



RELIGIOUS GROUP IDENTITY AND SOCIAL COHESION: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS IN CALABAR, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores how religious group identity influences social cohesion among Christian denominations in Calabar, Nigeria. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, Conflict Theory, and the Contact Hypothesis, the research investigates the dual function of denominational identity in fostering both internal unity and external division. A key problem addressed is that in Calabar's multi-ethnic and politically sensitive context, denominational identities often align with ethnic and class structures reinforcing both inclusion and exclusion within the Christian community. Despite shared beliefs, persistent divisions are driven by theological elitism, evangelistic competition, and unequal power dynamics. Using a mixed-methods design, the study surveyed 385 participants and conducted 48 interviews across various Christian groups in Calabar. Quantitative findings show a high degree of religious identity internalization ($M = 4.36$), strong in-group loyalty ($M = 4.28$), and active religious engagement ($M = 4.45$). In contrast, intergroup attitudes were moderately positive ($M = 3.61$), indicating limited ecumenical interaction. Thematic analysis identified five key themes: denominational identity, in-group loyalty, internal involvement, cautious intergroup relations, and spiritual involvement. The study concludes that while denominational affiliation offers emotional security and spiritual direction, it also creates rigid social boundaries that hinder broader Christian unity. It recommends intentional ecumenical initiatives, cross-cultural religious education, and psychosocial interventions to address these tensions. This research contributes to knowledge by providing an empirically grounded, context-specific analysis of how religious identity shapes social cohesion within Christian communities in Nigeria.



Keywords: Religious Group Identity, Social Cohesion, Denominationalism, In-group Loyalty, Interdenominational Relations.

Introduction

Religion plays a central role in shaping both individual and collective identities globally. In Nigeria, Christianity is a dominant religion, with denominational affiliation serving not only as an expression of personal faith but also as a significant marker of social identity. Calabar, the capital of Cross River State, is home to a diverse range of Christian denominations, including Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and African Indigenous Churches. These groups differ in theological beliefs, worship styles, leadership, and community practices, influencing both internal cohesion and intergroup differentiation.

Religious identity within each denomination fosters a sense of belonging, spiritual unity, and adherence to shared values. This internal cohesion supports moral discipline, emotional support systems, and active participation in religious and communal life. However, denominational distinctions can lead to tensions and fragmentation, with competition for membership, doctrinal disagreements, and differing evangelistic approaches contributing to mutual suspicion and rivalry.

In the context of Calabar, a city marked by ethnic diversity and political complexity, Christian denominational identities often align with ethnic groups such as the Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Yoruba, and others. This intersection strengthens group cohesion but can also deepen intergroup boundaries and contribute to social fragmentation. Additionally, socioeconomic factors influence denominational affiliation, with wealthier congregations attracting urban elites, while others serve marginalized populations, reinforcing class divisions. These dynamics call for a social psychological analysis of how ethnic, class, and religious factors shape social cohesion within Calabar's Christian community.

Although Christian denominations in Calabar engage in ecumenical events, doctrinal and psychological barriers hinder sustained cooperation. This study fills the gap in research by examining how denominational identity fosters both unity and division within Calabar's Christian community, aiming to uncover challenges and opportunities for promoting cross-denominational solidarity.

In Calabar, Christian denominational identity plays a dual role in shaping social dynamics: it fosters internal cohesion while simultaneously contributing to intergroup fragmentation. On the one hand, denominational affiliation provides psychological security, shared moral values, and a sense of communal belonging. These elements reinforce spiritual commitment and enhance group solidarity. On the other hand, denominational distinctions often produce rigid social boundaries, exclusivity, and rivalry, driven by theological disputes, evangelistic competition, and divergent leadership ideologies.

This tension is further complicated by Calabar's multi-ethnic and politically sensitive context. Denominational identities often align with ethnic blocs such as the Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Yoruba, and others, reinforcing both in-group solidarity and out-group differentiation. Socioeconomic status also shapes religious affiliation, with class distinctions evident in worship styles, leadership structures, and access to resources. Wealthier congregations tend to attract elites, while others primarily serve economically marginalized groups, deepening divisions along class lines. These interwoven dynamics of religion, ethnicity, and class create

complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion that affect social cohesion within the broader Christian community.

Despite the existence of ecumenical dialogues and cooperative church activities, longstanding tensions persist. Historical conflicts, theological elitism, and unequal power dynamics continue to impede meaningful unity. While research in Nigeria has largely concentrated on interfaith interactions particularly between Christians and Muslims there is limited scholarly attention on the internal dynamics of Christian denominations and how these shape social cohesion and division.

This study addresses this critical gap by examining how religious identity, in conjunction with ethnic and class factors, shapes both cohesion and division among Christian denominations in Calabar. Anchored in Social Identity Theory, Conflict Theory, and the Contact Hypothesis, it seeks to uncover the psychological and social mechanisms that drive denominational boundaries and to explore avenues for fostering meaningful cross-denominational engagement and peaceful coexistence.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religious Group Identity and Social Cohesion: Religious group identity, grounded in the principles of Social Identity Theory, represents a complex and evolving aspect of the self that is shaped through an individual's connection to a religious community. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory suggests that people form a significant part of their self-understanding through their perceived belonging to social groups. These group memberships act as cognitive frameworks for interpreting social experiences and serve as key sources of emotional attachment, a sense of belonging, and self-worth. Religious identity, within this context, is one of the most influential and lasting types of social identity, providing individuals with both moral direction and a sense of uniqueness. This is particularly relevant in Calabar and Nigeria in general, where religious affiliation is strongly interwoven with social organization, cultural outlook, and personal identity. Ysseldyk et al. (60) explain that religious group identity includes both the intellectual recognition of belonging to a faith community and the emotional commitment to its beliefs and practices. It offers individuals a sacred understanding of the world and a lasting sense of spiritual membership, which supports psychological well-being. Stein et al. (114) emphasize that participation in religious rituals plays a crucial role in reinforcing this identity by strengthening emotional ties within the group and encouraging commitment in thought, feeling, and behaviour. Therefore, religious group identity plays an essential role in defining the self and fostering emotional security while supporting the unity and continuity of the group's moral framework.

This study understands religious group identity as a particular form of social identity expressed in the context of Christian denominations in Calabar. It reflects how individuals internalize religion collectively, distinguishing between members of their group and others, and showing commitment through emotional loyalty, symbolic connection to traditions, and a sense of shared spiritual destiny. As outlined by Barzian and Hemmati (11) and Ysseldyk et al. (66), this identity performs key social and psychological roles. It satisfies the need to belong, provides meaning in life experiences, and affirms group distinctiveness. However, it can also become a source of conflict when individuals feel their group identity is under threat.

In Nigerian Christianity, denominational identity is closely tied to ethnic background, historical experience, and political affiliation, Okpaleke and Nweke (240); Nolte et al. (34). As

a result, religious group identity offers a valuable perspective for examining relationships within and between Christian groups. In this study, it serves as a tool for analyzing how this form of identity influences individual mental health, shapes social behaviour, and supports shared coping and group interaction in today's Nigerian society. Social cohesion is a complex sociological and psychological concept that reflects the level of connectedness, solidarity, and cooperation among members of a society or group. It involves both emotional and structural aspects: emotional bonds that foster belonging and trust, and institutional mechanisms that promote inclusion, equity, and collective participation. Social cohesion is widely regarded as essential for societal well-being, democratic stability, and social integration.

Despite its frequent usage, social cohesion remains a theoretically contested term. Scholars have made various efforts to define and operationalize the concept, particularly considering its broad application across social, political, and cultural contexts. Dragolov et al. (1) provide a concise, multidimensional definition, framing social cohesion as resilient social relations, positive emotional connectedness, and a shared commitment to the common good. This perspective emphasizes both relational and normative dimensions of cohesion, capturing psychological and structural components. Deineko (221), in a critical reassessment of existing models, stresses the importance of refining social cohesion measurement by incorporating dynamic social processes and value-driven indicators, advocating for more detailed data collection strategies like projective questioning to reduce response biases. These insights underscore a growing consensus that, while inherently complex, social cohesion can be meaningfully understood through interconnected dimensions addressing both individual experiences and systemic structures.

Moustakas and Robrade (1301) further emphasize the evolving nature of social cohesion, arguing that its theoretical clarity requires detailed exploration of subdimensions like belonging, trust, and civic engagement. They suggest that scholars should move beyond static models by accounting for contextual variations, particularly in pluralistic societies where cohesion is tested by religious, cultural, or political differences. Phillips and Berman (1) also highlight that social cohesion is sustained through interactions between shared values, trust, and collective identity, alongside integrative social norms and inclusive institutional frameworks. These views suggest that long-lasting social cohesion necessitates both relational depth and systemic integrity, which are vital for fostering inclusive participation, resilience, and unity.

Collaborating, Dyikuk (20) shows that in religiously diverse Nigeria, social cohesion extends beyond unity within religious groups to encompass interfaith relationships, which are crucial for national harmony and peaceful coexistence. This research views social cohesion as a dynamic and context-sensitive process influenced by cultural shifts, political developments, and religious dynamics. It is not a fixed state but requires ongoing efforts through inclusive dialogue, collective storytelling, and responsive institutional structures. Using this perspective, the study examines how Christian denominations in Calabar a vibrant city in Nigeria influences social cohesion, either fostering harmony or contributing to division in contemporary Nigerian society.

Interdenominational Tensions and Theological Diversity: Interdenominational tensions refer to conflicts among Christian denominations, often fueled by doctrinal differences, liturgical variations, and institutional independence. In Nigeria and specifically Calabar, these

tensions are intensified by socio-cultural, ethnic, and political factors, creating a religious landscape where denominations function as both faith communities and socio-political entities, Okpaleke & Nweke (250). This dual role fosters rivalry for religious authority, membership, and visibility, weakening ecumenical efforts and fostering mistrust. Leadership struggles, divergent evangelistic strategies, and conflicting socio-political positions exemplify these tensions. Okpaleke and Nweke (250) emphasize that denominationalism in Nigerian Christianity perpetuate suspicion and insularity. Wandusim (166) notes similar interfaith challenges in Ghana, where competing religious truth claims obstruct dialogue. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber (22) identify interdenominational divisions as barriers to collaboration even within faith-based environmental activism, affecting social cohesion and civic engagement.

Nmah (16) observes aggressive proselytizing, competition for followers, and resistance to ecumenical collaboration further reinforce these tensions in Nigeria. Hence, Iheanacho, (104) explains that the unchecked proliferation of churches, materialism in ministry, and diminishing spiritual depth exacerbate fragmentation, fostering accusations of theological compromise. This weakens the Church's ability to present a united response to societal challenges. Adebayo and Obasola (33) call for a return to Pauline theological principles that emphasize unity under Christ, while Nmah (12) advocates strengthening interdenominational dialogue to overcome hostility.

Theological diversity refers to the broad spectrum of doctrinal views, spiritual focuses, church traditions, and theological perspectives found within Christianity. This diversity, as noted by Naidoo (7) arises from historical developments, cultural influences, and varied hermeneutical approaches to Scripture. In Nigeria, theological diversity underscores the adaptability of faith traditions to local contexts, where denominations emphasize prosperity teachings, ascetic spirituality, social justice, or experiential encounters with the Spirit, Griffith-Dickson, (76). Rather than undermining unity, theological diversity provides opportunities for mutual learning, ecumenical dialogue, and shared theological reflection. Pinho (161) argues that engaging theological diversity requires an acknowledgment of epistemological limits within individual traditions and a commitment to unity amid difference. Ellingsen (192) suggests that theological diversity fosters creative pastoral engagement and deeper theological insights, akin to interdisciplinary approaches such as quantum physics. Consequently, Griffith-Dickson, (98) asserts that comparative theology and interfaith dialogue serve as an effective mechanism for navigating these complexities.

Rather than posing a threat to Christian unity, theological diversity enhances Christianity's responsiveness to changing socio-religious environments. By embracing humility, mutual respect, and openness, diverse theological perspectives contribute to a more inclusive and effective ecclesial witness. Addressing interdenominational tensions requires intentional ecumenical initiatives, while appreciating theological diversity fosters deeper reflection and collaboration. A detail understanding of both concepts enables scholars and faith communities to cultivate a more unified and contextually relevant Christian witness.

In essence, interdenominational tensions and theological diversity shape Christian engagement in Calabar and Nigeria generally. While denominationalism fosters fragmentation through doctrinal exclusivity and institutional rivalries, theological diversity encourages dialogue and enrichment. Resolving tensions requires ecumenical initiatives, while embracing diversity promotes deeper reflection and collaboration. A balanced understanding of both enhances unity and strengthens Christianity's relevance in a pluralistic society.

Rituals, Doctrines, Worship Practices, and Christian Denominations: Christian denominations are distinct branches within the Christian tradition, each shaped by specific theological beliefs, organizational systems, and worship styles. These include Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, and numerous Evangelical movements. Their unique theological interpretations, ritual expressions, and worship methods contribute significantly to their distinct identities and spiritual orientations.

Rituals are often understood religiously as repeated symbolic actions with deep theological and communal implications that holds a vital place in the Christian faith, Lawler (7). Foundational rites such as baptism and the Eucharist are not merely traditional ceremonies but are rituals integral to spiritual identity and theological expression. Lawler explains that such practices communicate key beliefs, reinforce religious values, and sustain the cohesion of Christian communities by connecting individuals to the shared narrative of the faith.

In this light, Cooke and Macy (20) argue that rituals like baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist serve as embodiments of each denomination's doctrinal understanding. Despite shared practices, differing interpretations prevail. For example, while Roman Catholics regard the Eucharist as the literal presence of Christ, many Evangelicals interpret it as a commemorative act. These distinctions reflect deeper theological commitments and underscore denominational diversity.

Doctrine refers to the structured theological teachings intended to articulate and preserve the fundamental truths of Christianity. Thompson (25) asserts that doctrines are more than theological statements; they function as foundational frameworks that shape religious thought, guide ethical living, and maintain scriptural fidelity. They play a dual role ensuring consistency in biblical interpretation while also supporting spiritual maturity through a harmonized belief system.

From a historical perspective, Gaukroger (175) highlights Christianity's deep investment in doctrinal reasoning, tracing how it developed a tradition of systematic theology that paralleled the intellectual advancements of early scientific inquiry. This fostered a religious culture that emphasized intellectual engagement with faith. Dominiak (96) offers a more dynamic view of doctrine, suggesting it is not merely a static set of ideas but an active force that molds character and sustains communal life. He presents doctrine as an ongoing formative process that connects belief with practical Christian living.

Worship is a theological and context-sensitive expression through which believers render honor and service to God. Anderson (21) frames worship as a spiritually transformative discipline that cultivates a Christ-centered worldview. Henny (73) highlights worship's holistic nature which involve body, intellect, and spirit in acts of reverence and gratitude. Smit (259) describes worship as both a moral and theological pedagogy that helps believers interpret time, history, and human experience through a spiritual lens.

Worship styles vary widely among denominations, ranging from the formal and sacramental rituals of high church traditions to the spontaneous and emotionally charged expressions common in Pentecostalism. Smit (280) again asserted that, these differences reflect distinct theological emphases, yet all contribute to the formation of collective identity and shared values. Alvarado (135) observes that Pentecostal worship adds a vivid and experiential dimension to Christian liturgy, combining charismatic expression with traditional liturgical forms.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework, combining Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Conflict Theory (Marx, 1848), and the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), to comprehensively examine denominational identity and social cohesion within Nigerian Christianity. The inclusion of these theories allows for a multidimensional analysis of the complex social and psychological processes influencing religious group dynamics.

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals incorporate group membership into their self-concept, which fundamentally shapes their attitudes, behaviours, and social interactions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Pamungkas (53), strong religious identification tends to heighten social distance by fostering in-group loyalty and the exclusion of outsiders. This loyalty is predominantly motivated by positive evaluations of the in-group rather than conformity to norms or historical commitments. Furthermore, Dunaetz (108) highlights that while such social identity processes consolidate internal cohesion within denominations, they simultaneously hinder reconciliation by promoting in-group favoritism and negative perceptions of out-groups. Thus, this theory is essential to understanding how denominational loyalty in Nigeria serves both as a source of communal solidarity and intergroup tension.

Building on this psychological perspective, Conflict Theory provides a structural lens grounded in Marx's analysis of power struggles and competition over scarce resources, explaining how social inequalities and institutional arrangements arise from such conflicts, Simon (1). Within religious contexts, denominational fragmentation results not only from theological divergences but also from organizational factors, with larger denominations being more vulnerable to splits, Liebman et al. (343). This framework is crucial for uncovering the underlying power dynamics and resource contests that fuel rivalries and weaken social cohesion among Nigerian Christian groups.

Complementing these approaches, the Contact Hypothesis offers a social-psychological mechanism to mitigate intergroup prejudice and conflict. Proposed by Allport (1954), it argues that positive intergroup contact reduces bias and improves relations, provided certain conditions such as equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support are met, Pettigrew et al. (271); Pettigrew (65). Despite challenges like selection bias and complex psychological processes, this hypothesis is particularly relevant within religious settings, where structured contact can foster mutual understanding and reduce tensions. Applying this theory to Nigerian Christian denominations highlights how constructive intergroup engagement and the cultivation of a shared identity can enhance social cohesion and diminish conflict.

Integrating Social Identity Theory, Conflict Theory, and the Contact Hypothesis enables a comprehensive exploration of denominational identity and cohesion. Social Identity Theory explains the psychological foundations of loyalty and division; Conflict Theory reveals structural causes of tension; and the Contact Hypothesis offers pathways for reconciliation and unity. This multidimensional framework is thus well-suited to address the complexities of religious group dynamics in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

1. Psychological Belonging, Shared Norms, and Socio-Political Influence: Psychological belonging is the emotional need to feel connected, accepted, and valued within a group or community, which impacts mental health and overall wellbeing. Studies across disciplines emphasize the importance of *psychological belonging* in religious communities as a key factor in shaping personal identity and social behaviour. Goodman (373), in "*Belonging, Identity, and Identification—Reviewed: Kinship, Law and Politics*," argues that religious affiliation provides ontological security, essential for emotional well-being and ethical stability. Accordingly, Stroope (568) posits that this sense of belonging is formed through shared beliefs, rituals, and narratives that strengthen group identity and create a common moral structure. Scholars have observed that Christian communities, in particular, foster unity and encourage moral responsibility, civic values, and ethical behaviour, Stroope (592); Mankowski & Thomas (517).

Antonsich (644), in his study "*Searching for Belonging—An Analytical Framework*," views *psychological belonging* as both personal and collective. It serves as a tool for managing social inclusion and exclusion. Within Christian settings, communal stories and spiritual teachings support identity development by promoting acceptance, personal growth, and healing, Mankowski & Thomas (528). These shared experiences strengthen internal bonds and influence how individuals interact with the broader society.

In terms of *socio-political influence*, Park and Smith (276) observed that religious involvement encourages civic participation and volunteerism, driven by shared moral values and a strong sense of group identity. Sihotang et al. (23) highlights that this is particularly evident in communities where religious and cultural or ethnic identities overlap. In African Christian contexts, for instance, churches often function beyond religious spaces, acting as platforms for addressing collective concerns, preserving cultural identity, and engaging in political discourse.

Furthermore, Kumalo (220) explains that African Christian institutions often play a dual role, meeting both spiritual and social needs. Consequently, Sihotang et al., (32) argues that churches serve as spaces for political expression and community organization, especially in postcolonial societies. Pfaff-Czarnecka (199) adds that *psychological belonging* and *shared norms* are influenced by individual movement through social groups and by the broader systems that include or exclude people. This reveals how identity and community connection are shaped by complex and changing social realities. In essence, Christian religious communities serve as powerful sources of *psychological belonging*, transmitters of *shared norms*, and channels for *socio-political influence*. Coherently, these factors shape how members understand their place in society and how they engage with ethical, cultural, and political issues.

2. Intra-denominational Unity and Fragmentation: The themes of unity and fragmentation are essential for understanding Christian group identity and social cohesion within Nigeria's complex religious landscape. A thematic analysis of scholarly research reveals four interrelated patterns: the psychological function of unity, sources of internal tension, the effects of fragmentation, and the rise of charismatic renewal movements. Religious unity plays an important psychological role by fulfilling basic human needs such as identity, emotional safety, and belonging. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), unity within religious groups supports self-esteem and moral purpose. Similarly, Ysseldyk, Renate, et al. (67) argue that shared

beliefs, rituals, and leadership structures strengthen emotional attachment among members and reinforce collective identity. However, the same factors that promote cohesion may also give rise to internal tensions. According to Doyah (93), divisions often occur due to differing theological views, leadership ambitions, and unmet spiritual expectations. Relatively, Sani (718) notes that when members feel excluded or dissatisfied, they may seek new religious identities that better meet their personal and spiritual needs. Sani and Reicher (95) further explain that people are more likely to separate when they believe their concerns cannot be addressed from within.

The effects of fragmentation are both positive and negative. Dyikuk (19) suggests that breakaway groups can offer a renewed sense of purpose and deeper spiritual connection. However, fragmentation can also lead to psychological stress and confusion, especially for individuals caught between traditional loyalties and emerging movements. Dingemans and Ingen (20) argue that religious socialization and strong faith may decrease trust, suggesting that such divisions within religious communities can weaken interpersonal bonds and reduce cohesion. In the Calabar- Nigerian context, these issues are intensified by the country's religious diversity and social dynamics. As noted by Adogame (101), religion influences both individual identity and group behaviour. Odumosu and Simbine (101) emphasize how religious institutions affect political relationships, while Meagher (209) shows how religious competition influences economic activity and social inclusion.

Charismatic movements have emerged as both a result and a cause of fragmentation. According to Ojo (175) and Anderson (52), Pentecostalism broke away from mainline Protestant churches in search of more vibrant, spirit-filled worship. The Deeper Life Bible Church reflects this focus on holiness and spiritual renewal. Likewise, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal introduced charismatic practices within Catholicism but also triggered internal tensions over doctrine and authority, Onyinah (20). Ultimately, intra-denominational unity enhances group identity and cohesion, while fragmentation reflects evolving efforts to renegotiate meaning, authority, and belonging. In Nigeria's diverse religious environment, these dynamics remain central to understanding the shifting patterns of Christian community life.

3. Ecumenical Movements and Interdenominational Collaboration: The goal of promoting unity among Christian denominations in Calabar and Nigeria at large faces significant challenges due to denominational divisions, doctrinal disagreements, and socio-cultural influences, which often have a stronger impact than theological differences, Adebayo & Obasola (33); van Willigenburg (210). Ecumenical Movements and Interdenominational Collaboration have therefore become essential strategies in addressing these divisions, aiming to foster cohesion within Nigeria's religiously diverse landscape. However, these efforts encounter both institutional and psychological barriers. The tension between unity and fragmentation carries important psychological implications that affect individuals' sense of identity, emotional well-being, and moral alignment. Key ecumenical bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), and the World Council of Churches (WCC) continue to engage these challenges, while also navigating complex processes of group identity formation, trust-building, and community belonging.

Founded in 1976, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) seeks to create a unified Christian voice on issues such as religious intolerance and political representation. Psychologically, CAN aims to foster a collective Christian identity by helping diverse

denominations within Nigeria find common ground. However, the association faces challenges in maintaining unity, as internal group identification may lead to tensions with other denominations, which could be perceived as threats to their values and identity, Okpaleke (1166); Okpaleke (43).

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), established in 1986, addresses the fragmentation of Pentecostal and Charismatic communities. It aims to resolve doctrinal differences, especially around practices like prophecy, healing, and exorcism. PFN's goal is to promote theological compromise, which supports unity within the Pentecostal movement. As Adebayo and Obasola (33) highlight, this effort aligns with social cohesion theory, which emphasizes unity for the survival of religious groups. However, Dyikuk (19) notes that doctrinal purity and church autonomy still create internal tensions, hindering the development of a fully unified identity within the movement.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) works globally to unite Christian groups across denominational lines, advocating for social justice and discipleship. In Nigeria, however, the WCC faces challenges due to theological disagreements, liturgical differences, and the increasing influence of Pentecostalism (Dyikuk, 20). As Oxley (16) observes, despite efforts to cultivate ecumenical awareness, the WCC struggles to balance church independence with its broader mission for unity.

For ecumenical efforts in Nigeria to succeed, theological compromise and practical cooperation are essential. This includes reconciling doctrinal differences while working together on social issues like poverty. However, social categorization theory suggests that group favoritism and hostility toward others impede true cooperation. Additionally, religious competition intertwined with political and economic tensions makes sustained ecumenical collaboration difficult, Eke (221).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the quantitative results from the survey, analyzing the degree to which religious group identity, loyalty, cohesion, intergroup attitudes, and religious involvement shape social dynamics among Christian denominations in Calabar. Findings are interpreted considering the study's theoretical framework and relevant literature. The quantitative results demonstrated a robust influence of religious group identity on individual and collective psychological orientation within Christian denominations in Calabar, Nigeria. The construct of group identity yielded a mean score of 4.36, indicating that respondents strongly internalize denominational affiliation as a core component of self-concept and interpersonal behaviour. This finding substantiates Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive self-esteem and behavioural scripts from group membership. It further aligns with Ysseldyk et al. (60), who emphasize the integrative cognitive-affective role of religious identity in sustaining moral certainty and psychosocial belonging.

In-group loyalty recorded a mean score of 4.28, reflecting affective commitment, relational trust, and preferential treatment towards fellow members. Items such as "I trust members of my church more than outsiders" and "I prioritize helping members of my group" received high level of agreement, confirming Dunaetz's (108) proposition that religious in-groups consolidate identity but simultaneously inhibit intergroup reconciliation through loyalty-driven boundaries. These results also corroborate Pamungkas (53), who argued that

loyalty in religious communities arises from emotionally charged identification rather than historical obligation or normative pressure.

The dimension of perceived social cohesion presented a mean of 4.22, signifying high intra-denominational unity and cooperative engagement. Participants strongly affirmed their church's role in fostering togetherness, conflict resolution, and emotional support. This resonates with Dragolov et al. (1) and Stein et al. (114), who conceptualize cohesion as both a relational and normative construct embedded in shared rituals and communal narratives. However, while cohesion within groups appears robust, the bounded nature of such solidarity suggests a fragility in broader religious integration, consistent with the fragmentation predicted by Conflict Theory (Marx, 1848).

Intergroup attitudes, in contrast, produced a moderate mean of 3.61, indicating measured but simultaneous and contradictory posture or feelings of openness toward other denominations. While respondents expressed general respect and theoretical support for Christian unity, actual engagement in interdenominational events was limited. This supports Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), which posits that prejudice reduction is contingent upon structured contact with institutional support and status equality, a condition evidently insufficient in this context, as also noted by Okpaleke and Nweke (250).

Finally, religious involvement exhibited the highest mean (4.45), underscoring the centrality of faith in respondents' daily lives through consistent participation in liturgical activities, personal devotion, and volunteer service. These results affirm Kumalo's (220) position on African Christianity as a comprehensive moral, social, and spiritual system and corroborate Stroope's (568) assertion that religious engagement reinforces prosocial values and civic behaviour. Coherently, the data confirms that denominational identity reinforces strong psychological belonging and moral orientation within groups. However, the same identity boundaries that nurture cohesion also inhibit ecumenical collaboration, thus substantiating the dual interpretive lens of Social Identity Theory and Conflict Theory, while partially validating the conditional applicability of Contact Hypothesis. These findings explain the contradiction of religious identity as both an integrative and divisive force in Nigeria's pluralistic Christian landscape.

The thematic analysis of interview data provided deeper insight into the psychosocial dynamics of group identity and cohesion among Christian denominations in Calabar. Five dominant themes were discovered: identity formation and distinctiveness, loyalty and affective solidarity, internal cohesion and collective efficacy, ambivalence toward interdenominational engagement, and spiritual motivation and participation.

First, participants described denominational identity as central to their self-definition and worldview. Narratives revealed how religious affiliation offers not only doctrinal orientation but also emotional anchorage and a sense of spiritual inheritance. This supports Ysseldyk et al. (66), who argue that religious identity serves as both a psychological and ontological framework, fulfilling the human need for uniqueness, belonging, and continuity.

Second, loyalty emerged as a normative expectation and emotional obligation. Respondents described instances of material, emotional, and moral support rendered within their church, illustrating high relational density and preferential commitment. This reflects Pamungkas's (53) finding that affective loyalty is a primary mechanism of cohesion and echoes Tajfel's (1979) assertion of in-group favoritism as a stabilizing but exclusionary social force.

The third theme social cohesion was evident in descriptions of shared rituals, problem-solving networks, and mutual support structures. Participants emphasized how collective worship and community activities reinforced unity and a common purpose. However, there was implicit recognition that such cohesion often failed to transcend denominational lines. This internal focus reinforces Dragolov et al.'s (1) and Stein et al.'s (114) distinction between internal bonding and external bridging in cohesion theory.

Fourth, interdenominational tension between different groups became apparent. While respondents espoused doctrinal tolerance and the principle of Christian unity, many expressed discomforts with joint worship or theological compromise. This tension reflects what Allport (1954) and Pettigrew (1998) noted as the conditional efficacy of contact highlighting the role of institutional trust, doctrinal equality, and cooperative goals in enabling genuine intergroup engagement.

Finally, religious involvement was described not merely as duty but as deeply internalized spiritual expression. Participants linked their worship practices, volunteerism, and daily ethical choices to faith-based convictions. This finding affirms Kumalo's (220) claim that religion in African settings operates as both existential orientation and public engagement tool, shaping moral agency and communal resilience.

In synthesis, the qualitative findings provide empirical depth to the psychological mechanisms identified in the quantitative data. They demonstrate that religious identity is simultaneously a unifier and divider, creating secure internal bonds while delimiting the scope of ecumenical empathy. This duality supports the study's integrated theoretical framework, showing how Social Identity Theory explains identity salience, Conflict Theory illuminates institutional rivalries, and the Contact Hypothesis offers a conditional pathway toward unity.

Conclusion

The study concludes that religious group identity functions as a double-edged construct: while it enhances intra-group cohesion, loyalty, and spiritual commitment, it simultaneously restricts broader ecumenical collaboration due to perceived boundaries between denominations. The high levels of internal cohesion observed among respondents affirm the psychological and social value of religious identity; however, the moderate intergroup engagement highlights persistent fragmentation within Nigerian Christianity. Thus, denominational identity, though beneficial in fostering belonging and moral development, must be carefully negotiated to prevent insularity and religious parochialism.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, religious institutions are encouraged to promote interdenominational dialogue through structured platforms that emphasize unity, shared worship, and theological exchange. Theological education should be revisited to include content on ecumenism, inclusive doctrines, and respect for denominational diversity. Churches should initiate cooperative programs designed under Allport's Contact Hypothesis to foster meaningful intergroup engagement. In addition, pastoral training should address the psychosocial complexities of group identity and help congregants balance loyalty with openness. Furthermore, denominational leadership should prioritize unity-driven community projects that can act as practical spaces for collective action, while researchers and



policymakers should continue to explore the interface between religious identity and civic life across diverse contexts.

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