
A Buddhist-Muslim Partnership Model for Strengthening Solidarity in the Local Community: A Case-Study of Tha-It, Pakkred, Nonthaburi, Thailand

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Abstract

This article aims to study the development and implementation of a Buddhist-Muslim partnership model to strengthen community solidarity in Tha-It Subdistrict, Pakkred District, Nonthaburi Province, Thailand. It examines: (1) community solidarity and the factors that strengthen it between Buddhists and Muslims in Tha-It; (2) it designs, implements, evaluates, and follows up on a Buddhist-Muslim partnership program for enhancing community solidarity, and (3) presents a conceptual model for such partnerships.

Utilizing qualitative research methods, including documentary research, interviews, ethnography, participant observation, and content analysis, the study reveals several key findings:

1. The literature suggests that religions can be a forceful tool in the construction of exclusivist identities in violent conflict. Addressing rising Islamophobia in Southeast Asia and Thailand and recognizing key Buddhist and Islamic principles that promote interreligious inclusivity is essential for fostering positive interfaith relations. Identities shaped by familial, ethnic, national, and religious ties can both foster unity and create obstacles. Understanding and managing these dynamics is crucial in multicultural societies, especially in Southeast Asia and Thailand. Nonetheless, the study challenges the Southeast Asian literature narrative that views religions primarily as threats, revealing that religious values and principles can also serve as a source of community strength and cohesion.

2. Despite historical harmony, interfaith interaction initiatives in Tha-It remain limited, particularly in educating youth about mutual respect and understanding. Younger generations often lack interest in religious practices and lack knowledge about their own and others' religious traditions, leading to a gap in interfaith engagement. Introducing youth commissions in planning and executing interfaith activities represents a pioneering approach of this research. This strategy involves direct engagement of Tha-It's religious leaders, government officials, and

youth, fostering an inclusive dialogue that values young individuals' contributions to interfaith relationships.

3. The developed Buddhist-Muslim partnership model is structured around four stages: (1) establishing a partnership foundation, (2) engaging in interaction, (3) reflecting and learning, and (4) focusing on sustainability and continuous improvement. The first stage emphasizes mutual understanding and respect, especially among youth, incorporating teachings from Buddhism and Islam, aspects of the Royal Educational Policies of King Rama X, and conflict resolution education. The second stage promotes active engagement in community needs, inclusivity, and participation in projects. The reflection stage allows participants to share experiences and deepen interfaith understanding. Lastly, the model stresses continuous evaluation and collaboration with external bodies to ensure sustainability and responsiveness to community needs.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue; Community Solidarity; Conflict Resolution; Community Building

Introduction

The significance of this research emerges from several key factors: (1) over the past two decades, conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand, particularly in the southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, have escalated, manifesting in frequent violent clashes (Khaosod English, 2015). Although these conflicts are fundamentally rooted in political issues and ethnic identity rather than religious differences, the intertwining

of these aspects is inevitable. The Malay population, which makes up 80% of the region's two million people, is predominantly Muslim and fears assimilation into Thai culture, which threatens their ethnic and linguistic identity. Religion, being integral to this identity, further complicates the situation. Additionally, both insurgents and the Thai state often invoke religious rhetoric to justify violence, exacerbating the divide between Buddhist and Muslim communities (News, 2022). (2) According to Frydenlund and Jerryson (2020), the scholarly literature on Buddhist-Muslim relations is sparse, particularly regarding Southeast Asia and Thailand. Existing research tends to focus more on the violent interactions between these communities rather than on positive engagements. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring Buddhist-Muslim interactions in Central Thailand, with a specific focus on the Tha-It community. By doing so, it seeks to unveil a new model of collaborative initiatives that can enhance communal solidarity. (3) Contemporary research on community solidarity frequently employs the threefold scheme of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Putnam, 2000). However, this model often overlooks the significant impact of family, ethnic, religious, and nationalist connections on social cohesion. These elements are particularly crucial in understanding multiculturalism, Islamophobia, and Buddhist-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia. This research intends to delve deeper into these dynamics, examining how these factors influence social cohesion and can act as both obstacles and assets. Moreover, it explores how the religious values, principles, and doctrines of Buddhism and Islam can be harnessed to strengthen community solidarity.

The research further explores the complex dynamics of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Thailand, particularly focusing on communal conflicts and collaborative initiatives. The core issue is the challenging relationship between these two communities, especially in the Tha-It community, where despite a history of harmony, ongoing interfaith interaction initiatives are limited. This shortfall has led to a perception that the interfaith bond lacks depth and continuity, particularly in educating the youth about mutual respect and understanding. Addressing this gap requires sustained interfaith education efforts to ensure that the younger generation values and upholds these principles, fostering a deeper and lasting interfaith connection. Consequently, there is a critical need to examine how religious and ethnic factors influence social cohesion and to identify strategies that enhance communal solidarity through interfaith collaborations. The research targets academics and scholars in religious and interreligious studies, sociology, and Southeast Asian studies, as well as policymakers,

community leaders, and organizations involved in conflict resolution and interfaith dialogue. By offering new insights into the role of religious values in fostering community solidarity, this study aims to inform both academic discourse and practical initiatives to reduce conflict and promote harmony between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Thailand.

The research involves five steps: first, examining scholarly work on the topic and assessing the quality and necessity of Buddhist-Muslim community solidarity in Thailand; second, designing a tailored partnership program with clear goals, methods, actors, and expected benefits; third, implementing the program and observing its reception in the community; fourth, evaluating and following up on the program to assess its effectiveness; and fifth, presenting a conceptual model of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership based on the research findings.

Research Objectives

1. To study community solidarity and the factors for strengthening solidarity between Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand;
2. To design, implement, evaluate and follow-up a Buddhist-Muslim partnership program for strengthening community solidarity in Thailand;
3. To present a conceptual model of Buddhist-Muslim partnership for strengthening community solidarity in Thailand.

Literature Review

Pathan et al. (2018) warn of the potential growth of Islamophobia in Thailand if conflicts between Thai Buddhists and Muslims are not addressed. They stress the need for Muslims to adapt to the changing social environment while maintaining Islamic principles and emphasize that “Thainess” includes diverse ethnic backgrounds. The authors explain that many who identify as “Thai” actually descend from various ethnic groups, including Lanna, Shan, Lao, Khmer, Siamese, Malay, Chinese, and other Asian races. However, the authors do not mention current examples in Thailand where mutual respect and understanding between Buddhism and Islam are being successfully practiced.

In Frydenlund and Jerryson (2020), Scupin and Joll expand the discussion on Buddhist-Muslim relationships in Thailand beyond the usual focus on the southern provinces

and separatist movements. They explore the broader interactions, coexistence, and tensions among these communities across Thailand, including central, northern, and southern regions. The authors call for a reevaluation of the dynamics and conflicts between these groups, which are often simplistically attributed to religious differences. They highlight the significant linguistic and ethnic diversity within the Muslim and Buddhist populations, arguing that the drive for homogeneity by political and religious leaders negatively impacts ethnic minorities. However, while Scupin and Joll emphasize the need to move away from the dominant narrative focused on separatism, they do not provide specific proposals for enhancing solidarity among different religious communities.

In their research paper “Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia,” Evans et al. (2023) survey six Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka) to explore the complex interconnections between religion, culture, family tradition, and national identity. The study finds that for most respondents, religion intertwines deeply with cultural identity, family traditions, and ethnic backgrounds. Notably, over eighty percent of Thai Muslims and a majority of Buddhists in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand view their faith as integral not only to their personal beliefs but also to their cultural and familial identities. Furthermore, the research highlights a strong correlation between religious affiliation and national identity, with significant portions of the populations in these countries viewing membership in their religious community as essential to genuinely embodying their national identity. The paper underscores the deep-seated link between religion, culture, family tradition, and national identity across these regions, though it does not explore how these factors affect social cohesion, whether as barriers or enablers.

Additionally, in our research, we have explored the principles of Islam (Shafiq, M., & Abu-Nimer, M., 2011) and Buddhism present in the respective scriptures that can be applied to interreligious interactions. From a Buddhist perspective, we have identified several key principles that can enhance interfaith relationships: (1) virtues of fraternal living (Saraniyadhamma); (2) spiritual friendship (Kalyanamittata); (3) the five principles of teaching (Dhammadesaka-Dhamma); (4) topics for discussion (Kathavatthu); (5) four kinds of prejudices (Agati). Our aim is to examine how these Buddhist values, along with Islamic doctrines related to interreligious interactions, can be utilized to strengthen community solidarity (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2007; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the research is expressed in the following figure. 1

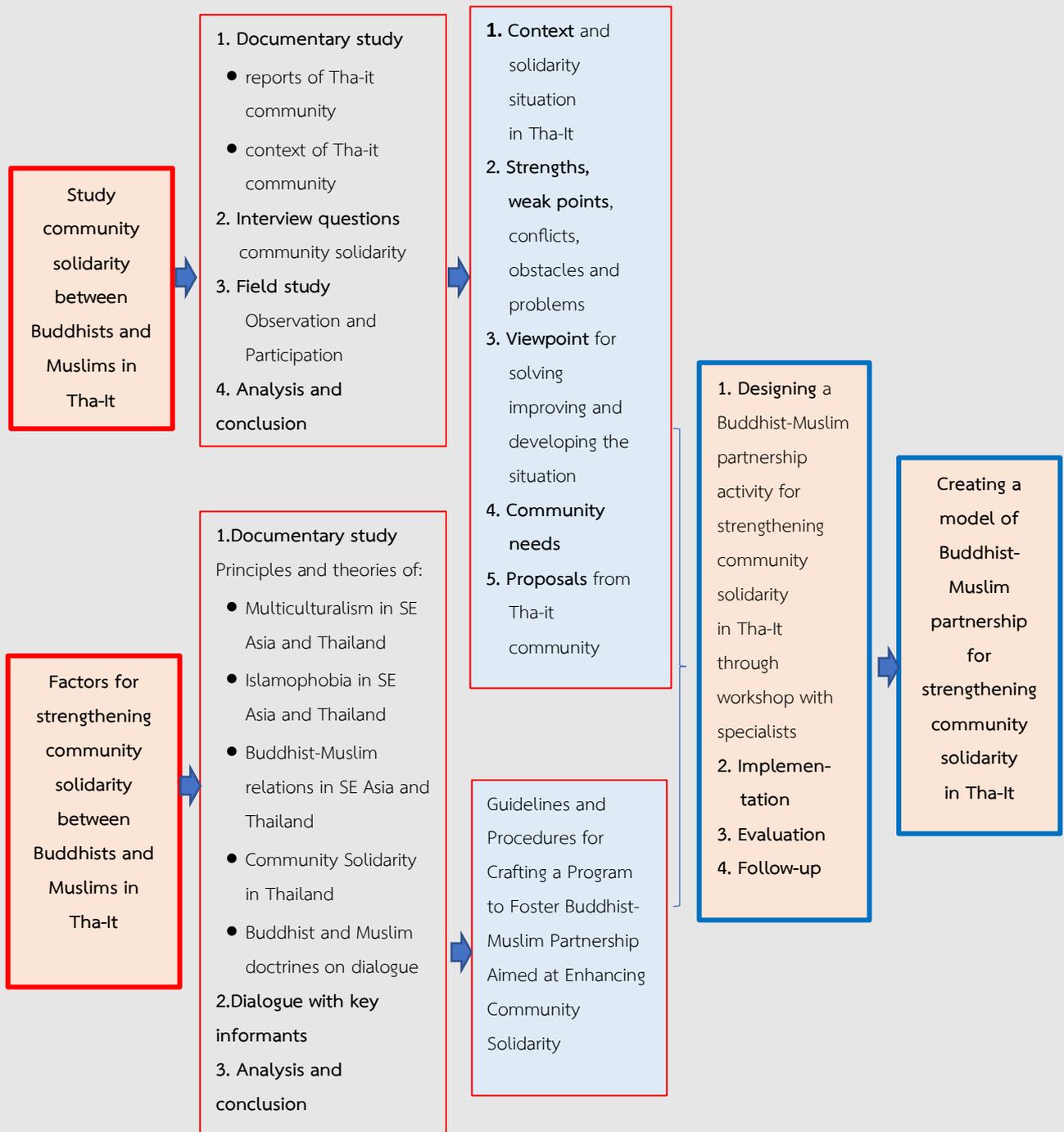


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This qualitative research employs documentary and action research methodologies to investigate community solidarity and factors enhancing relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Tha-It. It is organized into five sequential steps.

Step 1 focuses on exploring community solidarity through scholarly discourse, examining different types of solidarity between Buddhists and Muslims in Tha-It, assessing the perceived quality of these relationships, and identifying the need for strengthening solidarity within the community. Data sources include the Tipitaka, Quran, existing research, journals, books, dissertations, thematic papers, and insights from key informants. Analysis methods encompass content analysis, descriptive analysis, and thematic analysis to interpret findings and derive insights into community solidarity dynamics.

Step 2 involves designing a Buddhist-Muslim partnership program aimed at enhancing solidarity within Tha-It's local community. Key areas of investigation include defining goals, objectives, methods, identifying actors and recipients, and anticipating expected benefits. Methodologically, this step utilizes documentary study, in-depth interviews, and participant observation to inform program design. Analysis of collected data includes content analysis and descriptive analysis to refine the program's framework.

Step 3 focuses on implementing the designed Buddhist-Muslim partnership program to foster community solidarity in Tha-It. This step investigates the behaviors of program actors and recipients through direct observation, supplemented by insights from key informants. Instruments such as note papers and video recorders document activities, with data analyzed descriptively to understand program dynamics and outcomes.

Step 4 centers on evaluating and following up on the partnership program's impact on community solidarity in Tha-It. Key tasks include assessing the accuracy of the initial diagnosis, evaluating the effectiveness of program actions, and determining the overall impact on community solidarity. Analysis methods encompass content analysis, descriptive analysis, and narrative and thematic analysis to provide a comprehensive assessment.

Step 5 aims to present a conceptual model of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership within Tha-It's local community. This step involves analyzing program outcomes and synthesizing data from the Tipitaka, Quran, key informants, and video recordings of activities. Analysis methods include content analysis, descriptive analysis, and grounded theory analysis to develop a theoretical framework illustrating the dynamics and implications of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership model.

Research Results

Objective 1. The initial phase of the research aimed to evaluate the existing level of community solidarity between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Tha-It. Field studies, observations, and in-depth interviews underscored a strong sense of solidarity within Tha-It, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims who have coexisted peacefully for many years. However, it also revealed the persistence of prejudices, misunderstandings, and gaps in knowledge regarding each other's religious beliefs among some residents. While instances of overcoming these divides were noted, limitations in initiatives promoting interfaith interaction were evident, often confined to occasional events such as the King's birthday. There is a perceived lack of depth and continuity in contemporary interfaith bonds, particularly in educating youth about the legacy of mutual respect and understanding in Tha-It. Thus, the research advocates for a Buddhist-Muslim partnership program aimed at strengthening community solidarity in Tha-It, with a focus on educating and involving youth to deepen their understanding, appreciation, and daily embodiment of each other's religious traditions and values.

In the exploration of bonding social capital, the study identifies key factors that strengthen community solidarity within closely-knit groups such as family, friends, and shared social identities like ethnicity or religion. It categorizes these factors into three primary dimensions: emotional connections, community engagement, and shared values and identity. Emotional connections are fostered through frequent interactions, effective communication, conflict resolution mechanisms, and interpersonal trust. Community engagement is enhanced by involvement in service projects, shared goals, local leadership, and recognition of achievements. Shared values and identity are reinforced through traditions, cultural practices, shared experiences, religious activities, social norms, and educational programs.

Objective 2. After months of planning and preparation, including extensive discussions with government officials, religious leaders, and local residents, an interfaith partnership program was initiated in Tha-It. This program involved two primary Buddhist students from Wat Cheng Len School and two high school Muslim students from Thammasalam School in visits to sick and elderly residents in the Wat Saeng Siritham area. The objective was to foster mutual understanding and respect between Buddhist and Muslim communities through shared experiences and aid provision. In a second initiative, four university students (two Buddhists and two Muslims) continued these visits. The visits began with self-introductions, fostering a warm atmosphere and genuine connections. Children offered support and received blessings from the elderly, followed by reflection sessions to share insights. Feedback was collected to refine future activities. The initiative positively impacted community solidarity, with school principals, families, and passersby expressing enthusiasm and interest. The project not only strengthened interfaith cooperation but also inspired students to consider further acts of kindness, enriching the community fabric in Tha-It.

Objective 3. From the insights gained through research and the practical Buddhist-Muslim partnership program in Tha-It, a comprehensive model for strengthening local community solidarity through Buddhist-Muslim cooperation emerges, encompassing four distinct phases.

1. Foundation of Partnership: the initial phase of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership model aimed at strengthening community solidarity focuses on establishing a solid foundation for interfaith cooperation. This involves fostering collaboration both within each religious community and across different faith groups.

a) Within Each Religious Group:

- engagement with other religions: initiatives should commence with an exploration of the teachings within Buddhism and Islam that encourage engagement with individuals of diverse beliefs. Common good, active citizenship, and solidarity: it is crucial to highlight values related to community solidarity, the pursuit of the common good, and support for those in need, as ingrained within each religion.

b) Engagement Between Religious Groups:

- Appreciation of other religion's values: following the intra-religious engagement, both Buddhist and Muslim communities should prepare to share their spiritual wealth, organizing meetings, seminars, and sessions for mutual understanding of each other's religious practices

and values. From a Buddhist perspective, the virtues of fraternal living (Saraniyadhamma) embody principles that significantly enhance community solidarity. These virtues are relevant not only to monks but to everyone. The Saraniya Sutta outlines six essential principles of cordiality that foster amiability, affection, respect, unity, and harmony. These principles align closely with the concepts of right intention and right speech. They include consistently demonstrating acts of loving-kindness through physical, verbal, and mental actions, both openly and privately; generously sharing righteously obtained gains without hesitation; and maintaining virtuous behavior that is impeccable and unbroken. Moreover, individuals are encouraged to uphold and share a noble and liberating view that alleviates suffering. The "four kinds of prejudices" (agati) outlined in the Buddhist teachings, specifically in the Agati Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya, are crucial for interreligious dialogue as they highlight biases stemming from desire (chandagati), hatred (dosagati), delusion (mohagati), and fear (bhayagati). These prejudices can obstruct genuine, constructive exchanges by fostering impatience, mistrust, misrepresentations, and fear of differences. To mitigate these biases, the Theravada tradition advocates for the practice of upekkha (equanimity), one of the four divine abodes, encouraging impartiality and equal treatment of all beings. The concept of "spiritual friendship" (kalyanamittata) is another important Buddhist principle that can be applied to interreligious dialogue. It refers to friends who support each other on the noble eightfold path. While traditionally rooted in Buddhist practice, kalyanamittata can also be found where individuals from different faiths become spiritual friends. These friendships help participants deepen their understanding and practice of their own faiths while gaining insights into others' traditions. True spiritual friends, regardless of their religious backgrounds, support each other in remaining faithful to their traditions and progressing along their spiritual paths.

- Religious principles and values can be harmoniously integrated with the Royal Educational Policies advocated by King Rama X, where there is a pronounced emphasis on the importance of commitment to one's faith alongside the demonstration of kindness and care towards the community.

- Importance of collaborative efforts: further, there should be an emphasis on educating both adults and youth about the significance of partnership and collaboration in volunteer efforts across different religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups, highlighting the value of bridging social capital for the common benefit.

- Conflict resolution education: this component focuses on providing education and workshops on conflict resolution to mitigate religious exclusivism and the overemphasis on harmony and consensus.

2. Engagement and Interaction: the second stage of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership model for strengthening community solidarity focuses on active engagement and interaction:

- Identifying common community needs: organizing seminars and workshops to inform and educate community members, especially the youth and volunteers, about the needs of the elderly, sick, and needy, enhances local understanding and empathy.

- Engaging various groups such as volunteers and the Youth Commission (made up of high school student council members from different schools in Tha-It) in brainstorming solutions for the community's specific needs could assist local authorities in exploring new avenues.

- Promoting active citizenship across all ages: encouraging participation in existing projects or initiating new ones aligns with cultivating good citizenship.

- Training and preparation: infuse these actions with core values, ensuring meaningful and lasting engagements and connections across different segments of the community.

3. Reflection and Growth: following each activity, it's beneficial for participants to share their experiences and insights, fostering stronger emotional and spiritual connections. This reflective process is vital for understanding the individual and collective significance of their contributions. Personal interactions and shared experiences during these activities are instrumental in developing empathy and understanding across religious divides, laying a robust foundation for community solidarity.

4. Sustainability and Improvement: the fourth stage of the Buddhist-Muslim partnership model for strengthening community solidarity emphasizes the importance of continuous improvement and support:

- Evaluation and feedback: this involves a systematic review of the activities' effectiveness, collecting feedback to refine future strategies.

- Long-term commitment: the model advocates for ongoing engagement rather than one-off events, emphasizing the need for activities that continuously foster community cohesion.

- External support: collaborating with NGOs or government bodies that support interfaith cooperation enhances the partnership's reach and effectiveness

Discussions

An in-depth comparison between the outcomes of the research and the existing literature on interfaith partnerships and community solidarity reveals several critical insights. Firstly, the emphasis on education and dialogue stands out as a fundamental component in both this study and the broader literature (Pathan et al., 2018; Jerryson, 2011). This underscores the pivotal role that informed discussions and educational initiatives play in fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious groups. Such efforts are recognized as essential in dissolving barriers of ignorance and intolerance, affirming the principle that knowledge is a key catalyst for tolerance and empathy.

Secondly, the importance of community engagement and volunteerism is highlighted in both contexts as instrumental in building and reinforcing social cohesion. The research findings resonate with existing studies, illustrating how these acts of communal involvement serve not only as bridges connecting different faith communities but also as vital means for cultivating a shared sense of purpose and solidarity (Jerard & Suresh, 2022). Volunteer activities, in particular, provide tangible ways for individuals to contribute to their communities, thereby strengthening the communal fabric.

The role of youth in sustaining community solidarity emerges as a crucial theme across the board. Both this research and previous studies identify the engagement of young people in interfaith activities as essential for the continued vitality of such solidarity (Jerard, & Suresh, 2022). By involving youth, we ensure the transmission of inclusive values and the longevity of interfaith dialogue, preparing the next generation to carry forward the torch of mutual respect and cooperation.

Lastly, the acknowledgment of barriers to solidarity, such as stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural misunderstandings, is consistent across both this research and the literature (Stiftung, 2018). These challenges, often deeply ingrained, pose significant obstacles to interfaith cooperation.

Knowledge from Research

In the exploration of divergences or the contribution of new knowledge to the existing body of literature on interfaith partnerships and community solidarity, the research delves into the complexities of social relationships within the framework of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (Figure 2). This study illuminates the nuanced differences in social ties -

be it familial, ethnic, religious, national, or socio-economic - and their variable impacts on community dynamics. It brings to light the fact that not all connections wield the same influence across diverse contexts. Moreover, the multifaceted identities individuals embody, especially in Southeast Asia and specifically in Thailand, underscore the strong influence of ethnic, religious, national, and familial ties. This pronounced identification in regions where such ties are predominant can lead to unique challenges, which are often underexplored in academic circles. The research aims to systematically outline and scrutinize the potential threats and factors impacting each dimension of social capital, with a particular emphasis on religious beliefs and their dual role as both facilitators and barriers to social cohesion.

Further dissecting the discourse on religion and its societal impact, the study challenges the prevailing narrative in Southeast Asian literature that frequently casts religions more as threats than as unifying forces (Frydenlund & Jerryson, 2020). Contrary to this perspective, the findings from Tha-It Subdistrict reveal how religious values, principles, doctrines, and the way of life that each religion proposes can serve as a formidable source of community strength and cohesion. This shift in perception from viewing religious diversity as a problem to recognizing it as a resource marks a significant departure from traditional academic stances.

Furthermore, the research offers a comprehensive analysis of interfaith dynamics in contemporary settings, diverging from the existing literature's often historical or theoretical focus by providing an up-to-date examination of Buddhist-Muslim relations in Central Thailand, particularly in Tha-It, Nonthaburi Province. This contemporary analysis enriches our understanding of how interfaith relations adapt and respond to the current social and political landscape, revealing nuanced interactions and evolving practices within these communities.

The Integration with Royal Educational Policies, utilizing King Rama X's guidelines as a framework for interfaith partnership activities, marks a novel contribution to the field, bridging national cultural values with efforts to enhance interfaith dialogue. This unique alignment provides a strategic direction for incorporating national identity and values into the fabric of interfaith initiatives.

Lastly, the study introduces a conceptual model for strengthening community solidarity through interfaith partnerships, offering both a theoretical foundation and practical

insights for effective implementation. This model, inspired by the Buddhist-Muslim partnership in Tha-It, serves as a potential blueprint for similar initiatives across Thailand, indicating the broader applicability and relevance of my findings.

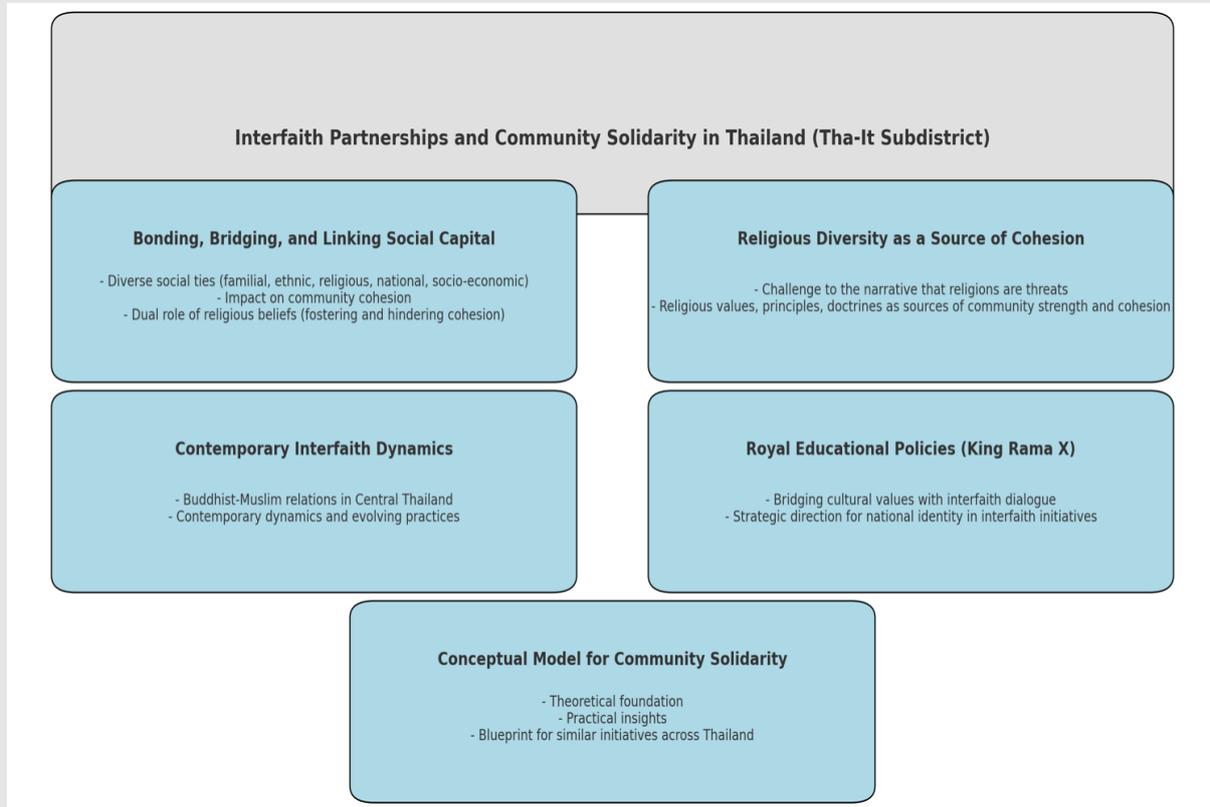


Figure 2 Conceptual diagram of knowledge gained by the research

Conclusions

This research has thoroughly examined scholarly work on Buddhist-Muslim relations, community solidarity, and the Buddhist and M religious principles applicable to interreligious dialogue. By engaging with the community in Tha-It and assessing the local situation, a tailored partnership program was developed with clear goals, methods, actors, and expected benefits. Following the program's implementation and subsequent evaluation, a conceptual model for Buddhist-Muslim interfaith partnerships was presented. This model offers a structured framework that can be utilized for further studies and implementations in other areas of Thailand, fostering enhanced community solidarity and cooperation.

Suggestions

Recommendations for implementing research results emphasize the need for active promotion and celebration of interfaith relationships, including organizing seminars to inspire

younger generations with examples of historic collaboration, promoting conflict-resolution workshops, developing comprehensive manuals for interreligious dialogue, and involving youth in interfaith activities. Future research should focus on conducting comparative studies of Buddhist-Muslim partnerships across various regions, highlighting positive aspects of coexistence, evaluating the lasting impacts of interfaith activities, exploring youth engagement strategies, analyzing policy impacts on multiculturalism, assessing the role of digital platforms, examining educational curricula, and studying the influence of religious leaders on interfaith dialogue and harmony.

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