



Social Conformity and Cultural Integration: Non-Muslim Students' Behavioral Adaptations during Ramadan (A Case Study of University of Narowal)

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Abstract

This study provides an analysis of the behavioral adaptations, emotional experiences, and processes of identity negotiations of non-Muslim students in socio-cultural and religious contexts in Pakistani universities during the holy month of Ramadan. Using thematic analysis, the study provides an exploration of how non-Muslim students negotiate their religious identities in a Muslim-majority society. Results show that non-Muslim students voluntarily adapted their behavior as culturally appropriate, which included not eating in plain sight, dressing modestly, and joining Ramadan events. These adaptations were motivated by a level of civic empathy, mutual respect, and social belonging desire, within the Muslim majority educational setting. Furthermore, results show how non-Muslim student exposure to Ramadan events facilitated interfaith empathy and experience of Islamic values of discipline, patience, and gratitude. This study adds to the wider sociological conversation about religious coexistence, negotiating cultures, and how educational settings support peaceful interfaith relationships. The University of Narowal is an outstanding exception in a third-world country like Pakistan, where religious minorities live peacefully, without a shadow of fear or perceived threat of danger. The minority students feel more secure and enjoy great freedom in a diverse environment. The tolerant and inclusive atmosphere of the varsity can be largely credited to the progressive and humane role of the faculty. This study points to possibilities for universities to facilitate a space where different religious identities can coexist peacefully while producing a culture of respect and mutual understanding.

Key words: *Non-Muslim students, Behavioral acclimatization, Social connection, Interfaith understanding, Institutional impact, Pedagogical diversity.*

Introduction

In Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, Ramadan is not only a religious observance but a kind of social rhythm that governs public life, reshapes institutional calendars, and reaffirms the moral community of shared fasting, prayer, and ethical consciousness (Malik & Zaman, 2020). The month traditionally makes adjustments to academic, economic, and social patterns of everyday life, in the form of altered university schedules, altered food patterns, and apparent public forms of piety (Khan & Mahmood, 2015). For Muslim students, these changes are spiritually important in their own right, and socially normative. But for non-Muslim students attending university in Pakistan, there is a unique socio-cultural temporarily situation created by Ramadan.

In many Islamic societies, religious practice spills over into public life. Conformity in a public space during Ramadan is seen as respect and social obligation (Saeed, 2007), so stopping to eat in public places, respecting dress codes, or eating Iftar collectively, demand



negotiated social compliance from some individuals. It should also be noted that the students who are not Muslim and do not have any requirement to take part in Islamic rituals, will often self-regulate their various behaviours in a way that demonstrates an act of cultural integration and social agreement. Self-regulation does not mean religious conversion or religious assimilation, it demonstrates, in sociological terms, conformity and intergroup sensitivity sensitive to the specific social context, based on theories of social identity, and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Non-Muslim students' behavior during Ramadan is influenced by a need to continue peaceful coexistence, prevent disrespect, and follow the moral and cultural climate of the university, which can be informally governed by peer expectations or institutional decorum (Qadeer, 2006). Such students can deliberately avoid eating or drinking in public, talk in hushed tones, or attend Iftar parties, not as a reflection of religious conviction but as an expression of pluralist respect and social tact (Khan & Ahmad, 2021). This renders Ramadan a useful prism through which to view social conformity in religiously diverse learning environments.

In Pakistani universities, where religious freedom is constitutionally assured but the dominant culture is heavily shaped by Islamic values, non-Muslim students are involved in a subtle negotiation of identity. Their answers are neither fully assimilative nor oppositional but rather a type of adaptive coexistence. The current research seeks to explore how non-Muslim students interpret and react to the socio-religious climate of Ramadan, the types of behavioral adaptation they utilize, and the ways in which these behaviors articulate larger dynamics of cultural integration, mutual respect, and social conformity within the Pakistani higher education environment.

Objectives

Objectives of the study are as follows;

1. To study the behavioral adjustments of non-Muslim students during Ramadan in the context of Pakistani university life.
2. To inquire into the cultural and social impetus for such changes within an academically Muslim-dominated setup.
3. To examine how non-Muslim students, view their conformity as a mode of cultural integration and religious respect.

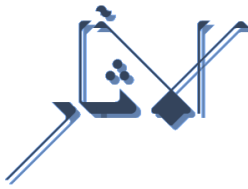
Literature Review

Social Conformity within Religious Environments

Social conformity is the way in which people change their behavior to suit the expectations of a specific social group or setting (Asch, 1955). In highly religious communities, conformity can be spurred not by religiosity but by the unstated norms that shape public life. In Pakistan, a Muslim nation, Islamic values play a considerable role in institutional life, public propriety, and interpersonal behavior, particularly during Ramadan (Qadeer, 2006).

Throughout this month, communal rhythms shift: working hours are adjusted, academic schedules are condensed, and shared practices such as Iftar and Tarawih prayers command center stage in social life (Malik & Zaman, 2020). Ramadan is also a period when public religiosity is most intense, and expectations around behaviors are heightened. For non-Muslims, such an environment demands that there be a high sensitivity to overt behaviors like eating, drinking, or dressing in public places (Ahmed, 2012).

The conformity of non-Muslim students during Ramadan is seldom the product of formal rules. Instead, it is the product of what Goffman (1959) referred to as the "presentation of self" in a moral community. Such students tend to get through the holy month by adopting



behaviors that fit the prevailing social script not to conceal their own selves, but to honor the moral code that regulates the shared experience. Such "contextual conformity" differs from religious conversion or theological assent; it is rather a kind of social diplomacy to ensure mutual respect and peaceful coexistence (Sharot, 2001; Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

These practices are usually conditioned by social signals and peer pressures, which are internalized via everyday interaction. Asch's (1955) conformity experiments, though old, are still insightful in highlighting how people tend to conform to group norms despite differing personal convictions. Among Ramadan students, non-Muslim students seem to exercise what Hopgood (2011) describes as "voluntary deference" a deliberate effort not to perform acts that might be offensive to the majority or disturb social cohesion.

2. Behavioral Adaptation and Cultural Sensitivity in Muslim Societies

The behavioral adaptation of non-Muslim students during Ramadan is best explained in terms of the cultural adaptation theories, more specifically Berry's (1997) acculturation model, which explains how one moves in intercultural arenas by either integrating, separating, assimilating, or marginalizing. Amongst these, integration retaining one's identity in combination with accommodation in behaviour is the most equilibrated and adaptive path. Non-Muslim university students in Pakistani institutions tend to follow this trend, where they maintain their religious identity but undertake behavioral adaptations for conformity with the cultural standards of their surroundings (Berry, 2005).

These accommodations involve avoiding eating or drinking in public spaces during fasting times, reducing socializing, applying religiously sensitive greetings (e.g., "Ramadan Mubarak"), and attending Iftar parties as guests and not as religious followers (Khan & Mahmood, 2015; Ramzan & Qureshi, 2019). This is an example of situational sensitivity, whereby the individuals adapt to the cultural environment without compromising their personal and religious boundaries.

Saeed (2007) conducted on tolerance within Islamic societies emphasizes that such expressions of behavioral conformity, if spontaneously chosen, become a means for social cohesion as well as decrease group-based nervousness. Thus, the behavior of non-Muslim students must be viewed not in terms of symbolic submission but intergroup politeness. Cultural sensitivity literature (Gudykunst, 2004) also highlights empathic understanding among diverse populations. It indicates that behavioral adaptation, if based on mutual respect and not coercion, contributes to the decrease in prejudice and enhancement of feelings of belongingness.

Siddiqui (2020) and Hefner (2001) further contend that interfaith environments within schools are a rich terrain for non-verbal learning and empathetic development. Such spaces, if handled with care, are capable of enhancing not just scholastic progress but also mutual understanding between religions. Self-motivated behavioural adjustments among non-Muslim students during Ramadan, hence, serve as tacit demonstrations of solidarity that affirm their place within a collective educational and ethical space.

3. Perceptions of Conformity as Respect and Belonging

A significant part of non-Muslim students' experience during Ramadan is how they understand their own actions and how others perceive them. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) states that people work towards acquiring positive self-identity by affiliation with positive group memberships. In institutions where a dominant religious culture dominates institutional life, minority members tend to adopt adaptive strategies in order to preserve social harmony without losing identity.



The choice of non-Muslim students to accommodate Ramadan is generally perceived by both parties Muslim friends and the non-Muslim students themselves as an indicator of respect and intercultural maturity (Khan & Ahmad, 2021). This conduct can be deliberately performed to escape misinterpretations, keep friends, and ward off perceived disrespect during a spiritually charged time. Instead of reflecting inferiority or enforced assimilation, these gestures are part of interfaith trust-building.

In addition, public opinion towards such adaptation is usually favorable. Muslim peers perceive these acts as respectful behaviors as opposed to theological affiliations. This is in accordance with the evidence of Saeed (2007), who points out that Islamic communities, based on true teachings on tolerance, promote acts of respect and reciprocity among religious communities.

Students tend to report a greater sense of belonging at Ramadan when their cultural integration efforts are recognized and valued (Sharot, 2001). This produces an informal in-group environment, in which reciprocal gestures of accommodation give rise to a sense of civic and moral unity. As Malik and Zaman (2020) put it, the season of Ramadan, as deeply religious as its origins are, is also a "cultural platform for unity" in Pakistan a season when distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims are typically erased through shared practices such as communal dining and intellectual solidarity.

Therefore, conformity here is not the elimination of difference, but a reciprocal negotiation of space, identity, and respect. It produces what scholars refer to as "inclusive public religiosity" a place where the dominant religion structures public life, but continues to be open to difference (Hefner, 2001).

Methodology

A purposive sampling strategy was used in this study and data were collected from 15 non-Muslim respondents from university of Narowal on semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Thematic Analysis Table

Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
1. Respectful Adaptation	Avoiding eating in public, dressing conservatively	"I avoided eating in front of others because I knew most of them were fasting. It was out of respect."
	Less noise	"We kept our hostel gatherings quiet after Iftar. It just felt like the right thing to do."
2. Desire for Social Belonging	Being included in Ramadan activities	"Muslim friends invited me for Iftar. I felt honored even though I didn't fast."
	Feeling accepted	"No one ever forced me to do anything, but when I joined them, they smiled. It made me feel included."
3. Navigating Identity Boundaries	Balancing personal faith and public decorum	"I'm Christian, but I knew this month is important for them. I adjusted my schedule without changing my faith."
	Internal reflections	"It made me think deeply about why people fast and how it brings people together."
4. Institutional Influence	University decorum during Ramadan	"The cafeteria stayed open, but most of us avoided it. Even non-Muslims were



Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
		discreet.”
	absence of formal pressure	“No one told us we had to act differently. We just knew and respected the vibe.”
5. Interfaith Empathy and Awareness	Greater cultural understanding	“I learned more about Islam in Ramadan than any classroom could teach me.”
	Shared moral values	“Respect, discipline, and patience those are things I also value in my religion.”

Interpretation of the Thematic Analysis Table

Theme 1: Respectful Adaptation

This theme captures how non-Muslim students adjusted their public conduct during Ramadan out of voluntary cultural respect and not religious requirement.

- Sub-theme: Avoiding eating in public, dressing conservatively

Participants demonstrated sensitivity to the sanctity of Ramadan by avoiding eating, drinking, or dressing in a manner that could be construed as disrespectful. This was not based on any policy enforced but instead a thoughtful, self-inflicted form of social etiquette. One respondent commented, "I didn't eat in front of people because I knew most were fasting. It was out of respect." This reflects cultural sensitivity and a commitment to maintaining respect for one another.

- Sub-theme: Less noise

The students also accommodated their daily lifestyle to match the spiritual and sober climate of Ramadan. They did not indulge in noisy socialization or partying, in the hostels. As one of the respondent explained, "We kept our hostel gatherings quiet after Iftar," indicating an appreciation for the religious environment of the month.

This theme indicates that adaptive action was prompted by moral awareness and social sensitivity and not by pressure, an internalization of group compassion.

Theme 2: Desire for Social Belonging

This theme describes the emotional need of non-Muslim students to feel socially included at a time when community identity became very apparent.

- Sub-theme: Inclusion in Ramadan activities

Individuals relayed how they were invited to Iftar events or had been included in communal labelled activities on campus. The experiences were meaningful and symbolic; feeling included and recognized. "Muslim friends invited me for Iftar. I was so honored," said one respondent, indicating that religious hospitality may have played a role in breaking down interfaith barriers.

- Sub-theme: Being accepted

The character of reciprocal acceptance was strongly observed. That is, students discussed how they used small acts of respect that their Muslim peers acknowledged and were thankful for, and they felt welcomed and appreciated. This suggests that the students have some level of interpersonal peace and emotional safety in this academic space.

The findings here support the socially constructed idea of belonging comes through a series of mutual recognition and shared experiences.



Theme 3: Navigating Identity Boundaries

This theme shed light on the fine line non-Muslim students walked in navigating the expectations to assimilate to cultural norms on campus while also honoring and protecting their own particular religious identities.

- Sub-theme: Reconciling one's faith with public behavior

Students noted how their public behavior wasn't necessarily a denial of their faith, but rather a situational accommodation. One Christian student said, "I changed my schedule without changing my faith." The assertion underscored a sophisticated understanding of cultural accommodation, in that one could still enter into another group's practice with a thoughtful and respectful consideration without abandoning their own beliefs.

- Sub-theme: Internal engagement

Some of the participants stated that they felt spiritually awakened on some level by seeing the level of communal engagement, discipline, and purpose surrounding Ramadan. In instances where they did not fast, they expressed thinking more about their own religious engagement and parallel moral values between their religious beliefs and Islam, including being patient, humble, and grateful. Such internal engagement resulted in greater empathy and understanding.

This theme demonstrated that a students' identity and respect can coexist, and when non-Muslim students could see examples of religious practices they could develop a greater sense of respect instead of emerging with conflict.

Theme 4: Institutional Influence

The theme highlighted the soft but important role of university culture/norms through Ramadan.

- Sub-theme: University etiquette through Ramadan

Universities were not legally constraining their non-Muslim community, but the informal etiquette performed by staff and students of university of Narowal created a type of tacit social contract. "Even non-Muslims were a bit discrete", said one participant, thus demonstrating how informal cultural regulation through social norms can inform behavior without policy.

- Sub-theme: No formal pressures

All participants noted that their behavioral change was self-motivated. One respondent argued that, "Nobody said we had to do something different. We just knew." This is indicative of the idea of using moral education and the idea of environment to implicitly elicit respect for each other's civic engagements without legislating norms.

The theme legitimizes that institutions are not normally punishing or requiring behavioral change, but that they do elicit a type of cultural behavior through a performative expression of values and cultural behaviors.

Theme 5: Interfaith Empathy and Awareness

In conclusion, this final theme surfaced the positive emotional and moral benefits of respectful cohabitation during Ramadan.

- Sub-theme: Increased cultural awareness

Students made comments about how Ramadan allowed them to learn about Islam through an experience not typically found in a classroom. "I learned more about Islam during Ramadan than any classroom could teach me," respondent argued. This connects to the thought that



shared experience can provide greater meaning and understanding than what is found in a textbook.

- Sub-theme: Shared ethical beliefs

The participants voiced discovering a shared ethical foundation between religious traditions. One student shared, "Respect, discipline, and patience – those are things I value in my religion as well." The realization of these shared characteristics enhanced interfaith solidarity, supporting the idea that moral universals may transcend the boundaries of religion.

This theme provides evidence that participation in the religious rhythm of society, even while on the edges, is a platform from which understanding, decreased prejudice, and peaceful cohabitation can stem.

Discussion

The results of this research shed light on the ways non-Muslim students respond behaviourally and affectively in Pakistani universities during the holy month of Ramadan. The themes that emerged; respectful adaptation, desire for social belonging, identity negotiation, institutional influence, and inter-faith empathy indicate broader socio-cultural dynamics characteristic of a religiously plural (while still Muslim majority) context.

The respectful adaptation theme shows that non-Muslim students exhibited an awareness with regard to behaviour during Ramadan, e.g. by refraining from public eating or dressing more modestly, and reveals consideration for the beliefs of others in the social setting. This behaviour is fitting with the notion of "face-work" where social actors identify and manage their impressions in social context to manage interactions (Goffman, 1967). Participants felt no external pressure to act with restraint, but demonstrated culturally-informed sensitivity to shared social norms; a manifestation of what Durkheim (1912) called "collective conscience" and principles of action constrained by beliefs held by others in the group.

Many customs associated with Islamic practices, like those in Pakistan, are so deeply engrained in social practices that the minority students' adaptation can be understood not as subjugation but as civic respect (Merry, 2005). Crucially, they are not forced to adapt the respectful accommodation is voluntary which illustrates the power of soft cultural power over institutionalised power with coercive enforcement (Scott, 1990).

Social belonging and inclusion themes in Ramadan activities illustrate how religious and cultural events can serve as integration platforms for minorities. Iftar invitations or collective spiritual thoughts made non-Muslim students emotionally included with Muslim friends. This is consistent with Putnam's (2000) concept of "bridging social capital" where inter-group relations are created over differences.

These instances of inclusivity reiterate that religiosity in public space does not necessarily give rise to exclusion, but has the potential to foster intercommunal solidarity if practiced through hospitality and mutual recognition (Modood, 2013). Here, Islamic ethics of respect and compassion were seen not just in the behavior of the majority but also in the manner minority students reacted to it.

Students' attempts to reconcile their individual faith with cultural norms demonstrate the nuance of religious identity negotiation in spaces that are religiously plural. Instead of repressing their beliefs, students articulated respect for the moral foundations of Ramadan. This aligns with Mahmood's (2005) assertion that ethical self-cultivation in religious terms does not mean passive conformity but may entail active moral thinking.

Additionally, interfaith compassion revealed through students who valued Islamic morals like patience and discipline underlies the concept of public religious rites being non-institutional



educative means (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996). Such knowledge proves crucial within the Pakistani context in which inclusion among minorities rests not only on a system of legality but also social imagination and between-group perception (Saeed, 2007).

The institutional influence theme suggests that universities, without enforcing Ramadan decorum officially, still influenced action by means of unspoken norms and common values. This resonates with Foucault's (1977) idea of disciplinary power not being exercised by direct coercion but through normalized expectation. It is also consistent with the Islamic philosophy of *adab* (etiquette), often communicated more through social conduct rather than written laws (Al-Attas, 1985).

Students' recognition of these norms and their decision to uphold them implies that learning environments in Muslim societies can facilitate multicultural living when grounded on mutual respect and not legalistic secularism (Asad, 2003). This makes universities microcosms of society, where every day ethical coexistence is practiced.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the behavioral adjustments, lived experiences, and emotional negotiations of non-Muslim participants in Pakistani universities during the holy month of Ramadan. Thematic analysis of culturally and contextually specific data has uncovered a nuanced yet valuable landscape of social interaction, respect for religious beliefs, and identity negotiation in a Muslim education space.

A central finding is that non-Muslim participants in this study exhibited a notable degree of cultural awareness and voluntary behavioral adjustments during Ramadan, which included avoiding eating and drinking in public spaces, dressing more conservatively, lowering noise in social gatherings, and participating in Ramadan-related gatherings (for example, Iftar dinners). The behavioral adjustments and practices entered into during Ramadan did not come from direct institutional transgressions, or peer pressure, but rather a reflexive understanding of social expectations and community respect. This finding is consistent with sociological assumptions on symbolic interactionism and social integration whereby individuals tuition their behaviors based on a collective understanding of meanings and group expectations (Goffman, 1967; Durkheim, 1912).

Additionally, the study found that many non-Muslim students sought out chances to take part in the broader communal and cultural practices of Ramadan. Their so-called involvement in the Iftar gatherings and acknowledgement by their Muslim peers furthered their sense of social belonging and interpersonal cohesion. All of these findings point to the idea of "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 2000), where commonly shared social rituals build bridges across faith boundaries to create inter-group solidarity.

The other important dimension that was revealed was negotiating religious identity in a dominant cultural space. The non-Muslim students were able to preserve religious uniqueness while being part of respectfully the shared ethos of Ramadan. This defies any simplistic polarity between assimilation and isolation and rather points towards a middle course with mutual acknowledgment, cohabitation, and pluralistic ethics (Modood, 2013; Mahmood, 2005).

The contribution of educational institution, although indirect, was equally significant. Even though Pakistani universities did not make specific behaviors for non-Muslim students obligatory during Ramadan, their moral climate, inchoate norms, and prevailing cultural tone constituted soft mechanisms of guidance and influence. The presence of these tacit expectations is evidence of Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of disciplinary power as well



as in concordance with Islamic interpretations of *adab* in sum, the study shows that Muslim-minority students in Muslim-majority environments such as Pakistan are able to participate in meaningful, respectful, and identity-sustaining ways throughout religiously important times such as Ramadan. Their experience charts the potential for peaceful coexistence, cultural adaptability, and pluralistic ethics within educational environments. Instead of tension, religious diversity when approached with mutual respect has the potential to be an avenue of learning, empathy, and social cohesion.

These conclusions have significant implications for policymakers, university administrators, and educators, particularly in multicultural academic environments. By developing inclusive procedures and encouraging ethical dialogue on faith lines, universities can serve as model sites for interreligious understanding, civic respect, and national concordance. a moral courtesy strongly rooted in routine interactions (Al-Attas, 1985). Lack of official coercion and existence of voluntary compliance speak to an existence of healthy institutional atmosphere appreciating respect without constraint.

The deepest realization is that Ramadan was not only a religious practice for Muslim students but also an educational moment for interfaith understanding. Non-Muslim participants articulated appreciation for the virtues of discipline, sacrifice, and communal compassion inherent in Ramadan practices. Their insights indicate an interfaith moral common ground wherein different faith traditions resonate with similar virtues like patience, humility, and gratitude.

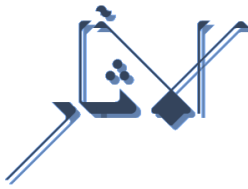
Lastly, the University of Narowal is an outstanding exception in a third-world country like Pakistan, where religious minorities live peacefully, without a shadow of fear or perceived threat of danger. The minority students feel more secure and enjoy great freedom in a diverse environment. The tolerant and inclusive atmosphere of the varsity can be largely credited to the progressive and humane role of the faculty. Through their dedication to equity, respect, and interfaith understanding, the teachers have fostered a campus environment where diversity is celebrated, allowing the students to flourish without fear. The unity that prevails in diversity is fostering harmony and peace, not only at Narowal University but also in the city.

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