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THE RAMADAN BRIDGE: INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE AND RAMADAN FASTING EXPERIENCE AMONG NON- MUSLIM STUDENTS IN A PRE-UNIVERSITY SETTING

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Abstract:

In multicultural academic environments, religious rituals often serve as markers of identity that can either segregate or unite. This study examines the sociological impact of non-Muslim students participating in the Ramadan fast. Using qualitative data from respondents of different religious backgrounds from one of the higher institutions in Malaysia, the research explores the transition from “outsider” to “participant”. Results indicate that participation is often motivated by a desire to experience the practice firsthand or to support friends. The study finds that communal meals (Iftar) and shared physical struggle lead to “prouder” and “amazed” reactions among Muslim peers, which in turn strengthen social bonds and reduce cultural distance. By analysing how these non-muslim pre-university students navigate communal spaces such as mosques and cafes, the paper argues that the Ramadan fast provides a unique civilisational platform for “practical pluralism”, in which shared action transcends theological differences to build a more inclusive campus community.

Intercultural Solidarity, Non-Muslim Participation, Practical Pluralism, Ramadhan Fasting, Social Cohesion



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Introduction

In today's multicultural academic environments, religious rituals are powerful expressions of identity that can either divide a diverse student community or bring them together. According to Jiang (2024), past studies often view big cultural and religious differences as barriers to group harmony. However, it is believed by Mazya et al. (2024) and Pajarianto et al. (2022) that higher education institutions can counter the issue by functioning as critical "micropublics" localised, everyday spaces where diverse students naturally interact and navigate cultural boundaries. While macro-level, formal interfaith dialogues often remain restricted to rigid theological abstractions, the everyday, lived experiences of students offer a more dynamic environment for genuine intercultural exchange (Yusuf et al., 2025).

It is widely agreed that the shared practice of the Ramadan fast establishes a unique, real-world platform for practical pluralism. Within this framework, diversity is recognised as a social reality that must be approached with openness, dialogue, and mutual respect to foster peaceful coexistence across different faiths (Malik et al., 2025). Rather than relying solely on abstract theological agreements, this form of practical pluralism is deeply rooted in shared physical action, daily social proximity, and lived experience (Zainuddin et al., 2025).

Building on this notion, practical pluralism suggests that true intergroup solidarity is forged not by forcing distinct religious doctrines into alignment, but rather by sharing the synchronised rhythm of daily, disciplined physical practices. This perspective strongly aligns with contemporary research on 'lived religion' and inclusive spirituality. Indeed, as observed by Hartati et al. (2025), when individuals approach another religious tradition with genuine mutual respect, these daily shared practices transform into powerful tools for cultivating lasting social harmony.

This dynamic is particularly evident within higher education institutions, which serve as a critical proving ground for such interactions. Indeed, universities are often framed as microcosms of a multicultural society and strategic arenas for nurturing interreligious tolerance and harmony (Azhari et al., 2025). However, in practice, religious differences on diverse campuses can frequently divide students and erect rigid social barriers. This challenge aligns with findings by 'Ainah et al. (2025), who note that a restrictive campus social climate and a lack of structured interfaith programming can leave minority students feeling uncomfortable during cross-religious interactions. Consequently, despite generally positive superficial

contact, underlying tensions and misunderstandings between different religious groups can persist.

To bridge these deep-seated divisions, institutional spaces must look beyond passive coexistence toward active, shared engagement. Yet, while universities naturally provide the physical spaces intended to bring people together, there remains a significant gap in research regarding how non-Muslim students actively participate in Islamic traditions such as Ramadan. For instance, while existing literature examines non-Muslim clinicians' understanding of Ramadan and Islamic practices within healthcare settings to improve cultural competency (King et al., 2023), this line of inquiry has yet to be extended to higher education landscapes.

To address this empirical gap, this study explores how practical pluralism manifests through the transformative social experiences of non-Muslim pre-university students in Malaysia who voluntarily participate in the Ramadan fast. Such voluntary engagement signifies a profound shift in perspective, transitioning the student from a detached 'outsider' to an active, engaged 'participant' within a sacred Islamic tradition. By doing so, this practice effectively translates the theory of practical pluralism into an inclusive campus environment rooted in mutual recognition. Ultimately, to achieve the aim of this study, the following three research questions serve as a guide:

1. What primary factors motivate non-Muslim pre-university students to initiate and sustain their participation in the Ramadan fast?
2. How do non-Muslim students experience and psychologically manage the physiological and mental stressors of the fast?
3. How does voluntary participation in this shared ritual shape intercultural social cohesion and transform relationships between non-Muslim students and their Muslim peers?

Literature Review

Every year, Muslims observe fasting during the holy month of Ramadan by abstaining from food, drink, and other physical needs from the pre-dawn meal (*Suhoor*) until the sunset meal (*Iftar*) (Ahmed, 2022). While deeply spiritual, this daily routine is intensely physical and communal. Sociologically, these tangible rituals operationalise the concept of 'Practical Pluralism,' which posits that sustainable social cohesion is constructed not through theological debate, but through shared, lived experiences. When non-Muslims engage with the orthopraxic or action-oriented elements of Ramadan, such as participating in *Iftar* celebrations, they bypass intellectual friction and build mutual trust anchored in shared presence and collective "we-ness" (Dey et al., 2025).

To systematically examine this phenomenon, this literature review will focus on three interconnected thematic pillars, namely: i) Rituals as Social Bridges, ii) Intercultural Solidarity and the Reduction of Distance, and iii) Communal Spaces as Catalysts for Interaction. By analysing the intersections of these three themes, this paper will demonstrate that communal harmony is ultimately forged through shared action and inclusive spaces rather than ideological alignment.

Ritual as Social Bridges

Participation in cross-religious rituals and celebrations serves as a powerful mechanism for individuals from diverse backgrounds to cultivate deeper relationships and promote peaceful coexistence (Hartati et al., 2025). During Ramadan, interfaith activities exemplify how shared spiritual experiences can stimulate meaningful dialogue, mutual understanding, and communal unity. This cohesive potential is driven by the core tenets of Ramadan, namely compassion, generosity, and inclusiveness, which consistently bridge cultural divides. Hence, as Yogeeswaran et al. (2020) agree, when multicultural societies engage with and practice local wisdom, they simultaneously express unique traditions and reinforce shared values, thereby strengthening the overarching social fabric and the sense of belonging.

This dynamic is evident in pluralistic civic spheres where religious values actively shape social cohesion. For instance, Mubarak et al. (2025) demonstrated that the principle of brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*) plays a foundational role in the social architecture of multicultural communities, such as that of East Kutai, Indonesia. This principle manifests twofold: as Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah islamiyyah*) among Muslims, and as national brotherhood (*ukhuwwah wathaniyyah*), which actively fosters harmonious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. In daily life, these encourage civic unity and cooperation, particularly during communal emergencies or natural disasters that necessitate immediate, collective action.

While these values manifest broadly within civic communities, they undergo a distinct sociological transformation within multicultural educational environments. On campus, religious rituals, traditionally perceived as private, exclusive acts of worship, are reimagined as accessible, communal experiences. Fasting, therefore, transcends solitary spiritual discipline to become a visible, collective rhythm of daily life that non-Muslim students can actively navigate. Futaqi and Yenuri (2023) stated that, in multi-religious Indonesian educational settings, rituals like breaking the fast (*Iftar*) are deliberately extended to non-Muslim peers, allowing food to be shared irrespective of religious affiliation. Therefore, this “bridging” effect transforms a strict religious obligation into an inclusive social celebration, utilising ritual communication as a pedagogical tool for harmony, mutual understanding, and cross-faith solidarity.

Intercultural Solidarity and the Reduction of Distance

Ramadan plays a vital role in strengthening social integration and fostering mutual understanding among individuals from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The local wisdom reflected in Ramadan traditions, including communal iftar gatherings, charitable initiatives, and interfaith discussions, encourages meaningful social interaction and promotes a stronger sense of collective unity (Hartati et al., 2025), and these components would be the reason for participation by non-Muslims in fasting.

Beyond mere cognitive recognition of religious diversity, intercultural understanding is often profoundly deepened through shared visceral experiences. By actively enduring the immediate physical rigors of the fast non-Muslim participants transition from passive observers to active empathetic agents. This immersive participation shifts empathy from an abstract intellectual exercise to a form of embodied cognition. By subjecting their own bodies to the same physiological stressors as their fasting peers, non-Muslim students gain a raw, firsthand

comprehension of the discipline and religious commitments required by Islamic practices. enhance social integration, mutual understanding, and solidarity across cultural and religious lines (Shalihin & Sholihin, 2022). This shared physical vulnerability bridges cultural divides, allowing non-Muslims to conceptualise the religious devotion of their peers not as an alien ritual, but as a deeply felt, respectable human endeavor.

Consequently, this co-endured physical hardship catalyses profound relational bonding, cultivating what participants describe as a powerful sense of communal “oneness.” Within the framework of social exchange and mutual validation, this vulnerability does not go unnoticed. A “relational inclusivity” approach centers interdependent relationships, friendship, emotional connection, and support as core to authentic inclusion in schools (Mamas & Trautman, 2025). Positive reinforcement functions as a form of social reciprocity; by acknowledging the sacrifice of their non-Muslim peers, Muslim students reward them with heightened social inclusion, validation, and the formation of genuine “new friends.” Interculturalism and structured intergroup contact reduce prejudice, increase trust and cooperation, and foster a shared sense of belonging, conceptually mirroring your “cultural distance” reduction (Berry et al., 2021). Ultimately, this dynamic transforms the fasting period from an individual act of worship into a collaborative, prosocial space that dismantles out-group biases and fosters durable, cross-cultural networks.

Communal Spaces as Catalysts for Interaction

The physical design of a university campus does more than just house academic activities. It actively shapes how students interact and experience community. Because campus environments are never truly neutral, their design can subtly signal to students whether they are included or excluded, deeply impacting the sense of belonging for underrepresented groups (Wong, 2023). Shared campus areas, such as mosques, cafes, and dining halls, act as crucial third places where the abstract idea of practical pluralism becomes a daily reality. For example, Li et al. (2025) found that local and international students on both Japanese and U.S. campuses share a strong desire for third places, such as cafeterias and libraries, to unwind and exchange cultural perspectives. Building on this idea, Lin and Shen (2020) argue that these communal spaces allow students to navigate cultural differences naturally through daily proximity, opening doors for casual contact through clubs, roommates, and social activities that significantly boost students’ cultural intelligence and cross-group understanding.

These shared environments become even more impactful during culturally significant periods that bring student schedules into alignment. Berlian et al. (2025) stated that, because Ramadan is a time when Muslims traditionally “meet, eat, and pray together” through shared meals and collective practices, campus dining areas during peak hours create a unique, shared daily rhythm. This rhythm cuts across religious boundaries, drawing Muslim and non-Muslim students into the same spaces for meals and conversation. As Edwards (2021) points out, communal dining can be intentionally used to build a third culture that fosters intercultural sensitivity. This is a prime example of “everyday multiculturalism,” where simply sharing a dining hall during *Iftar*, the breaking of the fast, brings students together, turning a routine meal into an opportunity for mutual awareness. Ultimately, these spaces function as what Mittelmeier et al. (2025) call “everyday convivialities,” which are places where routine, casual interactions not only build meaningful connections but also help redefine what it means to belong on campus and to understand better a certain culture, such as fasting during Ramadan.

Beyond formal classes, the campus's smaller social hubs, including student-led bazaars, cultural events, and volunteer activities, provide the relaxed, low-stakes interactions that are essential for social cohesion. When universities actively encourage students to participate in these activities, students report richer social lives, stronger peer relationships, and greater satisfaction with their university experience (Kassab et al., 2024). Within these casual campus marketplaces, informal chats lower social barriers and ease the anxiety of interacting with unfamiliar cultures. The casual conversations that happen over food, commerce, or shared tasks turn superficial coexistence into real, lasting relationships, as these informal settings are proven to build cross-cultural trust and reduce discrimination (Dharma et al., 2025).

As a result, daily life within these communal zones fundamentally changes how non-Muslim and minority students experience campus. In these highly integrated spaces, non-Muslim students step out of the role of passive observers looking at a foreign culture from the outside. Instead, they become active co-occupants of a shared space. Sharing these spaces normalises cultural differences, weaving what might otherwise seem like unfamiliar traditions into the regular fabric of campus life.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the intercultural experiences of non-Muslim students participating in the Ramadan fast within a pre-university institutional setting in Malaysia. A qualitative framework was selected as it is uniquely suited for capturing the nuanced, subjective meaning that individuals assign to their lived experiences and cross-cultural interactions (Xue & Singh, 2025). By focusing on students from diverse religious backgrounds, the research aimed to capture a wide array of perspectives regarding interfaith participation in a traditionally Islamic practice (Pendatun & Estrellan, 2025).

Participants

A total of ten pre-university students (seven males and three females) were selected for this study using a purposive sampling strategy. To ensure a comprehensive dataset, participants were chosen from diverse faith traditions other than Islam. The cohort exhibited varying degrees of fasting frequency, ranging from occasional engagement (fewer than 15 days) to sustained participation exceeding fifteen days or lasting the entire month. This variation in engagement levels allowed for a deeper, more robust analysis of how the intensity of participation shapes its subsequent social and cultural implications (Tozal, 2026).

Data Collection

Data were gathered via a qualitative, open-ended survey administered to non-Muslim students who voluntarily fasted during Ramadan 2026. This instrument was chosen to give respondents the temporal flexibility to reflect deeply on their experiences without the constraints of rigid, pre-determined multiple-choice options. The survey successfully elicited detailed narrative responses regarding the participants' personal motivations, their day-to-day physical and

mental experiences of fasting, their immediate social interactions with Muslim peers, and their overall perceptions of how this shared practice affected broader campus relationships.

Research Instrument and Data Analysis

The qualitative survey instrument was systematically structured around three key thematic domains: (i) motivations for initial and sustained participation, (ii) physical and mental experiences of the fast, and (iii) impacts on intercultural relationships. The collected text data underwent thematic analysis following a rigorous coding process. First, the transcripts were repeatedly read to achieve data immersion. Next, recurring phrases, ideas, and patterns were systematically assigned open codes. Finally, these codes were organised into broader conceptual categories. The emerging themes were critically analysed in relation to established sociological frameworks, with a focus on practical pluralism, intercultural solidarity, and cultural proximity.

Result And Discussion

This study involved 10 non-muslim respondents in one of the higher education institutions in Malaysia. Out of the ten respondents, seven were male and only three females, all of whom were enrolled in their second semester of pre-university studies. A total of 60% of respondents indicated that 2026 was not their first experience fasting during Ramadan, whereas the remaining 40% stated that it was.

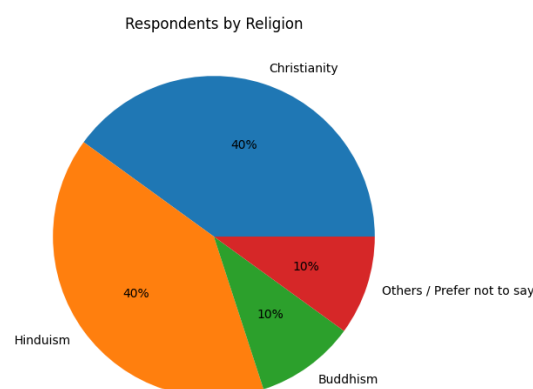


Figure 1: The Religion of the Respondents

Based on *Figure 1*, an equal number of respondents were recorded for Christianity and Hinduism, with four respondents representing each religion, while one respondent identified as Buddhist and one respondent preferred not to disclose his religious background.

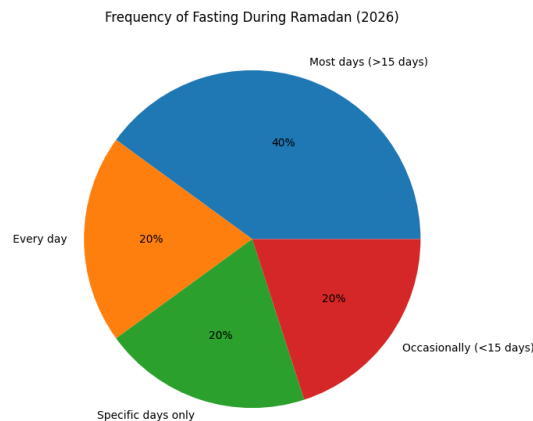


Figure 2: The Frequency of Fasting During Ramadan 2026

Next, the majority of respondents demonstrated a high level of participation in the Ramadan fast. Specifically, five respondents reported fasting on most days during Ramadan, defined as more than 15 days. In addition, 20% of the respondents ($n=2$) stated that they fasted every day throughout the month of Ramadan. Meanwhile, two respondents participated in fasting only on specific days, such as weekends, while another two respondents indicated that they fasted occasionally, which refers to less than 15 days. These findings suggest that most respondents showed strong engagement and commitment towards experiencing the Ramadan fast.

The next section of the paper discusses the experiences of non-Muslim pre-university students participating in Ramadan. The findings highlight the motivations that encouraged the students to observe fasting during the month of Ramadan, how they navigated the physical and mental challenges associated with fasting, and the overall impact of Ramadan on social cohesion.

Motivation for Participation

The findings of this study reveal that non-Muslim students do not fast for a single reason. Instead, their participation in Ramadan is shaped by a mix of personal curiosity, social connections, and environmental factors. For many, the primary driver was a genuine desire to experience the practice firsthand. As one respondent noted, “I want to experience fasting as well” (R4). Interestingly, this personal curiosity was made even easier by her own background, as the fasting season in her own religion happened to coincide with Ramadan, giving her an extra push to participate. This lived experience aligns perfectly with the ideas of Hackett et al. (2023), who emphasise that intercultural and culturally grounded pedagogies naturally build empathy, curiosity, and respect for other traditions. Ultimately, this support from literature confirms that non-Muslim participation in Ramadan goes far beyond a simple curiosity. It serves as a meaningful form of active intercultural learning and a deep expression of cultural respect.

Rather than remaining distant observers, several respondents expressed a genuine desire to understand the physical and mental reality of what their Muslim friends experience. As shared by R3, “I wanted to see if I could last as long as my friends.” This desire highlights a strong sense of peer solidarity and a yearning for a shared experience. Interestingly, this aligns closely with a study by Latif et al. (2025), which found that a sense of belonging and the concept of “group” fasting strongly motivate participation among both British Muslims and individuals

from different religious backgrounds. This connection underscores the idea that fasting is inherently “hard when you’re not doing it with everyone,” proving that communal practice and social support are powerful motivators during Ramadan.

Consequently, this personal interest does not exist in isolation as it is deeply connected to the social and institutional world around the students. Within this campus ecosystem, peer groups and university environments act as powerful catalysts for participation. For instance, one student highlighted the casual, inviting nature of peer influence by stating, “My friends. They asked me to join them to fast together with them. So, why not?” (R7). In this context, fasting transitions from a purely individual challenge into a natural avenue to bond, foster inclusivity, and build community. This dynamic mirrors the findings of Budiansyah (2025), who noted that student involvement within Islamic campus organisations is heavily driven by social-relational motives and direct invitations from friends, seniors, and alumni. In fact, even among the Muslim students, fasting is described as central to identity and pride, strengthened by family and community influence, and noted isolation when lacking peers who share the practice (Amjad et al., 2023). Ultimately, these parallels suggest that cross-cultural participation in religious rituals is rarely a solitary spiritual quest; rather, it is a socially mediated practice sustained.

Beyond immediate social circles, structured environments also play a critical role in normalizing the practice of fasting. This is evident in the experience of R6, who recalled, “I learned to fast when I joined an army camp held during Ramadan at my school.” This example demonstrates how an immersive, collective routine can strip away the intimidation of a new ritual, making fasting feel like a natural, shared activity. This student’s experience directly echoes the insights of King et al. (2023), who argued that institutional structures and policies heavily dictate how manageable fasting feels to an individual. By embedding the fast within a structured collective program, the institution effectively creates a supportive macro-environment that aligns with Ramadan routines. Hence, this highlights that when an organisation or institution normalises a religious practice through its daily scheduling, it significantly lowers the barrier to entry for outsiders, transforming a daunting physical challenge into a communal norm. by the warmth of immediate interpersonal networks and institutional proximity.

Yet, environmental influence is not always about voluntary bonding. It can also come from practical constraints. This is clearly seen in the blunt honesty of R2, who admitted, “I was not inspired to fast, but forced since the canteen was closed during the daytime in Ramadan.” This stark contrast shows that the environment is incredibly powerful, acting as a space for genuine cultural connection for some, and a source of forced compliance for others. This situation reflects the ideas of Khasanah et al. (2024), who note that on secular campuses, Islamic practices often occur as a ““quite”” everyday *da’wah* that is shaped and limited by institutional neutrality and peer dynamics. Depending on the setting, the campus context can either open doors or restrict how students participate in religious activities. Consequently, when a campus closes its canteens, it unintentionally shifts the experience for non-Muslim students from a gesture of friendly solidarity to a matter of survival and forced conformity.

Beyond these social circles and environmental pressures, many students also tied fasting to their personal values and self-growth. Culturally, several participants chose to fast out of respect, using the practice as a tangible way to show appreciation for their Muslim friends and

their faith. At the same time, others viewed the fast through a practical lens of self-improvement, using it to reach personal health goals or to push their own boundaries. For instance, R10 looked at it as a personal challenge, stating their goal was simply “to test my endurance.” By doing this, these students temporarily look past the religious roots of Ramadan, reframing the fast as a secular tool for self-discipline and health.

This finding aligns with Bonaccorsi and Romeo (2025), who noted that Ramadan and other religious fasts are powerful practices for self-discipline, inner freedom, and personal growth. They found that participants often frame fasting as a “spiritual exercise” that simultaneously supports healthier eating, weight loss, and better overall well-being. Hence, this proves that fasting is not just a rigid religious ritual exclusive to one faith. It is rather a flexible practice that allows individuals from different backgrounds to find personal meaning, health benefits, and universal human values.

Conclusively, these findings show that non-Muslim participation in Ramadan is highly dynamic. It moves along a spectrum from deep empathy and friendship to environmental pressure and personal development, proving just how adaptively students navigate and share cultural traditions on a diverse campus.

The Physical and Mental Struggle

When looking at how fasting affects the body and mind, the responses show that it is a highly personal experience that changes throughout the day. Instead of everyone simply feeling exhausted, respondents described a constant mental tug-of-war with physical fatigue. For many, the main hurdles were classic symptoms of low energy, with participants mentioning feeling “tired,” “light-headed,” or “dizzy” at various points. These physical responses align with findings by Lauche et al. (2025), who noted that common adverse symptoms during Ramadan fasting among healthy adults include headaches, dizziness, and fatigue. This connection highlights that such physical struggles are not tied to a specific religion or spiritual background, but rather, they are universal physical reactions that depend entirely on the individual’s body and how it adapts to the fast.

At the same time, the data reveals a surprising twist. For some respondents, fasting actually brought a wave of positive energy rather than draining them. This positive shift is backed by Anić et al. (2022), who found that fasting can lead to significant improvements in quality of life and reduced fatigue over time, making people feel more energetic and well rather than drained. A few participants in this study mirrored this trend, reporting feeling “surprisingly more energetic” (R5), “more refreshed” (R9), and “very healthy” (R8). For these individuals, skipping food and water felt less like a chore and more like a physical reset that “strengthened the mind” or made them feel “leaner.” This contrast suggests that how a student experiences Ramadan depends heavily on their mindset, that what feels like a grueling “test of self-control” (R10) for one person can feel deeply empowering and health-boosting to another. These findings align with Ring et al. (2022), who noted that fasting often leaves individuals feeling “light,” relaxed, and physically or spiritually cleansed, boosting their self-efficacy and inner freedom even when the fast itself is described as burdensome.

Interestingly, though, this physical tiredness did not automatically cloud the respondents' focus in class or during their everyday activities. One respondent shared that while she felt quite tired compared to regular days, "it does not really affect the mind" (R3). For others, pushing through was a conscious choice. As another respondent noted, they felt a bit tired at first, but "when you start ignoring it, the feeling just kind of goes away" (R6). This ability to push through physical discomfort aligns with the ideas of Wang and Wu (2022), who suggested that fasting is tightly linked to self-emotional control, and successfully persisting through it can enhance feelings of self-mastery and mental strength. Ultimately, this highlights that hunger wasn't just something the students passively suffered through; instead, it was something they actively managed by choosing exactly where to direct their mental energy.

However, even for those who handled the day well, that sense of control often hit a wall as the clock ticked closer to sunset. The shift from feeling physically fine to feeling mentally drained became especially tough in the late afternoon. One respondent captured this perfectly, admitting, "My body can accept it, but as the time gets much closer to *iftar*, my mind suffers a lot" (R1). This underscores that the true struggle of fasting isn't just about whether the body can handle being hungry. It is about the mental stamina needed to navigate those final few hours. Interestingly, this is a very common scenario among Muslims as well, especially when adjusting to work and daily routines during the first few days of Ramadan.

This shared experience aligns with findings by Berthelot et al. (2021), who noted that individuals tend to experience higher levels of fatigue early on, followed by physical and mental improvement later in the month as the body and mind adapt. This idea is further supported by Hosseini et al. (2024), whose findings similarly revealed that hunger sensations often decline across the month as people successfully adjust to the routine over time. This situation proves that whether a person is Muslim or non-Muslim, navigating the final hours of a fast is a universal hurdle that gets easier with time and consistency as the body naturally adapts.

Impact on Social Cohesion

When evaluating the broader social impact of this phenomenon, the data reveal that non-Muslim participation in the fast serves as a powerful mechanism for reducing "cultural distance" through shared, embodied action. This dynamic is well-documented by Shalihin and Sholihin (2022), who found that Ramadan naturally strengthens social cohesion, moral feelings, tolerance, and a sense of belonging within communities through generosity and shared rituals. In this study, revealing the fast to Muslim peers sparked overwhelmingly positive and validating social dynamics that mirror this sense of harmony. Respondents noted that their friends were "proud" (R1), "amazed and overjoyed" (R3), with one participant humorously noting that their peers reacted "like I am the first guy [who] discovered fire" (R8). This heightened emotional response often translated into immediate communal integration, where one student recounted how their friends were so "happy and excited" that they began inviting them to *sahur*, the pre-dawn meal (R4). In the end, these everyday interactions align closely with Hartati et al. (2025), who explained that inclusive Ramadan practices like communal meals and interfaith solidarity heavily enhance social integration and mutual understanding while actively reducing cultural misconceptions across diverse groups.

However, as highlighted by Abboud-Armaly et al. (2025), even when individuals express openness toward a different faith, they can still experience a lack of reciprocal acceptance or legitimacy from their religious counterparts. This dynamic is reflected in the findings, which show that the validation non-Muslim students received was not entirely universal. A minor but telling undercurrent of indifference or hesitation existed among peer groups, with respondents noting that some Muslim peers “pretended it’s normal” (R2) or that “not everyone was very keen on the idea” (R5). This connection suggests that while cross-cultural fasting is predominantly viewed as a bridge for connection, it can occasionally hit a wall, meeting with mild scepticism or protective boundaries around religious identity on campus.

While *sahoor* was often observed privately or skipped due to its early hours, *iftar* was overwhelmingly communal. Non-Muslim students actively embedded themselves in Muslim spaces by joining communal meals, breaking their fast together with housemates, and visiting local Ramadan bazaars. One respondent beautifully captured this sense of cultural erasure and belonging by stating, “I feel I am merged with Malay friends” (R10). In these spaces, the fast ceases to be an exclusive religious boundary and instead becomes a shared civic currency that fosters a deeply inclusive university ecosystem. This behavior aligns with findings by Jones-Ahmed (2022), who noted that sharing food and *iftar* strongly support a “feeling of community” and collective belonging, even under restrictive conditions.

Consequently, this shared practice fundamentally reshaped interpersonal relationships on campus by transforming abstract cultural tolerance into active, lived empathy. For many, the experience went far beyond simply learning about Islamic practices, as it fostered deep emotional and cultural proximity. Participants noted that experiencing this religious routine firsthand made them feel “much closer to them... culturally” (R4) and made both sides “much more open to each other” (R1). This deep closeness was directly tied to those spatial and communal rituals of Ramadan, particularly *iftar*. This reality mirrors the views of Hartati et al. (2025), who indicated that Ramadan practices such as communal *iftar*, charity, and interfaith events heavily enhance social integration, mutual understanding, and solidarity among diverse groups by actively bridging cultural divides and reducing misconceptions. This proves that true diversity on campus isn’t achieved just by having different groups coexist, but by actively creating shared spaces where everyone can participate in each other’s traditions. When non-Muslim students step into these communal rituals, fasting ceases to be a barrier and instead becomes a powerful tool for genuine inclusion and campus unity.

Beyond the social bonding, this cross-cultural participation prompted profound internal reflections on what “fasting” actually means, allowing non-Muslim students to align the practice with their own personal philosophies. Rather than viewing it as a mere dietary restriction, as mentioned by one respondent who defined it simply as “not eating for a day” (R5), many participants looked past the physical deprivation to find universal moral values. For instance, they redefined fasting as a personal exercise in “manners” (R1), “patience” (R9), and “refraining yourself to submit to your cravings” (R1). This psychological shift matches Al-Ghazali’s perspective on the “educative values” of Ramadan fasting, which Huda (2023) explicitly frames as an inner exercise in patience, controlling basic impulses through reason, and building individual discipline. For these students, the practice took on a deeper psychological dimension of self-regulation, described by R10 as a “beautiful act of self-sacrifice” where one restricts not just food, but “what you think, say, and act.” This holistic approach to fasting directly mirrors the work of Jamil (2021), who defined fasting as an

intentional act of self-control over negative emotions and behaviors, rather than a mere restriction of appetite.

Consequently, by mastering these behaviors, students were able to connect their personal self-discipline to broader social values. This connection aligns with a comprehensive study on fasting and integrity by Mokhtar et al. (2026), which concluded that fasting serves as a psychological exercise that naturally cultivates honesty, self-discipline, and social responsibility. In this study, that sense of social responsibility became clear when students framed their experience through a lens of social justice, noting that fasting actively taught them to “feel empathy for the poor” (R7). In the end, this shared moral ground beautifully echoes comparative research by Dey et al. (2025) on Catholic and Islamic fasting traditions, which shows that regardless of one’s specific background, fasting is universally used to open the heart to the suffering of others, foster deep empathy, and motivate acts of social justice.

This philosophical reframing allowed students to uncover surprising truths about their own psychological resilience. When asked what the most significant thing they learned about themselves was, respondents expressed a newfound sense of agency and self-mastery. This personal awakening aligns with findings by Latif et al. (2025), who noted that youth often describe Ramadan as a specific time to “improve yourself as an individual,” directly linking the fast to the long-term refinement of character, patience, and discipline. In this study, character refinement was visible as respondents discovered they possessed “more perseverance than [they] thought” (R3) and realised they could effectively control their desires and daily food intake without external pressure. Whether discovering a personal capacity for “12 hours without cigarettes” (R8) or realising they have the “resilience to keep true to yourself throughout the fasting month” (R4), the experience became deeply transformative. This sense of empowerment is supported by Lauche et al. (2024), whose study on intentional fasting revealed significant improvements in mindfulness, health satisfaction, and overall quality of life, proving that when fasting is approached with clear intent, it feels more like empowered self-care than a restrictive duty.

Finally, the fast stopped being just a simple gesture of cross-cultural solidarity and evolved into a deeply personal journey of self-actualisation. This individual growth does not detract from the community; rather, it strengthens it, mirroring the insights of Solihati et al. (2024), who framed Ramadan as a unique period where fasting naturally brings people closer together by renewing relationships, belonging, and collective identity. In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that the shared struggle of Ramadan acts as a double-edged catalyst for positive change. By pushing past their physical boundaries, non-Muslim students do not just show respect to their peers; they unlock a higher level of personal discipline while simultaneously embedding themselves into a more harmonious, empathetic, and unified campus community.

Conclusion

This study looked at the unique experience of non-Muslim students who voluntarily chose to participate in Ramadan fasting at a pre-university campus in Malaysia. By focusing on the everyday lives of students rather than high-level theological debates, the findings show how abstract cultural tolerance can turn into active, lived empathy through shared physical experiences. This process demonstrates the real-world power of “practical pluralism” in a diverse campus environment. Instead of watering down their own religious identities, entering

the daily, disciplined routine of the fast allows non-Muslim students to actively engage with their peers' traditions. In doing so, they shift from being distant observers to active participants in a shared campus community.

The findings reveal that while physical hurdles like fatigue and dizziness are universal bodily reactions to fasting, how non-Muslim students handle them ultimately comes down to their personal mindset; transforming the fast into a challenge for self-discipline and health changes a tough physical test into an empowering act of self-care. This internal discipline is heavily supported by the external campus environment, where shared areas like cafeterias, dining halls, and local Ramadan bazaars provide a neutral ground for students to connect. In particular, the highly social nature of *iftar* acts as a powerful tool to break down social walls, building a sense of community that helps non-Muslim students feel culturally close rather than left out. However, this environmental influence has two sides, as it can both support and restrict student participation. While warm encouragement from friends and structured routines make it easy for interested students to join the fast voluntarily, practical issues such as completely closing campus canteens during the day can accidentally force compliance, turning a gesture of friendly solidarity into involuntary conformity.

From a critical perspective, the "Ramadan Bridge" proves that true harmony in a diverse society does not require different religious groups to agree on doctrines or theological ideas. Instead, it is built through the simple routine of daily social proximity, shared struggles, and close friendships. When Muslim peers respond to this participation with pride, amazement, and invitations to join meals, it completes a positive feedback loop that lowers cultural anxiety and strengthens social ties. Genuine diversity on campus is not achieved by just having different student groups live past each other passively. Real inclusion happens when institutions support voluntary and respectful opportunities for students to share lived experiences. Pushing past exclusive religious boundaries through shared action turns a private ritual into a meaningful tool for campus unity, offering a practical model for harmony and mutual respect in diverse societies.

Recommendation for Future Study

To build upon these findings, several areas warrant further academic investigation. First, future research should consider utilising long-term longitudinal studies to track non-Muslim participants over an extended period, such as throughout their entire undergraduate journey. This would help determine whether the empathy, intercultural solidarity, and self-mastery developed during Ramadan have a lasting impact on their adult social interactions and long-term attitudes toward diversity. Additionally, because this study was conducted within a specific pre-university institutional context in Malaysia, conducting comparative studies across different higher education settings would be highly valuable. Comparing these experiences across fully secular universities, private international branches, or public campuses with varying demographic balances could reveal how different institutional policies and student demographics alter the dynamic of the "Ramadan Bridge."

Furthermore, the scope of "practical pluralism" can be expanded by investigating other religious and cultural rituals. Future studies should explore whether similar levels of active participation, social cohesion, and personal growth occur when students' cross cultural boundaries to participate in rituals from other faiths, such as Christian Lent, Hindu fasting

(*Vrats*), or Buddhist dietary fast. Given the qualitative nature of this research, incorporating quantitative and mixed-methods validation would also strengthen the literature. Measuring variables such as cultural distance reduction, empathy levels, or campus belonging before and after Ramadan could provide statistically measurable proof of fasting as an intercultural tool. Finally, future projects should look into the role of technology and digital spaces, exploring how social media platforms and campus group chats influence cross-cultural fasting practices. Investigating how digital networks are used to share iftar locations or organise group activities could reveal new dimensions of peer-led social integration in the modern era.

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