

Article

Predicting Cultural Acceptance Among Students in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces: Key Influencing Factors

Punya Tepsing, Kasetchai Laeheem *  and Buskorn Komontree

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai 90110, Songkhla, Thailand; punya.t@psu.ac.th (P.T.); buskorn.k@psu.ac.th (B.K.)

* Correspondence: kasetchai.la@psu.ac.th

Abstract: (1) Background: Thailand's three southern border provinces face challenges in fostering cultural acceptance due to historical conflicts and religious influences. Promoting understanding through schools and families is crucial for reducing tensions and building harmony. This research aimed to examine the relationships among key factors influencing students' behavior in accepting cultural differences within the multicultural social context of Thailand's three southern border provinces. (2) Methods: Data were collected through a survey of 601 student samples and analyzed using computer software to calculate Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regression coefficients. (3) Results: The research results found six predictors that significantly predicted students' behavior in accepting cultural differences in the multicultural social context of Thailand's three southern border provinces at a 0.001 significance level. These predictors were as follows: religious guidance (X_1), attitudes toward cultural differences (X_4), student–peer relationships (X_6), understanding of cultural differences (X_5), student–teacher relationships (X_7), and encouragement to perform religious practices (X_3). (4) Conclusions: Six predictors, including religious guidance, attitudes, and relationships, explained 45.7% of behavior fostering cultural diversity. The findings highlight the vital roles of religion and interpersonal connections in promoting acceptance.



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Keywords: cultural acceptance behavior; cultural differences; students; multicultural social context; three southern border provinces

1. Introduction

Thailand's three southern border provinces—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—form a dynamic multicultural region where diverse ethnic groups coexist. Malay Muslims constitute the majority, followed by Thai and Chinese communities, each contributing to the region's rich cultural landscape [1]. As the largest ethnic group, Malay Muslims share strong cultural and linguistic ties with neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia. In these southern provinces, they receive compulsory Thai education while simultaneously pursuing Islamic studies in Tadika schools. Bilingual in Central Thai and Bahasa Melayu, they predominantly identify as “Ang Rang Nayu” (Orang Melayu) rather than “Orang Suya” (Orang Siam). Their cultural identity is reflected in their religious and social traditions, including Hari Raya celebrations, mosque-centered community life, and traditional performing arts such as Hulu and Mayong Likay. The Thai ethnic group, although the national majority, represents a minority in these provinces. Educated under the Thai national curriculum, they communicate in Central Thai and local Thai dialects while predominantly practicing Theravada Buddhism. Their cultural heritage is expressed through Thai temples,

the Songkran Festival, and traditional performing arts such as Manora and long drum dance performances. The Chinese ethnic group is another minority, primarily residing in urban and commercial centers. While they receive Thai national education and generally communicate in Central Thai, some pursue additional studies in the Chinese language, gaining fluency over time. Their religious practices encompass Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, while their cultural traditions are visible in Chinese shrines and temples, as well as annual celebrations such as Chinese New Year, which features dragon and lion dances [1].

The multicultural character of this region is deeply embedded in its historical development. Once part of the broader Malay territories, the area has undergone successive religious and cultural transformations, beginning with the rise of the Srivijaya Empire in the eighth century. During this era, Hinduism and Buddhism were the predominant religions, as evidenced by ancient religious sites and artifacts in Pattani and Yala provinces. However, the spread of Islam in the 15th century led to widespread conversion among the local population, culminating in the establishment of an Islamic sultanate [2]. Despite this shift, a segment of the population continued practicing Buddhism, influenced by the Hinayana (Theravāda) tradition introduced by the Thai state. Meanwhile, the Chinese ethnic community migrated to the region at various points in history, with early waves dating back to the Srivijaya period. The most significant migration occurred in the early 20th century, driven by economic and political upheavals in China and the demand for labor in colonial industries. These Chinese migrants played a crucial role in shaping the cultural landscape, as seen in the historic Chinese architecture, shrines, and local legends that remain integral to Pattani's heritage. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of multiculturalism in this region necessitates an exploration of its historical dynamics rather than a superficial focus on ethnic distinctions [3]. This long-standing coexistence of multiple ethnic groups has fostered both cultural integration and, at times, cultural tensions. Recognizing these historical patterns offers deeper insights into the region's diverse cultural identities, which can be categorized into Malay Muslim, Thai, and Chinese cultural traditions. These cultural influences are prominently displayed in everyday life, from markets and parks to schools and festivals.

Schools, in particular, serve as microcosms of multiculturalism, as many educational institutions in the three southern border provinces accommodate both Thai Buddhist and Muslim students. Within these schools, students actively engage in cross-cultural interactions, participating in activities that incorporate Thai, Muslim, and other cultural elements. Beyond the classroom, students are frequently exposed to temples, mosques, and Chinese shrines in their daily surroundings, as well as the annual celebrations of various ethnic traditions. Additionally, the school curriculum integrates lessons on cultural diversity, further fostering cross-cultural understanding. Rogoff's research highlights how children naturally develop cross-cultural learning experiences, as every society provides cultural frameworks that shape communication, thought processes, and worldviews [4]. Recognizing the importance of fostering cultural awareness, the Thai Ministry of Education has implemented policies aimed at equipping students with the skills necessary for navigating cultural differences. As 21st-century Thai society continues to evolve in the context of globalization, exposure to diverse cultures is becoming increasingly prevalent. Therefore, cultivating a new generation capable of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity, embracing different perspectives, and engaging in cross-cultural thinking is essential for Thailand's future [5].

However, due to the current conditions, students' learning about cultural differences is unequal and changes over time, resulting in different behaviors. As Sopapon [6] reported, after the unrest in the three southern border provinces in 2004, children growing up during or after that year exhibited behavior towards living with people of different religions

that is completely different from previous generations. This is because these children are growing into teenagers and young adults with little to no relationships with people different from their group. Social wounds have widened the gap between the two ethnic groups in the area, leading to increased mistrust and rejection of understanding different cultures. Before 2004, there were joint activities between Buddhists and Malay Muslims, including visiting each other, studying together, and participating in events like weddings and funerals with separate food for Buddhists and Muslims. This research reflects those students in this area exhibit behavior in the context of cultural differences based on various conditions or factors. Currently, the three southern border provinces remain areas of conflict. Although the level of violence has decreased, it has not returned to pre-2004 normalcy. One issue might be the historically painful multicultural society in the three southern border provinces. Nonetheless, the Thai state believes that fostering knowledge and understanding of cultural differences will promote peace and acceptance of diverse cultures. As Jantawongsri, Chaowarakul, Bunyasut, and Benchamapronchai [7] noted, schools must encourage students to accept cultural differences so that when they enter the wider world, they will have the foundation to adapt to diverse multicultural societies.

Amidst a multicultural society, various conditions signal the behavior of acceptance of cultural differences among Thai Buddhist and Muslim students, such as politics, beliefs, and ideologies. Research by Tepsing [8] indicates that religion drives cross-cultural learning among youth in the three southern border provinces of Thailand. Particularly, Muslim students who attended Tadika schools tend to follow religious leaders in religious practices by interacting with people of different religions and by displaying behavior that aligns with Muslim social norms. However, some religious leaders teach against accepting people of different faiths or teach religion incorrectly, such as claiming that killing people of other religions is not a sin and leads to heaven, which causes violence [9]. Research by Laheem [10] points out that religious socialization is a crucial factor directly and positively related to promoting ethical behavior among Muslim youth. This social process shapes youth into well-adjusted individuals, changing them naturally over time. Currently, religious socialization is also discussed in terms of reducing religious prejudice. The southern border region still faces issues with attitudes towards religious differences.

Research by Earmeryuth [11] and Unwanno [12] explains that Islam intensifies Malay identity, making previously blurred identity boundaries more distinct. Polarization between people of different religions has become unavoidable, causing Malay Muslims to feel uneasy and forced to adapt to the Thai state's context, where Buddhism and Thai identity are central. This tension between Muslims and Buddhists underscores the need for knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity and acceptance of various cultures as policies the state actively promotes, especially in schools. The acceptance of cultural differences among students is also influenced by environmental factors such as family, relatives, friends, teachers, community members, and various media. Teachers, in particular, play a crucial role in creating the learning environment for students. According to Banks [13], teachers significantly influence the development of correct racial attitudes and values in students through teaching practices and by being unbiased role models. Therefore, teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward students' racial, religious, and cultural differences should be constructive. Teachers' biases can have a broad impact, extending from the school to the community. Banks [14] also noted that acceptance of cultural diversity in schools can be achieved through content integration, knowledge construction processes, prejudice reduction, teaching methods, and school reform. Families also have a similar influence. The Center for Child and Family Policy Knowledge [15] notes that family conditions affect issues in the three southern border provinces. The lower quality of life for children and youth compared to other regions affects their behavior. Social beliefs, values, and inter-

actions with others in the community also influence behavior. Most communities in the three southern border provinces are Malay Muslim, and these conditions shape thoughts, particularly the sense of Malay ethnic identity. Historically, the strength of this group has impacted Thailand's security and the confidence of Buddhists in living their lives. The violence resulting from unrest has further separated different cultures. Powerful situations can also stimulate new behaviors. On this matter, Sidor and Dubin [16] explained that Various factors contribute to differences in human behavior, including individual, social, environmental, cultural, and psychological influences. Behavioral responses are shaped by the nature of the stimulus, its intensity, and the specific context in which it occurs. A deeper understanding of the complex interplay among these factors can help develop more effective strategies for fostering positive behavior and enhancing overall well-being.

This study aims to examine the key factors that influence students' acceptance of cultural differences in Thailand's three southern border provinces. Specifically, it seeks to develop a predictive model of students' cultural acceptance behavior by analyzing critical determinants such as religious upbringing, attitudes toward and understanding of cultural diversity, and interpersonal relationships within these multicultural communities. These factors can shape both positive and negative behavioral responses. The ability of students to recognize and appreciate cultural differences plays a vital role in fostering a multicultural society. As Nurgiansah, Wulandari, and Bety [17] argue, conflicts in multicultural societies can be mitigated if multicultural education is effectively integrated into the national curriculum. Such an approach serves as a bridge between diverse cultural identities by reinforcing democratic values, equality, justice, unity, peace, and mutual respect for cultural diversity. Understanding the factors that contribute to cultural conflicts is therefore essential for developing strategies to enhance intercultural acceptance and promote social cohesion. Schools in the three southern border provinces exist within diverse cultural landscapes, encompassing Thai, Malay Muslim, Chinese, and other ethnic traditions. However, the degree of cultural exposure varies depending on the school's location. Schools in urban centers and commercial districts typically enroll students from multiple ethnic backgrounds, providing greater opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. In contrast, schools in suburban or rural areas, particularly smaller institutions, may have student populations that are over 90 percent Muslim or over 90 percent Buddhist, resulting in more limited exposure to cultural diversity. To address these dynamics, this study will explore the following research questions: (1) What factors influence students' behavior in accepting cultural differences? (2) To what extent can these factors predict students' acceptance of cultural diversity? The findings will offer valuable insights into the relationships among these variables and contribute to the development of a predictive framework for understanding students' cultural acceptance behavior. Moreover, this study's outcomes will inform strategies to reduce cultural conflicts in the region, fostering more harmonious intercultural interactions and strengthening social cohesion.

2. Materials and Methods

This study received approval from the Center for Social and Behavioral Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Songkhla, Thailand, under certificate No. PSU IRB 2021-LL-librats 034 (Internal) on 21 December 2021.

The research method was carefully chosen to systematically analyze the factors influencing students' cultural diversity acceptance in Thailand's three southern border provinces. A quantitative approach was selected to allow for objective measurement and statistical analysis, ensuring generalizable conclusions. A survey-based design was used to efficiently collect data from a large sample of students, enabling standardized responses for comparability.

To ensure representativeness, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed, selecting students from schools of different sizes and grade levels, thereby reducing selection bias. A structured questionnaire was developed based on existing theories and prior research, providing a reliable and validated tool for measuring students' attitudes and behaviors. The questionnaire underwent expert validation and Cronbach's alpha testing to confirm its consistency and reliability.

For data analysis, Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships between key variables, while multiple regression analysis identified significant predictors of cultural acceptance behavior and explained their impact. This structured and data-driven approach ensured the accuracy, reliability, and applicability of the findings, making it suitable for understanding cultural diversity acceptance in a multicultural educational context.

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine the factors influencing students' acceptance of cultural diversity and develop a predictive model for their cultural acceptance behavior. A cross-sectional survey design was used to collect data from students in Thailand's three southern border provinces. This study applied correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis to determine the relationships between key variables and their predictive power in explaining students' cultural acceptance behavior.

2.2. Sample Group

This study employed a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure a representative and diverse sample of 601 students from Thailand's three southern border provinces. This approach systematically selected students from schools of varying sizes and educational contexts, enhancing the generalizability and reliability of the findings.

To achieve comprehensive representation, schools were first categorized into three size groups based on Ministry of Education criteria [18]: small schools (fewer than 500 students, 29 schools), medium schools (501–1500 students, 15 schools), and large schools (more than 1500 students, 5 schools). One school from each size category was then randomly selected in each province, resulting in a total of nine schools.

Within these schools, students were stratified by grade level into lower secondary (grades 7–9) and upper secondary (grades 10–12). To maintain randomization and reduce selection bias, 33–35 students were chosen from each grade level using a simple random sampling method without replacement.

The final sample was designed to reflect the region's demographic and cultural diversity, incorporating students from both Buddhist and Muslim backgrounds. This ensured that perspectives from different religious and social contexts were adequately represented. By including students from various school sizes, grade levels, and cultural backgrounds, this study provides a robust and well-balanced dataset, allowing for meaningful insights into factors influencing students' cultural acceptance behaviors.

2.3. Research Instruments and Development

The research instrument used was a questionnaire, developed through the following steps:

- (1) Reviewing Theories and Relevant Research: Studied theories and related research.
- (2) Defining Specific Terms: Defined specific terms for the attributes to be measured.
- (3) Creating Questions as shown in Appendix A.1: Developed questions to cover the defined terms, adapting from various scholars' questionnaires. The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

Part 1: General Information

Part 2: Behavior in Accepting Cultural Differences

Part 3: Religious Upbringing Factors

Part 4: Attitudes and Understanding of Cultural Differences

Part 5: Interpersonal Relationship Factors

- (4) Expert Validation: The questionnaire was reviewed by five experts for structural validity to ensure the questions aligned with the attributes to be measured, using a consistency index. Only questions with a consistency index of 0.5 or higher were retained, resulting in consistency values ranging from 0.60 to 1.00.
- (5) Pilot Testing: The questionnaire was tested with 40 students from schools not in the sample group to determine reliability using Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency. The overall questionnaire had a reliability score of 0.875.

The validity of the research instrument was established through expert validation and content analysis, ensuring that the questionnaire accurately measured the intended constructs. The instrument was developed based on existing theories and prior research related to cultural diversity acceptance. To confirm its content validity, five experts reviewed the questionnaire, assessing the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. Only questions with an Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index of 0.5 or higher were retained, indicating that the instrument adequately captured the key dimensions of cultural acceptance behavior. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted with 40 students from non-sampled schools to assess the instrument's effectiveness. Following this, necessary adjustments were made based on feedback to refine item wording and eliminate ambiguities. Construct validity was further supported by factor analysis, which confirmed that the questionnaire items were aligned with their respective theoretical constructs. Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, which assessed the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The overall reliability score of 0.875 indicated a high level of internal coherence, ensuring that responses were consistent and replicable across different samples.

2.4. Data Collection

The research team conducted field data collection with assistant researchers with data collection experience. The focus was on local researchers in the area where the data would be collected. Training sessions were held for the assistant researchers to ensure a consistent understanding of the field data collection methods.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using R program, a widely used statistical software for social science research. The analysis involved the following steps:

Descriptive Statistics: Mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage distributions were calculated to summarize students' demographic information and responses related to cultural acceptance behavior.

Correlation Analysis: Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the relationships between religious upbringing, attitudes toward cultural differences, interpersonal relationships, and students' cultural acceptance behavior.

Multiple Regression Analysis: A stepwise multiple regression approach was applied to develop a predictive model for students' cultural acceptance behavior. The regression model was evaluated using:

R^2 (Coefficient of Determination) to determine the proportion of variance explained by predictor variables.

Standardized Beta (β) Coefficients to assess the relative contribution of each predictor variable.

p -values ($\alpha = 0.05$ and 0.001) to determine statistical significance.

Multicollinearity Tests: Variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values were checked to ensure that independent variables were not highly correlated.

2.6. Criteria for Interpreting the Average Value

The researcher selected the criteria for interpreting the average values of the eight predictors and the criterion variable based on the concept of Laeheem [19] as follows:

Range of Average	Level of Meaning
1.00–1.49	Least
1.50–2.49	Low
2.50–3.49	Moderate
3.50–4.49	High
4.50–5.00	Highest

3. Results

3.1. Profiles of the Subjects

Most of the 601 subjects who were students in Thailand's three southern border provinces were female (60.4%), male (39.6%), Muslim (69.2%), and Buddhist (30.8%). Most of the subjects were in the age group 15 years (30.7%), followed by 16 years (20.0%), 13 years (18.1%), 12 years (16.7%), and 14 years (14.5%), respectively.

3.2. Data on Criterion Variables and Predictors

The criterion variable for this study was the behavior of accepting cultural differences (Y). The data analysis revealed that students in the multicultural social context of the three southern border provinces of Thailand had a high level of behavior in accepting cultural differences (average score of 3.71).

From the analysis of predictors related to religious upbringing factors, it was found that students in the three southern border provinces had the highest level of religious explanation (X_2), which was at a high level (average score of 4.14). This was followed by encouragement to perform religious practices (X_3) at a high level (average score of 3.93) and guidance towards religious interests (X_1) at a moderate level (average score of 3.38).

Regarding predictors related to attitudes and understanding of cultural differences, it was found that students in the three southern border provinces had the highest level of understanding of cultural differences (X_5), which was at a high level (average score of 4.18). This was followed by attitudes towards cultural differences (X_4) at a high level (average score of 3.96).

As for predictors related to interpersonal relationship factors, it was found that students in the three southern border provinces had the highest level of student–teacher relationships (X_7), which was at a high level (average score of 4.09). This was followed by student–peer relationships (X_6) and student–community relationships (X_8), both at high levels (average scores of 3.99 and 3.93, respectively).

Details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of criterion and predictor variables.

Variables	Mean	S.D.	Level
<i>Criterion variables</i>			
Behavior of accepting cultural differences (Y)	3.71	0.76	High
<i>Religious upbringing factors</i>			
Guidance towards religious interests (X_1)	3.38	1.05	Moderate
Religious explanation (X_2)	4.14	0.84	High

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variables	Mean	S.D.	Level
Encouragement to perform religious practices (X ₃)	3.93	0.92	High
<i>Attitudes and understanding of cultural differences</i>			
Attitudes towards cultural differences (X ₄)	3.96	0.79	High
Understanding of cultural differences (X ₅)	4.18	0.74	High
<i>Interpersonal relationship factors</i>			
Student–peer relationships (X ₆)	3.99	0.82	High
Student–teacher relationships (X ₇)	4.09	0.83	High
Student–community relationships (X ₈)	3.93	0.86	High

3.3. Relationships Between Criterion and Predictor Variables

The analysis of the relationship between religious upbringing factors and cultural acceptance behavior (Y) found that all three religious upbringing factors had a positive relationship with cultural acceptance behavior (Y) with statistical significance at the 0.001 level. Guidance in religious interests (X₁) had the highest correlation coefficient ($r = 0.490$), followed by guidance in religious interests (X₁) and encouragement to perform religious practices (X₃), with correlation coefficients of 0.339 and 0.286, respectively.

The analysis of the relationship between attitude and understanding of cultural differences and cultural acceptance behavior (Y) found that attitude and understanding factors had a positive relationship with cultural acceptance behavior (Y) with statistical significance at the 0.001 level. Attitude towards cultural differences (X₄) had the highest correlation coefficient ($r = 0.564$), followed by understanding of cultural differences (X₅), which had a correlation coefficient of 0.518.

The analysis of the relationship between interpersonal relationship factors and cultural acceptance behavior (Y) found that all three interpersonal relationship factors had a positive relationship with cultural acceptance behavior (Y) with statistical significance at the 0.001 level. Student–teacher relationships (X₇) had the highest correlation coefficient ($r = 0.538$), followed by student–peer relationships (X₆) and student–community relationships (X₈), with correlation coefficients of 0.535 and 0.479, respectively.

Details are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Relationship between criterion variables and predictors.

Variables	r	p-Value
<i>Religious upbringing factors</i>		
Guidance towards religious interests (X ₁)	0.490	0.000
Religious explanation (X ₂)	0.339	0.000
Encouragement to perform religious practices (X ₃)	0.286	0.000
<i>Attitudes and understanding of cultural differences</i>		
Attitudes towards cultural differences (X ₄)	0.564	0.000
Understanding of cultural differences (X ₅)	0.518	0.000
<i>Interpersonal relationship factors</i>		
Student–peer relationships (X ₆)	0.535	0.000
Student–teacher relationships (X ₇)	0.538	0.000
Student–community relationships (X ₈)	0.479	0.000

3.4. Factors Predicting Cultural Acceptance Behavior

From constructing the best regression model using the stepwise method, it was found that six predictors significantly predict the cultural acceptance behavior of students in the three southern border provinces of Thailand at the 0.001 statistical significance level, with a prediction efficiency of 45.7%. The six predictors were as follows: guidance in

religious interests (X_1), attitudes towards cultural differences (X_4), student–peer relationships (X_6), understanding of cultural differences (X_5), student–teacher relationships (X_7), and encouragement to perform religious practices (X_3). These predictors had a positive relationship with students’ cultural acceptance behavior, with statistical significance at the 0.001 level. The predictor with the highest correlation to cultural acceptance behavior was guidance in religious interests (X_1), and the predictor with the lowest correlation was the encouragement to perform religious practices (X_3). Details are shown in Table 3. The predictive equation for students’ cultural acceptance behavior in the multicultural social context of the three southern border provinces can be written in raw scores as follows:

$$\hat{Y}_Y = 0.93 + 0.24X_1 + 0.20X_4 + 0.14X_6 + 0.13X_5 + 0.12X_7 + 0.10X_3$$

Table 3. Final model of factors predicting behavior of cultural diversity acceptance among students in the multicultural social context.

Predictor Variables	B	S.E.	<i>p</i> -Value	95% CI
Constant	0.93	0.14	0.00	0.65, 1.21
Guidance towards religious interests (X_1)	0.24	0.03	0.00	0.19, 0.29
Attitudes towards cultural differences (X_4)	0.20	0.05	0.00	0.10, 0.29
Attitudes towards cultural differences (X_4)	0.14	0.04	0.00	0.06, 0.22
Understanding of cultural differences (X_5)	0.13	0.05	0.01	0.03, 0.23
Student–teacher relationships (X_7)	0.12	0.05	0.01	0.04, 0.21
Encouragement to perform religious practices (X_3)	0.10	0.03	0.00	0.04, 0.16

Multiple R-squared: 0.457. Residual standard error: 0.558.

4. Discussion

This study found that the factors predicting cultural acceptance behavior include guidance in religious interests and encouragement to perform religious practices. These factors help in understanding religious principles that respect diversity and recognize the roles of all parties, even those of different faiths. This reflects that religion still plays a crucial role in students’ behavior in the multicultural social context of the three southern border provinces of Thailand. This finding is consistent with the study by Tepsing, Laeheem, and Akissakul [20], which found that some Muslims in the three southern border provinces learn about cultural differences through the promotion of education and religion to Muslim children and youth in the vicinity of Thai Buddhist temples. Similarly, Nakurirat’s [21] study pointed out that strengthening relationships and coexistence among people of different cultures in the three southern border provinces depends on the role of religious leaders of each faith and the two main religious communities in the area: Buddhists and Muslims. These leaders are key to weaving the bonds of peace and harmony in living together through interfaith platforms and dialogues.

Attitudes and understanding of cultural differences play a significant role in shaping students’ behavior. If students have a certain attitude or understanding of cultural differences, their behavior will align with that perspective. This aligns with the findings of Nunthaburom and Isarangoon Na Ayutthaya [22], who found that after implementing a learning activity plan to reduce prejudice based on multicultural concepts, students’ behavior improved. The change in attitudes, along with learning basic content about racial, religious, and cultural diversity, enhanced their social skills. This indicates that students from different cultural backgrounds can coexist harmoniously. Similarly, Sripen [23] found that cultural assimilation between Muslim youth and Thai culture requires socio-psychological actions that focus on building understanding and acceptance of cultural differences within Muslim practices. This helps foster positive attitudes towards Thai

society and supports the development of the southern border region, creating cultural acceptance so that youths can work with government officials. The state must create spaces for children and youth to express their views on diverse cultures. If such platforms can enhance understanding of real situations, it will lead to creative behaviors. Sukaroj's [24] research found that creating cultural spaces through activities like photography or other arts can help students understand and accept cultural differences to the extent that they can apply the values and benefits of diversity in daily life and make decisions to accept these differences. U-ma and Jeawkok [25] noted that expressing mutual cultural understanding creatively is not against social principles or cultural context. The unique identity of the three southern border provinces, with its prominent Malay ethnicity, multi-ethnic nature, and political unrest, has led to creative activities that support cultural learning processes. Sinthunava and Pokpong [26] identified four key factors for learning cross-cultural experiences for students and staff participating in institutional programs: (1) studying and understanding others' cultures, (2) providing spaces for cultural expression and accepting behaviors different from one's own, (3) creating strategies for working with people from different cultures, and (4) initiating actions to build good relationships with people from other cultures.

Additionally, there are interpersonal relationship factors, such as relationships with teachers or friends, that influence students' behavior in accepting cultural differences in the multicultural context of the three southern border provinces of Thailand. This aligns with the research by Soommat and Piolueang [27], which studied the personal factors of students and desirable attributes in a multicultural society of an educational institution. They found that students' special abilities in relational dimensions and interpersonal communication skills positively influence desirable attributes in a multicultural society, with statistical significance. Teachers, being closely associated with students, greatly influence students' cultural learning. Thongmark, Neimted, Choosuwan, and Sittichai [28] found that teachers lacking knowledge and skills in their roles, failing to regularly train or develop themselves, and teaching only in the local Malay language without using Thai, limit students' opportunities to develop Thai communication skills, making it difficult for them to learn and understand other cultural contents. Similarly, Srilarak [29] found that teachers in the three southern border provinces tried to adapt their teaching methods and study the principles of various religions to ensure students do not misunderstand other cultures or exhibit incorrect behaviors. Teachers who are open to differences and organize learning considering religious and cultural differences influence students' attitudes toward cultural diversity. Chuchoon [30] indicated that students learn values, develop good attitudes, and exhibit behaviors that understand and accept cultural differences through teachers' roles. Therefore, teachers must educate and promote cultural acceptance and respect among students. Banks [13] explained that teachers must organize learning to reduce prejudice by creating lessons or activities that help students develop open attitudes toward cultural diversity and resolve misunderstandings tied to deep-seated stereotypes. Friendship is another factor. If students have friends from different cultures, they are more likely to learn and exhibit behaviors aligning with their friends' cultures. However, current school environments are becoming more monocultural, with fewer schools having a balanced proportion of Thai Buddhist and Muslim students. Many schools lack multicultural environments, leading to students lacking friends from different religions and cultures. This concerns the state as it impacts multicultural education policies. Arphattananon [31] found that the proportion of Thai Buddhist and Muslim students in schools in the three southern border provinces correlates with almost all aspects of educational policy. For instance, if there are fewer Thai Buddhist students, schools might reduce extracurricular activities like the Wai Khru Ceremony, resulting in Muslim students missing opportunities to learn

about Thai Buddhist cultural practices. Having friends from different religions and cultures significantly influences cross-cultural learning skills, including language, art, and traditions. If there are only Muslim students and no environment fostering cultural learning, it may cause problems when students face a diverse world outside. Individuals who are part of the dominant Thai culture may experience little difficulty navigating societal norms. However, those from different cultural backgrounds often struggle to adapt and may develop prejudices against those outside their own cultural group. While preserving one's cultural identity is essential, it is equally important to foster shared cultural spaces that promote mutual understanding and coexistence. The findings of this study highlight an imbalance in cultural integration, aligning with Agoya's [32] assertion that societies benefit when individuals maintain their cultural heritage. While the introduction of new cultural influences is inevitable, the suppression or elimination of a particular group's culture can lead to cultural tensions. Agoya also warns that cultural integration, though often viewed positively, can become problematic if the distinctions between cultural identities become too blurred. This raises the question of whether the term multiculturalism itself requires a rhetorical reassessment. While the government promotes it as a beneficial framework, many local communities perceive it as mere rhetoric used to address longstanding issues in the three southern border provinces. Despite nearly two decades of implementing multicultural policies, social divisions persist in the region. From a sociological perspective, fostering acceptance of cultural diversity in a multicultural society requires actively reducing prejudice and ethnocentrism. This means refraining from viewing one's own culture as inherently superior and instead recognizing all cultures as equal. To address the region's challenges, achieving true equality requires minimizing the emphasis on ethnic differences. Bastidas [33] argues that multiculturalism must be grounded in human rights principles, ensuring that all cultural groups receive equal recognition and protection under state governance. However, in practice, achieving cultural equality remains a significant challenge. In any nation, one cultural framework tends to dominate. As long as national culture dictates school curricula without adequately incorporating local and minority cultural perspectives, community attitudes toward cultural diversity may shift negatively. This in turn becomes a major barrier to implementing policies aimed at fostering acceptance of cultural differences.

From the outset of this research, it was established that at least six key factors contribute to predicting students' behavior in accepting cultural differences. Among these, the most compelling were those related to religion, particularly the influence of religious orientation and encouragement to practice faith. This underscores the significant role that religion plays in shaping cultural acceptance behaviors in Thailand's three southern border provinces. This finding aligns with the work of Qadir and Wani [34], who argue that religion can foster mutual respect and understanding among diverse cultural groups, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive society. Moreover, they note that religious and cultural diversity can shape public policies and institutions, such as the education system and legal frameworks. While religious diversity can sometimes lead to conflicts and challenges, it also presents opportunities for intercultural growth, deeper understanding, and mutual respect. However, their analysis does not address whether religious diversity rooted in historical conflicts or political tensions can effectively promote mutual respect. In my view, for religious diversity to foster genuine respect, it must not be entangled with deep-seated historical grievances between religious communities. This raises an important question: Why do other regions of Thailand, despite also integrating religious principles into education, experience fewer interreligious tensions compared to the three southern border provinces? Is it because these other areas lack the long history of political and religious conflicts that have shaped divisions in the south?

The findings of this study offer significant contributions in three key areas: education, religion, and society. **Educational Implications:** This research highlights the potential of leveraging religious education to enhance cultural acceptance. Schools that consistently promote religious practices—while ensuring that religious teachings are integrated with general education and interpreted in ways that encourage positive attitudes toward other faiths—can foster greater acceptance of cultural diversity. This approach is particularly relevant for Malay Muslim students, many of whom engage in religious education through Tadika schools. However, for this strategy to be effective, classroom discussions must avoid emphasizing historical conflicts. Evidence suggests that minority groups in Thailand who attain higher levels of education tend to develop more inclusive attitudes toward cultural diversity. This is consistent with the findings of Murdock and Ferrings [35], who studied attitudes toward multiculturalism in Luxembourg and found that support for cultural diversity is closely linked to educational attainment. **Religious Contributions:** Strengthening religious institutions can further promote acceptance of cultural differences. Religious leaders play a crucial role in organizing community initiatives that foster unity and cross-cultural dialogue. Additionally, all religions emphasize moral teachings that encourage individuals to become ethical and compassionate members of society. Pangalila and Rumbay [36] found that religious diversity in Indonesia fosters positive perspectives, ultimately leading to a more cohesive and enriched cultural environment. **Social Impact:** This study underscores the role of family and early socialization in shaping attitudes toward cultural diversity. Parents who instill correct religious principles in their children, foster positive perceptions of people from different cultural backgrounds, and encourage strong social relationships contribute to a more harmonious society. Social media also plays a growing role in shaping public discourse on cultural and religious diversity, rapidly spreading both accurate and misleading narratives. While religious teachings can positively influence morality and ethics, the misinterpretation or distortion of religious content can also contribute to social divisions. Damgaci and Aydin [37] explored this dynamic in their study on perceptions of multicultural education in Turkey. By presenting a short film and gathering audience reactions, they found that participants overwhelmingly supported multicultural education, advocating for the elimination of discrimination, injustice, and alienation while promoting empathy, tolerance, and fairness. Applying these insights to Thailand's three southern border provinces could be transformative. If policymakers and peace-building authorities incorporate these findings into educational policies, they could cultivate greater empathy among children and youth. Encouraging tolerance and appreciation of diversity can be achieved by integrating the six predictive factors into school curricula and extracurricular activities. For instance, collaborative projects between Thai Buddhist and Muslim students—such as co-producing short films that explore each other's cultures—could foster mutual understanding, reduce social alienation, and ultimately strengthen students' acceptance of cultural differences.

Within the context of cultural differences in the three southern border provinces, there are implications of conflict, instability, ethnocentrism, and sensitivity in managing education. Therefore, students' behavior is influenced by various factors. The identified factors are just a part of but are significant for predicting students' cultural acceptance behavior, as they provide a rational explanation and offer solutions to problems. However, these findings cannot be expected to be universally generalized due to the specific context of the data sources. Nonetheless, they help identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for children and youth in the three southern border provinces, aiming to promote appropriate behavior in a sustainable multicultural society.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study on cultural diversity acceptance among students in Thailand's three southern border provinces, some limitations must be

acknowledged, namely the following: (1) This research was conducted in a highly unique sociopolitical and religious context. The three southern border provinces of Thailand have distinct historical, cultural, and religious dynamics that may not be representative of other multicultural regions in Thailand or beyond. The applicability of these findings to different cultural or geopolitical settings may therefore be limited. (2) This study relied on self-reported survey responses, which are inherently subject to biases, particularly social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses that align with socially acceptable attitudes toward cultural acceptance rather than their genuine beliefs and behaviors. This could have influenced the accuracy of the reported levels of cultural acceptance. (3) This study primarily employed quantitative methods, which allowed for statistical analysis of relationships between variables but did not explore the deeper reasons behind students' attitudes and behaviors. A qualitative approach, such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, could provide richer insights into the personal and contextual factors influencing cultural diversity acceptance.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research examined the factors influencing students' cultural diversity acceptance in Thailand's three southern border provinces, a region with historical religious and ethnic tensions. This study found that religious guidance, attitudes toward cultural differences, peer relationships, understanding of cultural differences, teacher–student relationships, and encouragement of religious practices significantly predicted students' acceptance of cultural diversity, explaining 45.7% of the variance in behavior. These findings highlight the role of religion and interpersonal relationships in shaping students' attitudes in a multicultural context. This study is contextually relevant as it addresses the unique sociopolitical and religious landscape of the southern border provinces, where historical conflicts have affected cultural interactions. By identifying the key predictors of cultural acceptance, the study provides empirical evidence for educational policies and multicultural integration strategies aimed at reducing tensions and fostering harmony. In terms of contribution, this study expands previous research by integrating multiple social, religious, and educational factors to explain cultural acceptance behavior. Unlike earlier studies that focused on ethnic identity or conflict-driven narratives, this research presents a predictive model that can be applied in similar multicultural contexts. It also emphasizes the importance of school environments and religious influences, offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders working on multicultural education and conflict resolution initiatives.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance cultural acceptance among students in the region.

First, this study's results can inform the development of school curricula and instructional strategies that promote understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Collaboration between educational institutions, religious organizations, and families is essential to ensuring culturally appropriate and inclusive learning experiences. Schools should implement programs that facilitate cross-cultural interactions and provide students with opportunities to engage meaningfully with peers from different backgrounds.

Second, addressing students' behavioral responses to cultural differences requires a nuanced approach, given the complexity and deeply rooted nature of these influences. Ethnic prejudices, often shaped by historical narratives and early socialization, may contribute to tensions among students. Therefore, effective interventions must involve key stakeholders—including educators, scholars, religious leaders, parents, and youth representatives—to create comprehensive strategies that foster intercultural understanding and reduce prejudice.

Future research should explore the causal mechanisms that shape group behaviors among youth, particularly Malay Muslim youth. Large youth gatherings are often perceived by state authorities as potential security concerns; however, in many cases, they may simply reflect expressions of ethnic and cultural identity within a multicultural society rather than political activism. A deeper investigation into these dynamics could help dispel misconceptions and inform more effective policies for fostering social cohesion.

Additionally, further studies should examine whether the predictors of cultural acceptance behavior identified in this study vary across different demographic and religious groups. Expanding this research to include adults and comparing predictive factors between Buddhist and Muslim communities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of cultural acceptance dynamics across different age groups. Such insights would be valuable in developing targeted initiatives to enhance intercultural harmony and cooperation.

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Appendix A

Appendix A.1

Research Questionnaire

Predicting Cultural Acceptance Among Students in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces: Key Influencing Factors

This questionnaire is part of a research study. We kindly ask for your cooperation in completing this survey and appreciate your valuable time in providing information that will contribute significantly to this research.

Instructions:

1. This questionnaire aims to study the factors influencing students' behavioral expressions in the context of cultural diversity in the three southern border provinces. The information collected will be used effectively for academic purposes. We sincerely request you to provide truthful responses, as this will help identify factual insights that can lead to the development of better understanding and strategies for promoting cultural awareness among youth.
2. The questionnaire consists of five sections, spanning five pages:
 - Section 1:** General Information
 - Section 2:** Behavioral Expressions in the Context of Cultural Diversity
 - Section 3:** Religious-Based Upbringing Factors

Section 4: Attitudes and Understanding of Cultural Diversity**Section 5: Interpersonal Relationship Factors**

3. Your responses will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to any third party. Completing this questionnaire will not affect you in any way.
4. We sincerely appreciate your cooperation in completing this survey.

Section 1: General Information

Instructions: Please check (✓) the box that corresponds to your information.

1. Grade Level: _____ Class: _____ Student No.: _____
2. Gender:
☐ Male ☐ Female
3. Age:
☐ 12 years ☐ 13 years ☐ 14 years ☐ 15 years ☐ 16 years
4. Religion:
☐ Buddhist ☐ Muslim

Section 2: Behavioral Expressions in the Context of Cultural Diversity

Instructions: Please check (✓) the box that best describes your behavior over the past six months The rating scale is as follows:

- 5 = Always (16 or more times)
 4 = Frequently (11–15 times)
 3 = Occasionally (6–10 times)
 2 = Rarely (1–5 times)
 1 = Never

Religious-Based Upbringing Factors		1	2	3	4	5
1.	Participating in multicultural activities that align with religious principles					
2.	Listening to opinions on multicultural activities					
3.	Sharing meals with friends from different cultural backgrounds					
4.	Respecting the religious practices of friends from different faiths					
5.	Being open-minded about the traditional attire of friends from different ethnicities					
6.	Not opposing friends in practicing their traditional customs					
7.	Engaging with new friends from different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds					
8.	Exchanging and learning about different cultural traditions					
9.	Adapting behavior appropriately in diverse multicultural settings					
10.	Avoiding prejudice toward thoughts or expressions of friends from different religious backgrounds					
11.	Assisting friends of different religions in times of distress without discrimination					
12.	Demonstrating goodwill and friendship toward friends from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds					
13.	Being sincere in friendships with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds					
14.	Being mindful of language that may cause misunderstandings with friends from different cultures					
15.	Providing accurate and reasonable information to friends from different cultural backgrounds					
16.	Using respectful gestures and tone when interacting with friends from different cultures					
17.	Appropriately using gestures in conversations with friends from different cultural backgrounds					
18.	Controlling emotions even when feeling upset by expressions of friends from different cultures					
19.	Finding the best solutions to resolve cultural conflicts					
20.	Adjusting personal viewpoints before cultural conflicts arise					

Section 3: Religious-Based Upbringing Factors

Instructions: Please check (✓) the box that best represents how frequently you experience the following based on the provided scale.

- 5 = Always (16 or more times)
 4 = Frequently (11–15 times)
 3 = Occasionally (6–10 times)
 2 = Rarely (fewer than 6 times)
 1 = Never

Behavioral Expression in a Culturally Diverse Context	1	2	3	4	5
Guidance on Religious Awareness					
1. Receiving recognition for participating in religious activities					
2. Being honored for performing religious rituals					
3. Being praised for strictly adhering to religious principles					
4. Receiving rewards for encouraging friends to engage in religious practices					
5. Being guided and reminded about significant religious observances					
Explanation of Religious Principles					
6. Parents teach the importance of charity and donations					
7. Parents explain the steps involved in performing religious rituals					
8. Parents educate about religious prohibitions and associated sins					
9. Parents instruct on mandatory religious practices and their rewards					
10. Parents describe concepts of heaven and hell according to religious beliefs					
Encouragement to Practice Religious Activities					
11. Parents frequently take me to perform religious activities					
12. Parents set a good example in religious practices					
13. Parents lead prayers or religious recitations					
14. Parents consistently remind me to practice religious activities regularly					
15. Parents provide financial support for religious practices					

Section 4: Attitudes and Understanding of Cultural Diversity

Instructions: Please check (✓) the box that best represents your level of agreement based on the provided scale.

- 5 = Strongly Agree
 4 = Agree
 3 = Neutral
 2 = Disagree
 1 = Strongly Disagree

Attitudes and Understanding of Cultural Diversity	1	2	3	4	5
Attitudes Toward Cultural Diversity					
1. I believe students can engage in cross-cultural activities that do not contradict religious principles.					
2. I believe all students should have equal opportunities to participate in cultural activities.					
3. I believe schools should provide spaces for religious practices of all faiths.					
4. I believe schools should organize religious observance events for all faiths.					
5. I believe cultural traditions of all religions should be preserved and passed on.					

Attitudes and Understanding of Cultural Diversity					
	1	2	3	4	5
6. I believe schools should encourage students to wear cultural attire in accordance with their beliefs.					
Understanding of Cultural Diversity					
7. Every religion teaches students to do good and avoid wrongdoing.					
8. All religions emphasize the concept of rewards, such as entry into heaven.					
9. Practicing cultural traditions is an expression of ethnic identity.					
10. We should not belittle or look down upon cultural practices of different ethnic groups.					
11. Cultural traditions of all ethnic groups are valuable and meaningful.					
12. We should refrain from comparing cultures to avoid conflicts.					

Section 5: Interpersonal Relationship Factors
Instructions: Please check (✓) the box that best represents your relationship experiences based on the provided scale.

5 = Very Strong

4 = Strong

3 = Moderate

2 = Weak

1 = Very Weak

Interpersonal Relationship Factors					
	1	2	3	4	5
Student-to-Student Relationships					
1. My friends have a strong understanding of cultural traditions.					
2. My friends appreciate traditional cultural attire.					
3. My friends actively participate in cultural activities.					
4. My friends assist in cultural practices.					
5. My friends accept and respect cultural differences.					
Student-Teacher Relationships					
6. Teachers encourage students to follow cultural traditions.					
7. Teachers recognize and commend students who engage in cultural activities.					
8. Teachers participate in cultural activities alongside students.					
9. Teachers show care and concern for students involved in cultural activities.					
10. Teachers provide advice and guidance on expressing oneself in a multicultural context.					
Student-Community Relationships					
11. Community members provide opportunities for students to participate in cultural activities.					
12. The community supports students in organizing cultural events.					
13. The community encourages students to wear traditional attire.					
14. The community honors students who uphold cultural traditions.					
15. The community advises students who do not follow cultural tradition					

Thank you for your valuable participation.

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