

ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF NON-MUSLIM STUDENTS TO ISLAMIC-BASED SOCIAL NORMS IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT OF UIN SUMATERA UTARA, MEDAN TUNTUNGAN

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Keywords

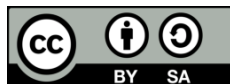
*social adaptation;
non-Muslim students;
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Abstract

This study examines the adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students to Islamic-based social norms within the academic environment of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus. The study is motivated by the presence of Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist students in an Islamic higher education institution whose everyday academic environment reflects various Islamic symbols and social norms. The research employs a qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design. The study focuses on non-Muslim students' experiences in encountering Islamic-based social norms, their strategies of adaptation and identity negotiation, and the possible emergence of stigma and symbolic pressure. Based on preliminary findings from research sources, previous literature, and institutional information from UIN Sumatera Utara, non-Muslim students tend to adapt through behavioral adjustment, respect for prevailing social norms, the development of social relationships with Muslim students, and the maintenance of their respective religious identities. The findings also indicate differences between adaptation experiences during the initial stage of study and those emerging after students develop more intensive social interactions. Initial concerns about entering an Islamic environment tend to diminish when students gain direct experience showing that social relations on campus are open and tolerant. From John W. Berry's perspective, this tendency can be understood as an integration strategy because students maintain their original identities while simultaneously establishing positive relationships with the majority group. Meanwhile, the perspectives of Bourdieu, Goffman, and Foucault help explain how norms, stigma, impression management, and social surveillance may shape students' adaptive behavior. This study demonstrates that the adaptation of non-Muslim students is not merely an individual process of adjustment, but also the outcome of interactions among identity, social norms, majority-minority relations, and the openness of the academic environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri/PTKIN) in Indonesia occupy an important position as higher education institutions that develop scientific knowledge, Islamic values, and religious practices within academic settings. Institutionally, PTKINs function not only as centers for strengthening Islamic studies but also as educational spaces that are open to all citizens. This principle is consistent with the mandate of Law No. 12 of 2012 on Higher Education, which affirms the right of every citizen to access education without discrimination. In this context, the presence of non-Muslim students at PTKINs demonstrates that Islamic universities are not necessarily exclusive institutions, but may also serve as spaces for social, academic, and cultural encounters among students from different religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, such institutional openness still needs to be examined critically because the everyday experiences of minority students do



not always correspond with formal institutional narratives of campus inclusivity (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023; Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 12 of 2012, 2012).

The Tuntungan Campus of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan is an academic environment characterized by an Islamic institutional identity, in which various Islamic symbols and social norms are visible in everyday campus life. These norms are reflected in the use of Islamic greetings, dress ethics, respect for prayer times, Islamic religious activities, the atmosphere of Ramadan, and social interactions shaped by the culture of the Muslim majority. For Muslim students, such norms tend to be perceived as natural because they are consistent with their religious identities and social habits. For non-Muslim students, particularly Christians, Catholics, and Buddhists, however, Islamic-based social norms may constitute a new environment that must be understood, negotiated, and addressed through specific adaptation strategies. Thus, the experiences of non-Muslim students at an Islamic university are not limited to academic learning, but also involve interpreting symbols, understanding unwritten rules, and building social relationships within a Muslim-majority environment.

The adaptation of non-Muslim students within an Islamic-based academic environment may take various forms, ranging from behavioral adjustment and respect for campus norms to the management of religious identity and the development of social relationships with Muslim students. In some situations, non-Muslim students may experience initial confusion or culture shock when encountering dominant Islamic symbols and practices. However, such experiences do not necessarily develop into conflict or rejection. Open social interaction, acceptance from peers, and direct experience of campus life can help non-Muslim students develop a more positive understanding of their social environment. From the perspective of acculturation theory, this condition can be interpreted through the integration strategy, in which individuals maintain their original identity while simultaneously developing positive social relationships with the majority group (Berry, 1997, 2005).

Nevertheless, this adaptation process cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological phenomenon. A campus environment characterized by dominant Islamic norms can also be understood as a social arena that shapes habitus, power relations, and particular practices of normalization. Bourdieu conceptualizes habitus as a system of dispositions that shapes how individuals understand and enact social practices within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). In the context of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, an Islamic habitus may function as a behavioral framework that appears natural to the majority but requires a process of social learning among minority students. In addition, Goffman's concepts of stigma and impression management help explain how non-Muslim students manage the presentation of self in order to remain socially accepted within a majority environment (Goffman, 1959, 1963). Meanwhile, Foucault's perspective can be employed to understand how social norms operate through subtle forms of social surveillance rather than solely through formally coercive regulations (Foucault, 1977).

Previous studies on non-Muslim students in PTKIN environments have generally focused on tolerance, coping, acculturation, and descriptive accounts of social acceptance. Several studies have shown that non-Muslim students are able to adjust to Islamic campus environments through positive social relationships, respect for majority norms, and efforts to maintain their respective religious identities (Khusniati, 2020; Ramadhan, 2019; Sari & Wijaya, 2021). However, research that specifically conceptualizes the adaptation of non-Muslim students at PTKINs as a process of negotiation involving identity, social norms, majority-minority relations, stigma, and symbolic pressure still requires further development. This research gap is important because the experiences of non-Muslim students cannot be adequately explained through indicators of formal tolerance alone, but need to be understood through their everyday experiences of navigating symbols, practices, and social relationships within an Islamic university environment.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze the adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students to Islamic-based social norms within the academic environment of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus. The study focuses on the experiences of Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist students in encountering Islamic social norms, the forms of adaptation and identity negotiation they employ, and the possible emergence of stigma, symbolic pressure, and impression management within campus social interactions. By drawing on the perspectives of Berry, Bourdieu, Goffman, and Foucault, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to scholarship on social adaptation, majority-minority relations, and religious moderation in Islamic higher education. Practically, the study is also expected to provide useful insights for strengthening campus policies that are inclusive, equitable, and sensitive to the experiences of students from diverse religious backgrounds.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using an instrumental single case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of non-Muslim students' adaptation strategies to Islamic-based social norms within the academic environment of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on the experiences, meanings, perceptions, and adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students from their own perspectives within a natural social context (Creswell, 2016; Sugiyono, 2015). An instrumental case study design was employed because the case of non-Muslim students in an Islamic university environment is not merely understood as a local phenomenon, but also as an entry point for explaining the relationship among religious identity, social norms, and adaptation processes within a Muslim-majority academic setting (Stake, 1995). The case was bounded within the academic environment of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, with a specific focus on active non-Muslim students identifying as Christian, Catholic, or Buddhist.

Research participants were selected purposively based on several criteria: they were active non-Muslim students in at least their third semester, had studied in the campus environment for approximately 1.5 years or more, were willing to participate as informants, and represented at least two faculties in order to capture a broader range of social and academic experiences. Approximately 6–9 informants were planned, or until data saturation was reached. Primary data consisted of narratives concerning the experiences, perceptions, and adaptation strategies of non-Muslim students in encountering Islamic-based social norms, while secondary data were obtained from campus policy documents, articles concerning the admission and presence of non-Muslim students at PTKIN institutions, documentation of interfaith activities, and data on non-Muslim students where available. Data were collected through passive participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation focused on clothing practices, interactions between non-Muslim and Muslim students, behavior in public spaces, participation in Islamic religious activities, and the use of religious facilities. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore adaptation experiences, identity negotiation, perceptions of Islamic social norms, and the possible emergence of stigma and symbolic pressure in campus life.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). During data reduction, the researchers selected and categorized the data according to the research focus, including Islamic-based social norms, non-Muslim students' initial experiences, adaptation strategies, identity negotiation, stigma, and symbolic pressure. Coding was conducted deductively based on theoretical concepts such as integration, separation, religious coping, and symbolic violence, as well as inductively based on themes emerging from the field data. During the data display stage, interview, observation, and documentary findings were organized into thematic narratives so that relationships between students' experiences and the theoretical framework could be analyzed systematically. Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, time triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing to ensure that the interpretations were not based solely on researchers' assumptions but were supported by consistency across field data and confirmation from informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sugiyono, 2015).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Islamic-Based Social Norms and Non-Muslim Students' Initial Adaptation Experiences

The field findings indicate that Islamic-based social norms constitute a defining characteristic of academic and social life at UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus. These norms are manifested not only through formal religious activities but also in everyday campus practices, such as the use of Islamic greetings, dress ethics, respect for prayer times, observance of Islamic religious celebrations, and patterns of social interaction shaped by Muslim-majority culture. For Muslim students, these norms tend to be perceived as a natural part of campus life. For non-Muslim students, however, they represent a new social environment that needs to be understood, learned, and negotiated within both academic activities and everyday social interactions.

The field findings also demonstrate that the initial experiences of non-Muslim students were not always free from challenges. During the early stages of entering the university, some non-Muslim students experienced confusion, awkwardness, and apprehension when encountering dominant Islamic symbols and practices. These concerns were related to adapting to dress norms, navigating public spaces,

interacting with Muslim students, and understanding the culture of an Islamic university. Nevertheless, these initial experiences did not necessarily develop into rejection or conflict. As non-Muslim students established more intensive social interactions, particularly with Muslim peers, their initial apprehension tended to decrease because they gained direct experience showing that social relationships on campus could be open and tolerant.

Islamic-based social norms within the environment of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus can be analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus refers to a system of dispositions that shapes how individuals act, think, and evaluate social practices within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). Within the context of an Islamic university, the use of Islamic greetings, dress ethics, respect for worship times, and Islamic social practices constitute a dominant habitus that is regarded as natural by the majority group. For non-Muslim students, however, this habitus is not necessarily something that is automatically understood, but rather a system of norms that must be interpreted and gradually accommodated. Thus, the adaptation of non-Muslim students involves not only personal adjustment but also a process of understanding the symbolic structures that organize social life within the university.

The initial experiences of non-Muslim students can also be understood as a form of culture shock, namely a condition that occurs when individuals enter a new social environment characterized by values, symbols, and practices that differ from their previous experiences. In this context, culture shock does not necessarily indicate rejection of the Islamic environment, but is more appropriately understood as a transitional phase within a broader process of social learning. When non-Muslim students have limited prior experience with life at a PTKIN institution, they may experience uncertainty in determining the boundary between respecting majority norms and maintaining their own religious identity. However, open interaction with Muslim students can help reduce such uncertainty. This process indicates that early adaptation is strongly influenced by the quality of social relationships rather than solely by religious differences.

From John W. Berry's acculturation perspective, the experiences of non-Muslim students may develop toward an integration strategy when they are able to maintain their original religious identities while simultaneously establishing positive relationships with the majority group (Berry, 1997, 2005). The findings indicate that non-Muslim students do not need to relinquish their religious identities in order to adapt to an Islamic university environment. They can respect Islamic-based social norms, observe appropriate social conduct, and participate in the academic culture of the university without fully assimilating into the identity of the majority. This pattern demonstrates that adaptation is not synonymous with assimilation, but may instead occur through balanced identity negotiation between respect for the prevailing social environment and the preservation of personal religious beliefs.

Accordingly, Islamic-based social norms at UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, need to be understood as part of a complex adaptive environment. These norms do not automatically constitute a source of discrimination, but neither can they be regarded as entirely neutral because they continue to reflect the symbolic dominance of the Muslim majority. Interpretatively, the early experiences of non-Muslim students indicate that successful adaptation depends significantly on the university's capacity to create open social spaces, tolerant relationships among students, and communication practices that do not place pressure on minority identities. Therefore, the adaptation of non-Muslim students should be understood as a relational process involving individuals, social norms, campus habitus, and the quality of majority-minority interactions. These findings emphasize that the inclusivity of an Islamic university should not be measured solely by the administrative admission of non-Muslim students, but also by their everyday experiences of feeling safe, respected, and able to maintain their religious identities.

Adaptation Strategies, Identity Negotiation, and Religious Coping among Non-Muslim Students

The field findings indicate that non-Muslim students at UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, employ several adaptation strategies in responding to Islamic-based social norms. These strategies are reflected in behavioral adjustments within public campus spaces, respect for the practices of the Muslim majority, and efforts to establish positive social relationships with Muslim students. Non-Muslim students do not automatically reject dominant Islamic norms; instead, they attempt to understand the prevailing social boundaries so that they can interact comfortably within the academic environment. At the same time, they continue to maintain their respective religious identities through private religious practices and relationships with members of their own faith communities. These

findings demonstrate that the adaptation of non-Muslim students is not a process of identity homogenization, but rather a selective and context-dependent form of social adjustment.

From the perspective of John W. Berry's acculturation theory, this tendency can be understood as an integration strategy. Integration occurs when individuals maintain their original cultural or religious identities while simultaneously building positive relationships with the majority group (Berry, 1997, 2005). Non-Muslim students within an Islamic university environment do not need to fully assimilate into majority norms or abandon their beliefs in order to gain social acceptance. They can respect campus norms, observe prevailing social etiquette, and develop relationships with Muslim students while retaining their religious identities. However, adaptation strategies are not necessarily uniform. Some students may adopt a form of limited separation, for example by restricting discussions about religion or keeping their religious practices within more private settings. Thus, the adaptation of non-Muslim students should be understood as a spectrum that moves between integration, limited separation, and identity negotiation according to each student's social experiences.

The findings also demonstrate that the adaptation of non-Muslim students is closely related to the management of social identity. Within a Muslim-majority environment, Christian, Catholic, or Buddhist identity becomes an important component of how students understand their position as members of a minority group. According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity is constructed through an individual's awareness of belonging to a particular group and through that group's relationship with other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this context, non-Muslim students need to manage how their identities are presented in everyday interactions. Goffman's concept of impression management helps explain how individuals may regulate self-presentation, choose particular forms of language, limit certain topics, or adjust their behavior in order to gain acceptance in specific social situations (Goffman, 1959, 1963). Accordingly, the behavioral adjustment of non-Muslim students should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of pressure, as it may also represent a form of social respect. However, when such adjustment is motivated by fear of being perceived as different or inconsistent with majority norms, the adaptation process may also contain a dimension of symbolic pressure that warrants attention.

In addition to social strategies, non-Muslim students also employ religious coping as a source of identity resilience and psychological strength. Religious coping refers to the use of religious beliefs, worship practices, and spiritual resources to manage situations involving pressure or uncertainty (Pargament, 1997). In the context of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, religious coping helps non-Muslim students maintain personal stability while navigating an academic environment strongly characterized by Islamic symbols and norms. Religious belief therefore functions not only as an identity to be preserved but also as a source of strength through which students can interpret their adaptation experiences more positively. Interpretatively, adaptation strategies, identity negotiation, and religious coping demonstrate that non-Muslim students are not merely passive objects adjusting themselves to dominant norms, but active subjects who interpret situations, select social strategies, maintain their identities, and build interreligious relationships. Consequently, successful adaptation is strongly influenced by the balance between the openness of the campus environment, social acceptance by the majority group, and the capacity of non-Muslim students to maintain their identities safely.

Academic Challenges, Symbolic Pressure, and Campus Inclusivity

The field findings indicate that the adaptation of non-Muslim students at UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, occurs not only in everyday social interactions but also within the academic sphere. One of the main challenges faced by non-Muslim students is participation in Islamic studies courses that form part of the curriculum of an Islamic university. Non-Muslim students may perceive these courses as opportunities to gain interfaith knowledge, while at the same time experiencing difficulties in understanding Islamic terminology, Arabic literacy, basic concepts of Islamic teachings, and religious references with which they were previously unfamiliar. This condition indicates that differences in religious background produce unequal levels of prior knowledge when students enter the learning process. Accordingly, the academic challenges experienced by non-Muslim students should not be interpreted simply as evidence of lower academic ability, but rather as a consequence of differing educational experiences and forms of cultural capital prior to entering a PTKIN environment.

This condition can be analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, language, and dispositions possessed by individuals that influence their success within a particular social or educational field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). In the context of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, Muslim students generally possess Islamic cultural capital that is more closely aligned with the curriculum and academic atmosphere of the institution, whereas non-Muslim students may require additional time to understand concepts that are already familiar to

many Muslim students. Islamic studies courses should therefore be understood as spaces in which the cultural capital of majority and minority groups intersect. The role of lecturers becomes particularly important because pedagogical accommodations, such as explaining basic terminology, providing additional contextual information, or offering reasonable flexibility in certain assignments, can help non-Muslim students adapt without feeling marginalized within the academic process.

In addition to academic challenges, the findings also reveal the possibility of symbolic pressure experienced by non-Muslim students in campus life. Such pressure does not necessarily take the form of direct discrimination, but may emerge through unwritten rules, social expectations, and caution in expressing religious identity in public spaces. Muslim-majority norms that have become normalized within campus culture may be perceived as natural, leading non-Muslim students to adjust their behavior in order to avoid being regarded as different, impolite, or disrespectful toward the surrounding environment. From Bourdieu's perspective, this condition can be interpreted through the concept of symbolic violence, whereby the norms of a dominant group are subtly accepted as natural and legitimate, making the underlying power relations less visible as forms of coercion (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, the adaptation of non-Muslim students requires critical interpretation because apparently voluntary adjustment may also be shaped by the symbolic structures of the majority.

Such symbolic pressure can also be examined through Foucault's perspective on normalization and social surveillance. Foucault (1977) argues that power does not operate solely through formal prohibitions but may also function through surveillance, habituation, and behavioral standards that encourage individuals to regulate themselves. Within an Islamic university context, non-Muslim students may regulate their clothing, speech, topics of conversation, or expressions of religious identity because they are aware of social scrutiny from the majority environment. This process does not necessarily indicate overt oppression, but it demonstrates that social norms possess a regulatory capacity over the bodies, language, and behavior of minority students. Therefore, campus inclusivity should not be assessed merely by the absence of direct conflict, but also by the extent to which non-Muslim students are able to participate academically and socially without feeling compelled to excessively conceal or suppress their identities.

The findings further indicate that UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, has the potential to function as a space for religious moderation because social relations between Muslim and non-Muslim students generally take place in an open and tolerant manner and do not necessarily result in conflict. Nevertheless, campus inclusivity still requires strengthening in the areas of institutional policy, curriculum, facilities, and interfaith dialogue. Religious moderation should not be understood merely as the administrative acceptance of non-Muslim students, but also as ensuring that they receive academic experiences that are equitable, safe, and meaningful. Values of tolerance, justice, openness, dialogue, and respect for rights need to be translated into concrete institutional practices, including pedagogical accommodation, lecturer sensitivity, access to worship facilities, and campus communication that respects religious diversity (Basid & Halimi, 2023; Burhanuddin & Hendri, 2024; Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Accordingly, the academic challenges and symbolic pressures experienced by non-Muslim students should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of institutional failure, but rather as important input for strengthening PTKINs as genuinely inclusive and moderate educational environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the adaptation of non-Muslim students within the academic environment of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Tuntungan Campus, constitutes a complex and dynamic social process that cannot be understood merely as individual adjustment to an Islamic campus culture. Christian, Catholic, and Buddhist students encounter Islamic-based social norms embedded in academic activities, social interactions, institutional symbols, and everyday practices; however, these norms do not automatically result in conflict or direct discrimination. The findings indicate that non-Muslim students tend to adopt an integration strategy by respecting majority norms, adjusting their behavior in public spaces, building social relationships with Muslim students, and maintaining their respective religious identities. At the same time, the adaptation process also involves identity negotiation, impression management, religious coping, academic challenges in Islamic studies courses, and the possibility of symbolic pressure arising from the dominance of majority norms. Therefore, the experiences of non-Muslim students demonstrate that campus inclusivity should not be assessed solely

through administrative acceptance or the absence of overt conflict, but also through the extent to which the university is able to provide academic and social spaces that are safe, equitable, dialogical, and sensitive to religious diversity. This study further reflects that PTKINs can function as meaningful spaces for religious moderation when the values of tolerance and respect for differences are translated into institutional policies, curricula, facilities, and everyday interaction practices that genuinely support students from diverse religious backgrounds.

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