

**RESEARCH PAPER****Icons of Faith: Understanding the Connection Between Religious Symbols and Youth Happiness in Pakistan****¹Ali Raza Siddique * and ² Prof. Dr. Muhammad Saleem**

1. Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author:** ali.raza@iub.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the role of religious symbols in shaping the happiness of Pakistani youth. A qualitative research approach was adopted to investigate the cultural aspects tied to these symbols and their impact on young people's religion related happiness. Given the deep emotional connections Pakistani society has with religion, alongside challenges like intolerance and terrorism. This study highlights the relevance of these symbols in fostering happiness; a topic that has been underexplored in previous research. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with youth across Pakistan, and the findings were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis with NVivo 11. The findings revealed that religious symbols provide guidance and emotional support to individuals and their communities, offering a sense of stability and belonging. These findings emphasize the significant role of cultural and religious foundations in promoting religious happiness and contentment among youth.

KEYWORDS Religious Symbols, Youth, Pakistani context, Qualitative Methodology, RTA, Happiness**Introduction**

The religious symbols are graphic or visual supports, which stresses the beliefs and faith with in the people all over the world. While in Islamic tradition, the religious artifacts such as *crescent* and *star* or written *name of Allah* and many other symbols are given much importance and shows significant connection with the religious experiences of believers (Saeed, 2020). Previous study by Siddiqui (2019), reported that, the symbols have bigger impact on the psychological and emotional well-being of people. There is huge saturation of religious symbols in almost all life activities, further the Islam being a prevalent religion in Pakistan, use of religious symbols is being witnessed openly at public places and in the house in all residential or public places. The religious symbols are pertinent to provide psychological support, and might help in improving the happiness and satisfaction with life, it also impacts on the mental health of individuals, resulting in shaping the individual and social identities (Ahmed et al, 2022; Khan, 2020). Though a lot of research has been done on the broad effects of religious symbols on mental health, less is known about how these symbols specifically affect youth happiness in Pakistan.

Religious symbols and mental health has been studied previously but the research in religious symbols and its connection with happiness of young individuals is not prioritized. In past few years, a number of studies have focused on association of religion with happiness and psychological well-being. But, people's psychological temperaments and their contentment and spiritual beliefs are less studied. It is also important to address the impact of religious traditions, symbols and beliefs on the happiness of youth.

The cultural and spiritual meaning of religious symbols in a deep context can have a substantial impact on the psychological well-being of youth, the most important symbols are mandalas, cross and crescents, which are more than visual representations. They give people a sense of consolation and understanding the life experiences while facing any hurdles of life. This strongly provide a conceptual framework for considering that religious symbols may stood as significant barrier against the anxiety or any psychological strain experiences by young individuals (Koenig, 2012).

Pakistan having majority of Muslim population with minorities such as Christians and Hindu, has rich cultural and spiritual possessions offered by the traditions, norms and religious symbols representing Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. The resources and tapestry showing symbols of these religions have effect on psychological and emotional growth of Pakistani Youth. Nonetheless, deeply penetrating into the social, personal and community lives (Zafar, 2019).

The religious landscape of Pakistan is scattered with a complex relationship of Islamic, Hindu and Christian tradition, as every thing has its own set of symbols and customs. For instance, the Quranic Verses and passages, star and crescents are very common Islamic symbols in public areas and private properties. The studies also suggested that the satisfaction and meaning of life can be increased with one's connection with religious symbols. Individuals who participate in the religious rituals and symbols are often seen in expressing greater life satisfaction and gratitude (Park, 2005). These symbols help in promoting spiritual comfort, harmony in community and identification of religion. In the same way, Cross and Swastika are symbols of Christian and Hindu are embedded with cultures respectively (Rashid, 2020).

Literature Review

In several nations religious symbols have great cultural and personal significance but in Pakistan, where religion is very important these symbols have practical effects on both individual happiness and group well-being. With an emphasis on the psychological, cultural, and social aspects of this relationship, this literature review investigates the relationship between religious symbols and happiness among young people in Pakistan.

Religious symbols have been shown to enhance mental health by reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of belonging. The emotional experiences of youth are significantly affected by such experiences and depict high connection with the religious identity. The religious symbols significantly provide identity, significance and comfort (Jorm, et al. 2002). These symbols also promote the meaning in life and resilience in individual resulting in dealing with challenges of life, the visuals of symbols in Islam or other religions gives a profound sense of security and belongingness (Pargament, 2001). The well-being is associated with shared religious harmony, cultural heritage within one's country elevating the sense of satisfaction with happiness (Koenig, 2012; Ahmad et al, 2022). In educational institutions, homes, residential areas, public and commercial places the religious symbols can be seen frequently which directly impacts the beliefs, faith and emotions of any individual, especially the young minds, who consider these symbols as an external support to overcome any obstacle, development, cultural continuity and stability within anyone's life (Rahimi & Amin, 2020). Since the cultural and social significance and solace of these symbols can't be ignored by the individuals, particularly, people living in Pakistan, where Islam acquires majority of its believers (Hussain et al, 2020).

The religious occasions and community gathering related to religion provide youth an opportunity to have recreation, satisfaction, meaning of life, happiness and making contacts in social circles. The social contexts of religious events create an environment which is supportive for people and which helps them to foster happiness and life satisfaction within them (Zafar, 2019). The religious symbols are considered as central part of bringing

communities and people together through group activities and social networks in Pakistan. The participation of youth in religious rituals and events tie themselves closer to the community and enhance the sense of identity. Research also suggests that the social support offered by religious communities can help lower stress levels and enhance overall well-being (Ali, 2022; Ellison, 1991).

The studies in contrast also showed that happiness vary according to the cultural context of people. The religious symbols in Pakistan have unique role in making the strong connections to national and cultural identity and shaping the life of individual, but many studies, carried out in western cultures emphasized that religious symbols are associated with personal meaning and cohesion, harmony among the religious communities, which at the same way, foster the well-being of people (Hood et al., 2009).

Methodology

For the exploration of association between religious symbols and youth happiness in Pakistan, an exploratory qualitative research design was used. The aim was to have a deeper understanding about the affects of religious symbols on youth's happiness and psychological well being. The sample included diversity across gender, socioeconomic status and residential orientation.

The community centers, higher educational institutions and social media platforms were targeted to reach the participants. A comprehensive research material was provided to them and were given the choice of being volunteer for the research. In this study young individuals were selected from major religious communities of Pakistan. The purposive sampling technique was utilized to acquire the diversity and various perspectives about religious symbols and beliefs. 15 participants were recruited, between the age range 18-25 belonging from various religious communities regardless of their education. 5 respondents from each religion (Muslim, Christian, Hinduism) were purposefully selected based on apparent use of religious symbols; wearing cross, pendants and threads. Data were collected through the indepth interviews, for which an interview guide and interview protocol was designed and approved from veteran scholars. Interviews were conducted, based on participant choices and limitations of location, either in-person or through video chats. With the participants' permission, each interview was audio recorded and encompassed between 60 to 90 minutes. To ensure that the investigation is thorough and accurately reflects the variety of participant experiences and viewpoints, data gathering was continued until no new information was emerging from the interviews.

For qualitative research to yield reliable and dependable results, rigor is essential. The study "Icons of Faith: Understanding the Connection Between Religious Symbols and Youth Happiness in Pakistan" used the criteria of rigor given by Lyclon and Guba (1985). Credibility was established by verifying findings, use a variety of data sources and viewpoints (such as those from various religious communities). To make sure there is consistency, compare data from several participants. Member Checking was make sure so that their opinions are fully reflected, participants will go through and verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations. Transferability was enshured by enabling the readers to determine whether the findings are transferable to other contexts or populations, provide thorough descriptions of the research context, participants, and outcomes.

Dependability was done making audit trail of the study,s methods and choices, keep a thorough record of every step of the research process, including data gathering, coding, and topic development. Conformability was done making researchers participate in reflexivity by considering their own biases and their possible effects they may have on the research's methods and conclusion. This involves recording one's own suppositions and how they affect how data is interpreted. Peer Debriefing: discuss the research method and results

with colleagues or peers. This outside information will guarantee a thorough investigation and firmly founded findings.

By utilizing these measures, the study will be held to a high standard of rigor, which will increase the validity and dependability of the conclusions about the relationship between religious symbols and youth happiness in Pakistan. To enable to establish the reliability of the research study “Icons of Faith: Understanding the Connection Between Religious Symbols and Youth Happiness in Pakistan,” several types of techniques will be employed. Credibility was established by member verification, where participants examine and confirm the findings to demonstrate accuracy. Dependability was confirmed by conducting an organized and accessible research process that includes thorough records of the steps involved in data collecting and analysis. Conformability was enhances readers’ ability to evaluate the findings’ generalizability to different contexts. This will be accomplished by maintaining a thorough audit trail of all decisions made during the research process. The researcher belongs to a shia muslim sect and affiliations and belonging could be figured out which determines positionality of the researcher.

Reflexive thematic analysis was done by using NVivo. First data were transcribed and transcriptions were checked for accuracy and comprehensiveness using guidelines by(Braun & Clarke, 2012). Then the interviews were read several times to get to understand themselves with the context and subject matter. Considering initial codes that identify significant concepts about religious symbols and happiness were identified and categorize to look for important elements of the data. Codes might be categorized into various themes by identifying patterns and connections in the data. The themes were examined for coherence and significance to make sure they appropriately represent the data and answer the research questions. The themes were clearly defined and named for detailing the specific aspects of the data they represent and their significance to the research. An integrated narrative that has been supported up by direct quotes and data-based evidence when compiling and presenting the final analyzing was created. This method provided researchers an extensive understanding of how religious symbols affect young people's happiness in Pakistan. NVivo software was employed to streamline the process of data analysis. NVivo is a software tool for managing, analyzing, and visualizing qualitative data analysis. Ethical Considerations were cater by employing informed consent, although at initial stages all participants delivered written informed consent after receiving comprehensive study information. Confidentiality of the participants' names was kept, and during the analysis and reporting stages, personal data was anonymous. Voluntary Participation:every participant was liberty to leave the study at anytime and without confronting consequences. Sensitive Topics: As religious beliefs and personal experiences can be sensitive topics, participants were advised to share only the information they were comfortable sharing.

Findings and Discussion

The Purpose of the study Icons of Faith: Understanding the Connection Between Religious Symbols and Youth Happiness in Pakistan, interviews were done with Pakistani participants, and it was made sure that each participant provided permission for their answers to be recorded. The interviews conducted successfully with their full participation. In-depth information was gathered using a set of seven carefully constructed questions, each of which was designed to elicit comprehensive and understandable responses from the participants. The way the questions were written made it easy for respondents to understand and give thorough answers regarding how religious symbols affect their level of happiness.

Table 1
Themes with Code and Verbatims.

Themes	Extracted Codes	Verbatims
---------------	------------------------	------------------

<p>Personal Significance of Symbols in Religion</p>	<p>Social support</p>	<p>"I feel at peace and am reminded of my responsibilities as a Muslim whenever I see the Kaaba pendant." (Participant 3).</p>
	<p>Day-to-day direction</p>	<p>"I always carry a Tasbih; it helps me concentrate in stressful situations." (Participant 7). "No matter what is going on in my life, I am always grounded and reminded of my faith when I see the mosque." (Participant 12).</p>
	<p>Spiritual bonding A feeling of safety</p>	<p>"The Quranic verses hanging on my wall give me a sense of security and protection."(Participant 9)</p>
<p>Impact on Contentment and Health</p>	<p>Uplifting of the emotions</p>	<p>"My mood instantly improves and I feel more connected and content when I hold my prayer beads."(Participant 4)</p>
	<p>Contentment and fulfillment:</p>	<p>"These symbols serve as a daily reminder of the deep bond between my faith and happiness."* (Participant 14)</p>
<p>The effects of Pakistan's cultural context</p>	<p>Integration of Religious Practices</p>	<p>Religious symbols are commonly displayed in our community, and it strengthens our bond." (Participant 2)</p>
	<p>Community Reinforcement</p>	<p>"I've noticed that some symbols are more prominent in different parts of Pakistan, like the use of green flags in the Sindh region." (Participant 10)</p>
	<p>Cultural Variation</p>	<p>"Religious symbols play a significant role in our cultural gatherings and celebrations; they are not just personal." (Participant 5)</p>
<p>Comparison with Other Sources of Happiness</p>	<p>Faith against familial support</p>	<p>"My faith, represented by the prayer mat, gives me a deeper sense of purpose; family brings me joy. (Participant 8)</p>
	<p>Religious belief optimism against materialistic take pleasure:</p>	<p>"Seeing the Quran gives me inner peace, even though I enjoy spending time with friends. (Participant 11)</p>
	<p>Interrelationships</p>	<p>"My religious symbols give me lasting contentment, but my happiness from work or social life feels fleeting." (Participant6)</p>
<p>Difficulties and Solutions Concerning Religious Symbols:</p>	<p>Misunderstanding or misconstruing</p>	<p>"I was once discouraged for wearing a hijab to pursue careers, but it only strengthened my resolve to uphold my religious beliefs."* (Participant 13)</p>
	<p>Outside critique</p>	<p>"I've sometimes needed to explain why I carry a Tasbih, but it's also given me an opportunity to discuss my beliefs with others."* (Participant 01)</p>

	Resilience via faith	"I used to have trouble understanding the meaning behind some symbols, but I've found clarity through learning and prayer."* (Participant 15)
Evolution of Views on Religious Symbols	Growth in understanding	When I was younger, I didn't understand the significance of the Hijab, but now it's a central part of my identity. (Participant 6)
	Influence of life events	After performing Hajj, the sight of the Kaaba brings tears to my eyes; it wasn't the same before. (Participant 14)
	Changes in practice	My view of religious symbols has changed after experiencing a personal loss; they now hold a deeper meaning. (Participant 3)
Identity and Belonging Contribution	Relation to the community	"No matter where I am, wearing a religious ring makes me feel closer to my Muslim brothers and sisters." (Participant 5)
	Identity of the individual	"These symbols define my identity in a way that nothing else can; they are a crucial aspect of who I am." (Participant 9)
	Sense of belonging	"I feel a strong sense of belonging to my country and faith whenever I see a green flag with the crescent and star.(Participant 11)



Figure 1: Flowchart of Factors Influenced by Religious Symbols

The findings shed light on the multifaceted role that religious symbols play in the lives of young people in Pakistan, particularly in shaping their sense of happiness and

fulfillment. Through reflexive thematic analysis, key themes emerged, revealing how individuals interpret and incorporate these symbols into their daily lives. To better understand the relationship between religious symbols and well-being within the Pakistani context, this discussion will integrate these findings with insights from previous research.

In the challenging and difficult situations, religious symbols offered identity, comfort and support to the Muslims by using these symbols in their daily life, participants perceived that they strengthened the connection with the wider community and faith of individuals. This was seen as one of the major themes of this study, that personal and social identities were fosters in Pakistani Youth through religious symbols, such as Mosques, religious attires, Quran and many other symbols which gave broader vision with in in collective religious beliefs. *After performing Hajj, the sight of the Kaaba brings tears to my eyes; it wasn't the same before. (Participant 14).* According to Tariq and Tanveer (2025), similar findings were reported that religious symbols gives sense of continuity and belonging helping in navigating the social environment.

The findings showed that religious symbols offered psychological comfort and happiness to the Pakistani Youth and it hold an important place in emerging themes. Many participants reported that whenever they experienced any hurdles and challenging situations, the religious symbols helped creating perception of support that help them acquire comfort and ease. *"My view of religious symbols has changed after experiencing a personal loss; they now hold a deeper meaning." (Participant 3).* These symbols played a role in elevating level of hope for betterment among the people. This finding is also supported by research conducted by Ali et al. (2022), who argued that psychological and emotional well-being is enhanced by emphasizing on understanding of religious frameworks and it helps to deal with all challenges of life, fostering overall sense of happiness and psychological wellbeing.

An important discovery from this study highlights how sectarian differences influence cultural dynamics and their strong ties to religious symbols. Each sect is characterized by distinct symbols that relate deeply with its followers, forming a profound emotional and cultural connection. Rizvi (2022), stated that sectarianism also forms the social identity of youth in Pakistan as diversity in religious sects and cultural norms are always crucial for the individuals. The various interpretations of people with their sect's and the symbols associated with them impacts and shape their happiness and well being strongly. The findings also attempted to argue that, where religious symbols provide unity, happiness and life satisfaction, the social and cultural diversity with sectarian system also promotes sources of division and difference within the youth.

The societal pressure of adherence to rituals on various religious occasions and diversity of sectarian religious symbols further arise various conflicts, which requires dealing with the issues and managing the psychological well-being associated with religious faith and harmony. *"Religious symbols play a significant role in our cultural gatherings and celebrations; they are not just personal." (Participant 5).* Ahmed et al (2022), debated that the young minds are usually seemed to be confused between the diversity and dividing sources of religious symbols, hence they are often facing challenges while evolving and growing between expectations of society and personal beliefs. But, gradually, the life experiences give more deeper understanding of these symbols and the evolution of this energizing relationship between religious symbols and youth's well-being is promoted towards the positive growth. The meaning and purpose of religious symbols also keep growing within the beliefs and practices of participants which ultimately enriches their spiritual, emotional and psychological development.

The participants also mentioned other sources of happiness besides the religious symbols, which included their relationships with family, educational achievements and advancements in careers. *"These symbols serve as a daily reminder of the deep bond between*

my faith and happiness.” (Participant 14). The study by Akhtar and Saeed(2020) emphasized that life satisfaction and happiness have many other associated factors and having a balanced approach can pour the individual’s life with happiness and well-being either concerning religious or non-religious aspects of life. This combination amplifies the congruence of worldly components and spiritual existence within the individuals to achieve satisfaction in their lives. There could be many situations that seems to be challenging or can create a resilient sense of well-being, the capability of an individual to bring balance within various domains of life will give a sense of fulfillment and contentment with its true meaning and purpose.

Conclusion

This study highlights the deep connection between religious symbols and religious happiness of Pakistani youth. Religious symbols offer comfort during challenging times, providing a sense of stability and peace. They also serve as a source of emotional support, helping young people feel grounded in their faith and values. Beyond personal significance, these symbols strengthen cultural identity by connecting individuals to their traditions, heritage, and communities. Together, these aspects (comfort, emotional support, and cultural strength) work harmoniously to create a sense of belonging and fulfillment, ultimately leading to religion related happiness in the lives of young people.

Recomendations

This study had few limitations, such as the sample size focused on specific area, which doesn’t fully represent the diversity across cultural backgrounds. The findings don’t reflect the broader population so in order to improve these lacking in future research, it would be appropriate to add a larger or more diverse sample potentially, leading to mixed methods to quantitative results. Further, the role of religious symbols across different age groups, gender and socio-economic status were also not explored in this study, carrying out such research in future would help in bringing more insights and detailed exploration of the current findings and adding significantly to the literature with applicability and relevance.

References

- Ahmad, A., Khan, M. U., & Aslani, P. (2022). The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Fasting in Coping with Diabetes among Indian Migrants in Australia: A Qualitative Exploratory Study. *Journal of religion and health*, 61(3), 1994–2017.
- Ali, J. A. (2022). Modernity, its crisis and Islamic revivalism. *Religions*, 14(1), 15.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). *Thematic analysis*. American Psychological Association.
- Ellison, C. G. (1991). Religious involvement and subjective well-being. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 80-99.
- Hood Jr, R. W., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach*. Guilford Press.
- Hood, R. W., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach*. Guilford Press.
- Hussain, I., Ali, S., & Gardezi, S. A. A. Illustration of Religious Minority Symbols in Bollywood Films: A Descriptive & Semiotic Approach.
- Koenig H. G. (2012). Religion, spirituality, and health: the research and clinical implications. *ISRN psychiatry*, 2012, 278730. <https://doi.org/10.5402/2012/278730>
- Lincoln, YS. & Guba, EG(1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pargament, K. I. (2001). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford press.
- Park, C. L. (2005). Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress. *Journal of social issues*, 61(4), 707-729.
- Rahimi, B., & Amin, M. (2020). Digital Technology and Pilgrimage: Shi'i Rituals of Arba'in in Iraq. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 9(1), 82-106.
- Rashid, A., Jabeen, S., & Shahbaz, S. (2020). Re-Writing Muslim Identity and Self against Western Discourse of Terrorism in Naqvi's Home Boy. *sjesr*, 3(2), 68-75.
- Rizvi Jafree, S. (2022). Transmitting religious values through online religious communities: case study of Pakistani Shia mothers' home education. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 43(4), 461-479.
- Saeed, A., & Shahed, S. (2020). Beliefs and Behaviors of Shrine Visitors of Bibi Pak Daman. *Journal of Gender and Social Issues*, 19(1), 71-84.
- Siddiqui, N. (2019). Strategic Violence among Religious Parties in Pakistan. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Tariq, A., & Tanveer, Y. (2025). Sacred Choices: Exploring the Influence of Religion on Green Consumption. In *Government Influences on Eco-Friendly Practices in Business* (pp. 151-176). IGI Global.
- Zafar, M. (2019). Cultural and spiritual resources in religious practices. *Journal of Spiritual Well-being*, 7(2), 88-102