hand, friends' perception of one another shapes their communicative patterns (Sias *et al.* 2008). It is a unique relationship as it has ambiguous boundaries with no conscious decision that marks a clear beginning, which is unlike other forms of relationships (Wright 1978).

2.4 Intercultural friendship formation

There is consensus among scholars that communication research on intercultural friendship is startlingly limited, despite the worldwide trend towards more culturally diverse societies (Chen & Nakazawa 2009, Lee 2006, Sias *et al.* 2008). It needs to be noted that "intercultural" can refer to individuals with different demographic characteristics, including but not limited to gender, age, and physical ability, as well as nationality and ethnicity (Martin & Nakayama 2014). The latter will form the definition for this study. Hence, "intercultural" for the purposes of this study will be understood as individuals with ethnic or cultural differences, which includes religion.

Much of the limited research on intercultural friendships has focused on investigating host nationals and international students (Gareis *et al.* 2011, Glass *et al.* 2014, Hendrickson 2018, Kudo & Simkin 2003). Research included the concept of *ethnocentrism*, which can be defined as evaluating other cultures based on viewing one's own culture as the benchmark (Arasaratnam & Banerjee 2007), and is often associated with feeling that one's own culture is superior (Martin & Nakayama 2014). It was found to have a negative impact on the motivation to interact with culturally different people (Arasaratnam & Banerjee 2007).

2.5 Intercultural friendship theory

Extensive interpersonal research has been done on how similarity/dissimilarity affects interpersonal attraction, with Byrne's similarity attraction theory (1971) as a major early contribution to the field. This theory states that, when forming relationships, greater similarity is linked to higher levels of attraction and preferred interaction. The importance of attitudinal similarity has also received much attention (Byrne 1971; Reid, Davis & Green 2013). It includes the importance of similar values and interests (Luo, 2009) and perceived similarity (Lee & Gudykunst 2001). People are more attracted to culturally similar rather than dissimilar people.

Communication scholars have focused on communicative processes and behaviors that influence intercultural friendships. A study by Chen and Nakazawa (2009) explored aspects of social penetration and self-disclosure in intercultural/ interracial friendships and concluded that relational intimacy is much more influential than cultural variability. Sias (*et al.* 2008) provide insight into how communicative behavior shapes intercultural friendship development and which factors are influential. Findings include that cultural similarities/differences, prior intercultural experience and targeted socializing all impact friendship formation, as well as that "communication both enables and hinders the development of intercultural friendships" (Sias et al. 2008: 1).

2.6 Benefits of intercultural friendship

Mixed conclusions have been drawn from studies exploring intercultural interaction and its effect on attitudes such as prejudices, with some concluding that intergroup contact increases or decreases prejudice (Allport 1954; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner & Christ 2011).

An action research project, The Gandhi Project (Helskog 2015), considered intercultural philosophical dialogue as a facilitator for overcoming fear of strangers and developing mutual understanding and intercultural/ interreligious friendships. The notion behind The Gandhi Project inspired this research. A participant from the study urged, "I hope that The Gandhi Project will be spread to more people, so that racism and fear of strangers will disappear.'' (2015: 225). Since Helskog's study facilitated conversations and structured interaction between the participants, it was clearly different to naturally formed friendships. Thus, there is a need to explore whether communication between naturally formed intercultural friendship dyads has the same positive impact on individuals. This creates an opportunity for this exploratory study to gain valuable insights.

3. Methods

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions posed in this study and wanting to best allow gaining an understanding of the cultural and communicative complexities in the unique contexts of the participants, qualitative methods were deemed most appropriate, to gather data from pairs of two friends (i.e., dyads). In-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured, conjoint interviews were conducted with the friendship dyad. Besides collecting demographic information, open-ended questions were used to gather valuable narratives about the participants' opinions and views on the friendship. The interviews had two sections corresponding to the two research questions. Interviewing both parties of the friendship dyad at the same time increased the likelihood of gaining insight into the friendship dynamics in a more natural setting.

3.1 Participants

All participants had to be current university students or recent graduates for two reasons: to reduce communication barriers due to English language difficulties, and to explore the uniquely diverse environment of Australian universities.

Ten participants were current students or recent graduates from universities in Brisbane, Australia. Five female Muslim students who wear the hijab most of the time in public places were asked to take part in interviews with a close friend of their choice who was of a different nationality. Among the ten interviewees, nine were female and one male. Their age ranged between 24 and 37, with an average age of 27.9 years. Participants were from Canada, China, Colombia, Indonesia, Iran, Germany, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The participants' demographic data is summed up in Table 1 below (culturally appropriate pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants).

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Dyad	Pseudonym	Country of origin	Linguistic background (native tongue)	Religion	Age	University student or graduate	Gender
1	Naida	Iran (grew up in Malaysia)	Persian (spoken), English, Malay	Islam	24	student	F
	Kerstin	Germany	German	Christianity (Protestant)	25	student	F
2	Salmah	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Islam	26	graduate	F
	Marisa	Colombia	Spanish	Christianity (Catholic)	28	graduate	F
3	Cahya	Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesian, Acehnese	Islam	30	graduate	F
	Felix	Canada/ Romania	English, Romanian	Christianity (Baptist)	25	student	M
4	Nilam	Malaysia	Malay	Islam	30	student	F
	Lestari	Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesian	Islam	37	student	F
5	Naarisha	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	Islam	30	student	F
	Shu	China	Chinese (Mandarin)	none	24	student	F

3.2 Data collection and analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Minor changes were made to the transcripts to fix grammatical errors, without altering the meaning. A content (thematic) analysis was used to interpret the data that included identifying themes from the transcriptions.

4. Findings and interpretations

The overarching themes that emerged from the narratives are presented in two sections, applicable to the relevant research questions: **R1:** intercultural friendship formation and maintenance, and **R2:** benefits of intercultural friendship.

4.1 RQ1 intercultural friendship formation and maintenance

As established, the definition of friendship depends on subjective interpretation of the relationship (Wright, 1978). To be able to analyze the intercultural friendships in this study in a meaningful way, it was necessary to explore what the term "friendship" meant to the individual participants. It became apparent that the participants clearly differentiated between levels of friendship; Naarisha termed this "zones of friendship".

Exploring this concept further, participants undoubtedly distinguished between so-called *social friends* and *close friends*. Social friends, also called *basic friends*, *fun friends* or *not-so-close friends*, were characterized by less frequent interactions, limited depths of communication, and non-alignment of values, which prevented the friendships from developing more deeply. Naida pointed out that for her, "a social friend compared to a close friend is the time I [spend]"; "I don't talk about my family members or my past to my social

friends". If values do not align, it hinders or even stops friendships from ever developing from social into close friendships.

Close friends are characterized by a high level of self-disclosure, honesty, mutual respect, similarity of values and increased levels of invested time and effort. Sharing highly personal thoughts, views and beliefs seems to be a critical core aspect of close friendships. As Nilam stated, "[With] close friends you are able to share your thoughts, and close friends are there for you in difficult times, unlike these friends who… you befriended them but you can't share anything. You can't share everything". It emerged from the participants' definitions that only close friends create the right atmosphere for in-depth communication.

To explore the dynamics of intercultural friendship formation, the significance of cultural, linguistic and religious similarity was discussed.

4.1.1 Cultural similarity

Most participants (8/10) held strong opinions that the cultural background of a person does not matter when forming friendships. They thought that personal characteristics were more important than cultural variables.

Factors considered included open and honest communication, mutual respect, alignment of values, support, trust and frequency of contact. It is not surprising that these factors were mentioned in the definition of friendships given by the participants, as it is these factors that influence the formation in the first place.

Cahya focused on high levels of self-disclosure as an important factor: a close friend is "the one that is really honest to me and tells me everything". Open communication was encouraged to facilitate deeper intercultural friendship development. As Naida stated, "I told her once, I was like 'Ask me any questions you want, in any form of vocabulary that you are comfortable with.' And then we talked about the *hijab* or whatever, the culture and Iran."

When discussing factors that influence intercultural friendship formation, especially among close friends, a strong emphasis was placed on trust and mutual respect as a shared value, which included acceptance of differences in culture, faith and views. Comments such as these were made: "[a friend is] the person who doesn't judge people… who is flexible in their mind, in their thought, who is not rigid in their thought, who accepts people from different cultures, from different mindsets" [Naarisha]; "a kind of person where you feel accepted'' [Salmah]. Mutual respect seemed to be a fundamental basis of intercultural friendship development, based on genuine interest in each other's lives, cultures and backgrounds.

The alignment of values as a basis for close intercultural friendships was an important factor as well. It is crucial to stress that sharing the same values does not necessarily mean sharing exactly the same opinions or agreeing at all times. Rather, it was explained as an underlying respect, an acceptance of each other's ways of lives, opinions and perspectives. Felix stated, "[close friends] don't have to agree, but at least they are open to my idea. And even if they are at the complete opposite [end] of the spectrum, they at least respect what I'm saying".

The importance of high frequency contact was debated among the participants. Some clearly saw it as a crucial aspect of a close friendship to have "constant contact" [Felix]; "in your free time or your available time, you will always catch up" [Shu]. Others clearly stated that the depth of conversation was more important than how often two friends communicate. To put it in Naarisha's words, "it's about quality not quantity". Continuing to have deep conversations and continuing to share was more important.

A surprising finding that emerged was that, at times, making friends from different cultures was perceived as easier, as it is free from culture-specific rules, expectations and societal pressures. Shu stated:

People from your background, when they come here they all take those [cultural] rules to judge you. Sometimes it's more – there are restrictions. But in here [Australia], the people from different cultures understand that people are from different cultures…. We're just like – how to say – we forget some [cultural] rules, some barriers, and some judgement and this will bring the friendship more freedom.

4.1.2 Linguistic similarity
The insignificance of cultural similarity was closely linked to the low importance of a shared linguistic background. Sharing the same language may initiate conversation at the beginning; however, it was not found to be a necessity in developing or maintaining friendships. In fact, linguistic dissimilarity sparked interest in learning more about the other language.

4.1.3 Religious similarity
A powerful statement was made by Salmah regarding religious similarity:

So I have this belief, but I don't think other religions are bad or worse than mine. Because I believe that we should accept people from different religions, and the heart is the most important.

It was stated that a friend needs to be an ethical person, have a "good heart" and treat others well. Although it was not important for a close friend to share the same religion, respect for their friend's faith was expected. As Marisa stated, "I wouldn't like to have friends who complain about my religion because it's very sacred for me, it's very personal. That's why I never complain about Salmah's religion." Because of her own expectation that others respect her religion, Marisa respects Salmah's religion, as she understands how deeply personal and important it is in both their lives. It is noteworthy that all except one of the non-Muslim participants practice a religion.

4.1.4 Barriers when forming intercultural friendships
Several participants acknowledged that they had experienced barriers to intercultural friendship formation. Some of those perceived barriers need to be discussed.

Prior misconceptions were named as one of the main barriers to intercultural friendship formation. Many participants admitted that they had held inaccurate assumptions about the other culture or religion prior to the friendship. From the perspectives of the primary participants who were all Muslim, some of the negative stereotypes included the notion that all Caucasians lack discipline. Naida confessed, "me as a Middle Eastern or Asian, we sometimes stereotype against Westerners that just because they are open-minded, they don't have any discipline, or they don't have any objectives or rules in their life". Other statements included: "I think it's more due to the media. I thought before all foreigners, especially Caucasians, they like to party" [Cahya].

On the other hand, many non-Muslim participants also had previous misconceptions, such as that female Muslims (especially those who wear the hijab) have "too many restrictions, couldn't do a lot of things and couldn't talk about a lot of things" (Kerstin). Marisa disclosed: "the stereotypes that we make, it was about, mostly about women that wear the hijab. Before I met Salmah, I thought these girls suffer a lot in their life. That they were forced to do many things". There was a lack of knowledge, as Kerstin admitted: "I always thought... for me, it might sound very bad, but for me all Middle Eastern countries are kind of the same. I think it's based on a lot of stereotypes. It's probably from media". These findings were of particular importance, as this study purposefully chose women wearing the hijab as a visible marker of their faith to explore its impact on intercultural friendship formation.

Another barrier that was mentioned numerous times during the interviews was the uncertainty about how to act around someone who is culturally different. Most participants agreed that they adjusted their communication style when meeting someone from a different culture, which included being more careful, talking more broadly, and avoiding sensitive topics that might offend or cause misunderstandings.

The third barrier of note was that some cultural groups have perceived walls that reduce the opportunity for intercultural interaction and, therefore, friendship formation. "A lot of cultures stick to each other in groups, so it's hard to approach them" [Kerstin]. Naida placed a strong emphasis on friendship being a "two-way street", stating that both communities need to reach out to each other more.

4.1.5 Strangers react to intercultural friendships

Most of the participants revealed that strangers visibly react and at times even comment when they see the friends together in public. The reactions from strangers were very diverse and of much greater interest since they provide a valuable insight into how the intercultural friendships were perceived by the public.

Two friendship dyads in particular shared many experiences of the public's reaction: Naida and Kerstin, and Salmah and Marisa. Both dyads disclosed that they noticed strangers staring "a lot". The facial expressions of strangers varied from mostly surprised to shocked, happy and sometimes hostile. However, hostile stares were perceived to be very rare, and it was mainly an expression of surprise that they noticed. Both dyads interpreted those stares as surprise that an intercultural friendship like their own existed – especially between someone who is visibly Muslim, wearing the hijab, and someone from a different background. In Naida's words, "it was just the fact of the combination of us: a *hijabi* and a non-*hijabi*, white, blonde person".

Although Naida and Kerstin never experienced strangers commenting on their friendship, Salmah and Marisa had several stories to share. They occasionally received comments from strangers (for example, waitresses, or other guests in cafés), mainly expressing their surprise that the friendship existed. They have been asked questions such as, "How can you be friends, you are so different?", often wanting to know how they had met and how they made the friendship work.

Overall, it became apparent that others do not expect to see intercultural friendships between Muslim women wearing the hijab and (perceived) non-Muslims. However, when asked how those reactions made them feel, both dyads declared that they felt proud of their friendship. Salmah stated, "I'm proud of our friendship. Even if we are different. Because we are still human." Naida explained, "it's not what other people tell you to do. I feel proud that our friendship is breaking stereotypes." Kerstin believed that showcasing their friendship was important for the public's opinion to change: "I find it positive because I think they stare because it's something that they don't know, and I think it's good that they get introduced to something different."

4.2 RQ2 benefits of intercultural friendship

4.2.1 Impact on the self (attitudinal/behavioral changes)

The second section of the in-depth interviews was designed to gain valuable insights into the impact of intercultural friendships on the individuals, in terms of attitudinal or behavioral changes.

It was mentioned before that misconceptions were the main barrier to intercultural friendship. It needs to be highlighted that such friendships helped the individuals overcome negative stereotypes and assumptions about their friend and the broader cultural community. There was consensus among participants that open, respectful and ongoing communication,

from the early stages of the friendship formation onwards, led to increased culture-specific knowledge, understanding and awareness. Participants agreed that it led to greater certainty in intercultural interactions and greater acceptance of cultural differences. In the friendship between Salmah and Marisa, Marisa shared that after they had talked a lot and had asked each other a lot of questions regarding their culture, religion and background; she understood the meanings behind Salmah's actions. In particular, Marisa talked about understanding why Salmah adhered to certain religious restrictions, which changed not only her attitudes but also her behavior as she was happy to accommodate Salmah to make the friendship work. (Such accommodation was mutual, as Salmah also adjusted her behavior for the benefit of the friendship.) Sharing and exploring the reasons behind actions to find common ground was also mentioned by Naida: "sometimes when you ask why and you go back to the reason behind the action, you find out that the reason is actually very similar to your reason. It's just a different action."

Many participants clearly stated that, due to their intercultural friendship, their attitudes and approach towards others who are culturally different had changed drastically. As Naida said, "I think Kerstin opened a door to be more open-minded".

Intercultural friendships reduced participants' overly ethnocentric attitudes. By being exposed to different viewpoints, lifestyles and ways of doing things, many of the participants started to reflect on their own habits and what is normal for them. Kerstin shared, "I… find it funny because you think the way I do it, everyone does it that way. It's kind of normal. But it's actually not.… I find it interesting. You can learn something new." Nadia used a beautiful metaphor. When asked to describe what she had gained from the intercultural friendship, she replied, "consciousness and just perspectives. I feel like life is more colorful, rather than black and white." Many participants became more relaxed when confronted with situations that were culturally out of the norm for them. As Kerstin put it, "[I'm] more relaxed, more patient and also [I know] that there are many other ways of doing things".

Self-reflection became a valued benefit of intercultural friendship. Since enquiring about each other's background, beliefs and values is inevitably part of close intercultural friendship formation, it often leads to questioning one's own worldviews. Such reflection was perceived as tremendously valuable and, paradoxically, at times even brought the individuals closer to their religion. Naida shared, "Kerstin was so genuinely intrigued with my culture and religion, that it kind of made me go and read about it more.… I realized what part of my culture was a habit versus part of my culture that was a belief." Felix agreed: "I gained a lot more understanding now. It really helps when you are challenged." Cahya pointed out that being challenged means necessary change; however, the core beliefs remain:

> Sometimes he made me question… if what I believe is really right. So we discussed a lot of stuff, about a lot of things. Sometimes when he asked difficult questions and I didn't have an answer, it makes me think again. But then, some things change of course. I started to change my opinion on some things, but more in a positive way. It doesn't really change the basic faith about what I believe. But it just changed the way I believe it. So I think discussions really help.

Besides attitudinal changes, some participants shared that they had implemented behavioral changes in their lives due to the friendship. Naida understood that it is disrespectful in Kerstin's culture to be late for an appointment and changed her habits to be punctual. Marisa shared that she stopped drinking alcohol, as she had realized through her friendship with Salmah that "you don't need a drink to enjoy".

4.2.2 Intercultural friendship as solution to overcoming misconceptions and Islamophobia

The last and, perhaps, most important question was to investigate whether the participants, who had all successfully formed and maintained intercultural friendships (with the exception of one friendship dyad), believe that intercultural friendship could help in overcoming misconceptions and Islamophobia. There was an overwhelming agreement that these friendships helped to increase respect and acceptance towards one another, but also beyond the friendship. "It can help break stereotypes" [Kerstin]; it will "help people to be more human and accept each other" [Salmah]; "it helps because you get a better understanding of the way people live, and who they are. It kind of opens your eyes" [Felix]. visible intercultural friendship in itself seems to send a strong positive message, as could be seen in the majority of the reactions from the public.

Intercultural friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims can help eradicate Islamophobia as it facilitates looking beyond the, often negative, narrative of Islam from the media. Marisa confidently claimed that "they [non-Muslims] will change for sure" after becoming close friends with someone who is Muslim. Having a close friendship with someone who is culturally different provides valuable insight and understanding of how it feels to be a minority. A higher level of empathy is the consequence.

It was emphasized that intercultural friendships need to be a "first-hand experience" to have a positive impact. As Kerstin puts it, "it only helps if every person has a friend from a different culture. Because I can tell my family and friends… but they don't experience it. You have to experience it."

4.2.3 Intercultural friendship vs. intercultural contact

To explore whether there is a difference in benefits between intercultural contact and intercultural friendships, participants were asked to share their experiences. Intercultural interaction was found not to have much impact on changing attitudes for the better, since intercultural contact is usually characterized by shallow conversations and limited length of interaction. Participants agreed that this was not enough to change someone's attitude and create mutual understanding. Even acquaintances, which entailed more frequent contact, did not facilitate intercultural understanding as "you can still have regular contact and discriminate. But you cannot discriminate and be a friend. Friendship is acceptance" [Felix] Only close friendships based on the characteristics identified earlier created the right atmosphere for open communication, cultural learning and understanding. This can be summarized by a statement from Naida:

> Because interaction or becoming social friends could venture just political correctness. But with friendships, actually creating a bond, a deeper bond and creating a community in the wider perspective or in the smaller perspective, like in friendships, creates kind of blood or a human level. The other person is different, maybe 100% different, but is just human. You know, made of the same material. It becomes so tangible; you see past the labels. And I think that can only be achieved through friendships.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore intercultural friendship formation and the benefits of friendship between women wearing the hijab and culturally different people.

Although it has been said that friendship is somewhat ambiguous in its nature because – unlike other kinds of relationships – it is not clearly defined (Wright 1978), there was consensus on what friendship means among the participants. Honesty and sharing of personal matters were communicative characteristics of friendship; mutual respect, trust and support

were other aspects of friendship that were mentioned. Such attributes align with existing studies (Collier & Bornman 1999; Kudo & Simkin 2003).

Most participants clearly differentiated between levels of friendship, or "zones of friendship". Perceived depth of friendship clearly shaped communicative behavior, which aligns with Sias' (*et al.* 2008) findings. In this study, less frequent contact and lower levels of self-disclosure were reported for social friends. In contrast, close friends were characterized not only by more frequent contact but, more importantly, higher levels of self-disclosure, where open communication was named as the most important aspect. Only at this level of perceived closeness were dyads willing to share their thoughts and discuss deeply personal matters such as religion or personal values.

It is important to examine close friends, as all participants agreed that the closer the friendship, the more frequently they communicated and the deeper their conversations were. Since cultural differences are manifest in values and beliefs, which are highly personal and part of the so-called internal culture (Weaver 1986), only close friendships seem to provide a platform to discuss these topics.

Linking the findings to RQ1, it can be said that a person's values and morals are more important than cultural, religious or linguistic similarity when forming intercultural friendships. Although culture and religion can impact on values, it appeared that the underlying value of not judging each other was the same across the culturally different participants. Values that repeatedly emerged as important were mutual respect, understanding and genuine interest in one another.

These findings support existing research, which has found that similarity in attitudes, opinions and values leads to attraction and hence likely relationship initiation (Byrne 1971, Luo 2009, Reid *et al.,* 2013). On the other hand, cultural dissimilarity is thought to be negatively associated with attraction (Byrne 1971) and has been found to have a negative impact on intercultural friendship formation (Glass et al. 2014). Hence, the findings of this study reveal a layer of complexity. It is often assumed that culturally dissimilar people have different values, opinions and interests. This was reflected by the participants, who initially had doubts whether values would align or whether they could share the same interests, mainly due to misconceptions. It was discovered that, although values impact on behavior differently, exploring and understanding the reason or value behind an action often leads to the realization that "the value that drives the person is the same [as] yours" [Naida]. Intercultural friendship is characterized by difference; negotiating similarities across cultural differences is key to intercultural friendships to enhance perceived similarity, which aligns with prior research (Sias *et al.,* 2008).

An interesting finding from Sias *et al.* (2008) suggests that cultural differences can aid friendship formation, as they make the culturally different person more interesting. This is supported by the findings of this study: exploring cultural differences was often described as "intriguing"; such differences can spark conversation. In the case of one dyad, it was cultural difference in behavior that instigated the friendship, as it piqued mutual interest. Some non-Muslim participants admitted that they had many questions about the religion that they had never had the chance to ask previously, mainly regarding negative media representation. Learning more about the culture and religion first-hand was not only interesting but also triggered further, more personal communication. Cultural difference was seen as an opportunity: "I have experienced more positivity from the difference. It was either an understanding of a new culture, something I learnt new or a new perspective on life that I could use positively in my life" [Naida].

In line with barriers identified from this study, research by Helskog (2015) indicated that negative assumptions about culturally different people negatively impacted intercultural contact. The results align as well with Barnett and Lee's (2002) research, which concluded

that the fear of causing cultural misunderstandings affected participants' communicative behavior, which led to feelings of uncertainty. It is worth noting, however, that such communicative and behavioral uncertainty was only experienced at the initial stages of the friendship and was overcome by gaining cultural understanding through self-disclosure and ongoing communication.

Based on the emerging themes, a valuable insight into the effects or benefits of intercultural friendship have been found in the quest to answer RQ2. Mixed conclusions from prior studies regarding intergroup contact, which found that it can decrease or at times increase prejudice and misconceptions (Allport 1954, Pettigrew *et al.* 2011), were taken into consideration when conducting this study.

Results from this study suggest that intercultural contact is not sufficient for positive attitudinal changes; it was specifically highlighted that only close intercultural friendships reduce misconceptions. Sias and colleagues (2008) point out that one of the rewards of intercultural friendship is gaining cultural understanding and knowledge. That makes these friendships unique, as they facilitate breaking stereotypes and broadening perspectives. Helskog's (2015) Gandhi Project concluded that in-depth intercultural dialogues reduce fear of others. The findings that emerged from this study strongly support such conclusions. They suggest that naturally formed intercultural friendships are characterized by sharing one's values, views and beliefs, which increases reflection on one's own cultural habits and expands the mind to consider other ways of life and doing things. The friendship helps to overcome misconceptions. One must experience such a friendship for oneself for maximized positive impact, which aligns with Helskog's conclusions.

Such friendships reduce ethnocentrism. An attitudinal shift occurs that overcomes viewing one's own culture as superior and central. Kerstin stated, "[I know] that there are many other ways of doing things". Felix said, "It helped me I guess to take other people's points of view into consideration when talking about something personal". It was found that the more ethnocentric views one holds, the less motivation one has to interact with people from other cultures (Arasaratnam & Banerjee 2007).

Much of the data from this research suggests that, in the case of these intercultural friendship dyads, once an intercultural friendship is successfully formed, future friendships are likely to develop. It can almost be viewed as a circular development (see Figure 1).

The findings also suggest that increased understanding is likely to have a positive impact on interreligious acceptance. The impact of the intercultural friendships on the non-Muslim participants in this study can only be described as an elimination of Islamophobia. This suggests that the intercultural friendships from this study offer a valuable solution to misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, which form the roots of Islamophobia (Awan 2011, Krondorfer 2015), providing an enormous opportunity.

It needs to be highlighted that the friendships seemed to have a positive impact beyond the dyad. It appears that showcasing a successful intercultural friendship between a Muslim woman who wears a hijab and a non-Muslim sends a message in itself.

Figure 1: Benefits of intercultural friendships
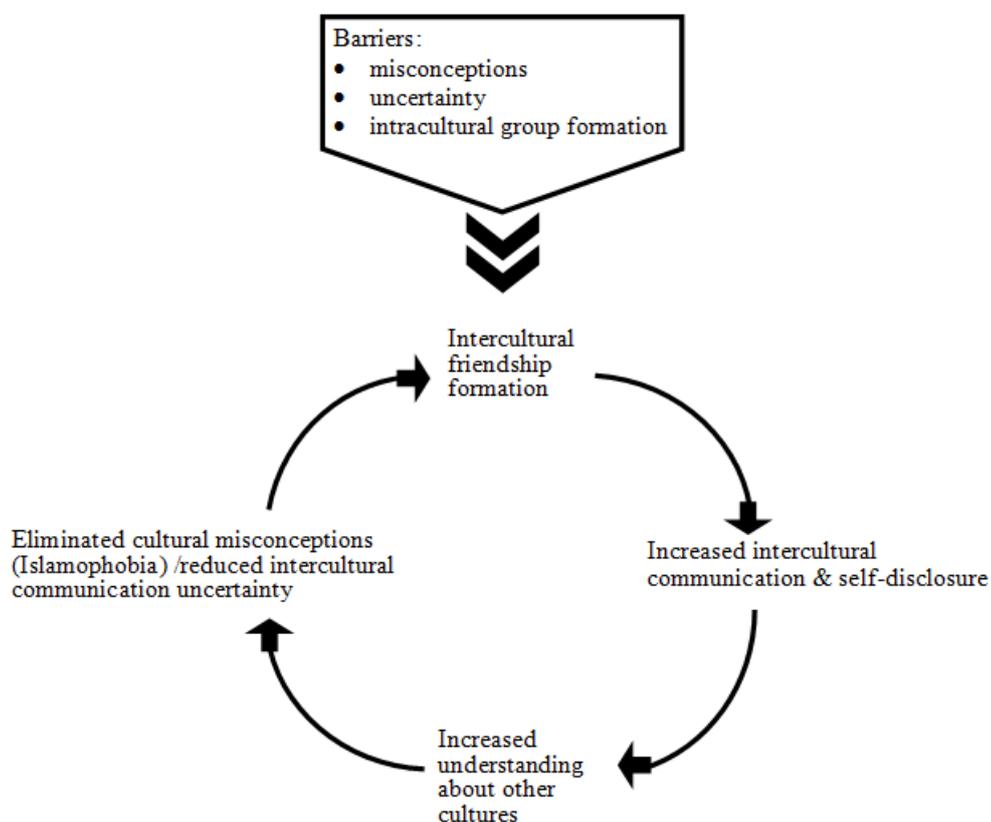
6. Limitations and future directions

One limitation of this study was that, although some participants explained that they had no Muslim or non-Muslim friends prior to this friendship, only limited information was gathered about participants' previous intercultural experience in general, which Sias (*et al.* 2008) found to have an impact on intercultural friendship development.

The small sample size was a limitation. The intent of this study was to gain insight into the subjective experience of friendship dyads. It was hoped that greater depth of information would offset the small sample size.

Finally, this study was limited to a university setting in a particular location: Brisbane, Australia. Findings could be different if a study were to be conducted in other contexts (i.e., other universities or locations). Since the aim was to examine the contextual and subjective experiences of participants, the findings should not be generalized.

Future studies could explore in greater detail the barriers that hinder intercultural friendship with a focus on the role of media, since it was apparent that confessed misconceptions were tightly linked to the media.

About the author

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