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Attitudes towards ethnic minorities in Sri Lankan Universities: A study based on a survey of the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates towards Muslim undergraduates

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Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities, focusing on the dynamics of interethnic relations within higher education institutions. It aims to analyze the factors shaping these attitudes, the dimensions of intergroup perceptions, and their potential impact on social cohesion and ethnic harmony. This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to capture a holistic view of these attitudes. Drawing on a quantitative approach, data is collected through a structured survey from undergraduates across major universities, including Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, South Eastern, and Jayewardenepura. Using a qualitative study approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, group discussions and document analysis. The research explores both positive and negative attitudes, highlighting barriers and opportunities for fostering inclusive inter-ethnic relationships. By examining the role of universities as spaces for cultural exchange, the study emphasizes the importance of higher education in promoting social integration and mutual respect among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The findings aim to inform policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders about practical strategies to enhance interethnic harmony in university settings, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Sinhala-Speaking Undergraduates; Muslim Undergraduates; Inter-ethnic Relations; Sri Lankan Universities; Social Cohesion; Inclusive Education.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country consisting of Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Muslims, and several other minority communities. The relationships among these ethnic groups have been shaped by historical, political, and social factors, influencing patterns of interaction and perceptions across different sectors of society. Ethnic attitudes are often influenced by personal experiences, social environments, cultural understanding, and opportunities for intergroup interaction.

Universities represent one of the most important spaces where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds come together and engage in academic, social, and cultural activities. As higher education institutions bring together students from different regions and communities, they provide opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction while also reflecting broader social attitudes present within society. Student experiences within universities can therefore play a significant role in shaping perceptions, relationships, and attitudes toward ethnic minorities.

The post-war context of Sri Lanka has created both opportunities and challenges for ethnic reconciliation. Although the end of the civil war reduced direct conflict, issues related to ethnic mistrust, stereotypes, and social divisions continue to influence intergroup relations. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to relationships between Sinhala

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and Muslim communities due to emerging social and political tensions. These developments highlight the importance of understanding how ethnic attitudes are formed and maintained, particularly among younger generations.

University environments differ considerably in terms of ethnic composition and levels of diversity. Institutions such as the University of Colombo and the University of Peradeniya have diverse student populations that encourage interaction among students from different ethnic backgrounds. In contrast, universities with more homogeneous student populations may provide fewer opportunities for meaningful inter-ethnic engagement. These differences can influence friendship formation, participation in student activities, academic collaboration, and perceptions of ethnic minorities.

Despite increased opportunities for interaction in higher education settings, challenges remain. Some students enter university with limited exposure to other ethnic communities, which may contribute to stereotypes and misconceptions. Differences in culture, religion, language, and social practices can also influence student relationships. While universities often promote multicultural engagement through academic and extracurricular activities, the extent to which these initiatives contribute to genuine social integration remains an important area of inquiry.

This study focuses on the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. The research examines how university environments, peer interactions, social experiences, and demographic factors influence these attitudes. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of inter-ethnic relations among university students.

Understanding these attitudes is important because university students represent a generation that will contribute to the future social, political, and professional landscape of Sri Lanka. Examining their perceptions of ethnic minorities can provide valuable insights into the current state of inter-ethnic relations and identify opportunities for promoting greater understanding, inclusion, and social cohesion within higher education institutions and society more broadly.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnic Relations and Intergroup Attitudes in Sri Lanka

Ethnic relations in Sri Lanka have been shaped by historical, political, and social factors. Several scholars have argued that post-independence policies and political developments contributed significantly to ethnic divisions among communities. Perera (2001) highlights that policies such as the Sinhala Only Act and disparities in educational opportunities created feelings of marginalization among minority communities. Similarly, Uyangoda (2005) argues that majoritarian political structures reinforced ethnic divisions and limited minority representation. Expanding this argument, Gunasekara and Pannilage (2021) contend that ethnic polarization was institutionalized through political processes and continued to influence interethnic relations even in the post-war period.

Research conducted in post-war Sri Lanka indicates that ethnic attitudes continue to be influenced by historical grievances and contemporary socio-political realities. Riswan (2014) found that although economic interdependence and local reconciliation efforts improved relationships among ethnic communities in Ampara District, mistrust and competition over resources remained significant challenges. Likewise, Jayamaha (2021) argues that unresolved structural issues continue to affect ethnic relations despite the formal end of the civil war.

Studies further suggest that contextual factors significantly influence ethnic attitudes. Schaller and Abeysinghe (2006) demonstrated that perceptions of ethnic groups vary according to demographic and geographical settings. Their findings indicate that ethnic attitudes are not fixed but are shaped by social environments and experiences. Similarly, Saldin (2019) highlights that minority communities continue to negotiate issues of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation in post-war Sri Lanka, which affects broader intergroup relations.

2.2. Ethnic Relations within Sri Lankan Universities

Universities play a crucial role in shaping interethnic attitudes because they bring together students from diverse backgrounds. Herath (2014) found that universities with diverse student populations generally demonstrate stronger ethnic cohesion. However, ethnic-based student groupings often continue to exist despite institutional efforts to promote integration. Similarly, Selvaratnam, Keat, and Tham (2024) argue that universities can function as important spaces for post-war reconciliation by facilitating intercultural interactions through academic and social activities.

Research focusing directly on university environments identifies several barriers to meaningful interethnic engagement. Razick, Fowser, and Mihilar (2020), in their study at South Eastern University, found that cultural

misunderstandings, religious differences, stereotypes, and social media influences often hinder ethnic harmony between Sinhala and Muslim students. Likewise, Rameez (2006) observed that students frequently preferred associating with members of their own ethnic groups, limiting opportunities for meaningful intercultural exchange.

Selvaratnam (2023), examining Sinhala–Tamil relations in public universities, found that although students shared academic spaces and expressed willingness to interact, subtle prejudices and self-segregation continued to influence social relationships. These findings suggest that physical proximity alone is insufficient to eliminate ethnic divisions. Ariyaratne and Karunanayake (2013) found that ethnic stereotypes remained prevalent among university students and significantly influenced interethnic perceptions and interactions.

2.3. Diversity, Inclusion, and Student Attitudes

Recent studies have examined students' readiness for diversity and inclusion within higher education settings. Chathuranga, Gunawardane, and Dissanayake (2024) found that many undergraduates express support for diversity and inclusion in principle; however, actual engagement with students from different ethnic backgrounds remains limited. Their study also revealed that factors such as gender, urban-rural background, and previous exposure to diversity influence student attitudes.

Similarly, Kumari (2021) reported that educated youth generally demonstrate positive attitudes toward ethnic integration, although deeper interpersonal relationships across ethnic boundaries remain less common. Gunathilake (2023) found that students from multiethnic environments displayed greater openness toward diversity compared to students from more homogeneous settings. These findings collectively suggest that exposure to diversity and prior interethnic experiences play important roles in shaping attitudes toward ethnic minorities.

Socioeconomic factors have also been identified as important influences. Hettige (2013) argues that social class and economic inequalities can reinforce ethnic divisions and shape intergroup perceptions. Likewise, Wijethunga and Samarakoon (2020) found that students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds often experience limited opportunities for social engagement, which may indirectly affect interethnic interactions.

2.4. Media, Stereotypes, and Interethnic Perceptions

Several studies emphasize the role of media and stereotypes in shaping ethnic attitudes. Mendis (2002) highlights how language divisions within the education system have historically reinforced ethnic boundaries and limited opportunities for interaction among students. Ariyaratne and Karunanayake (2013) further demonstrate that stereotypes are often inherited through family, community, and media influences rather than direct personal experiences.

International research similarly identifies media as a significant factor influencing ethnic perceptions. Schemer (2013) found that repeated exposure to ethnicized political messaging reinforces existing prejudices. Likewise, Ramasubramanian and Sousa (2019) argue that negative media portrayals contribute to ethnic stereotyping and social bias. Batarchuk and Sipki (2019) also found that media narratives and historical memories continue to shape university students' attitudes toward other ethnic groups.

The growing influence of social media further complicates interethnic relations. Ahmad, Alvi, and Ittefaq (2019) found that social media can both facilitate communication and reinforce existing biases through exposure to polarized content. These findings are particularly relevant in understanding how contemporary university students form attitudes toward minority communities.

2.5. International Perspectives on Interethnic Relations in Higher Education

International scholarships highlight the important role universities play in promoting ethnic integration. Nellans (2018) argues that higher education institutions in post-conflict societies can either reinforce ethnic divisions or contribute to reconciliation depending on institutional policies and leadership. Similarly, Lopez (2004) found that structured inter-ethnic contact and inclusive curricula significantly improve student attitudes toward ethnic minorities.

Research from Ethiopia demonstrates that positive interethnic attitudes are associated with higher-quality interactions among university students (Teferi, 2010). Studies conducted in Malaysia and China further suggest that structured diversity programs, multicultural education, and intercultural engagement initiatives contribute positively to ethnic harmony (Ismail et al., 2020; Lhagyal, 2024).

Moreover, Taiti (2024) found that negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities are strongly associated with discrimination and exclusion within educational settings. These findings emphasize the importance of institutional interventions in reducing prejudice and promoting inclusive university environments.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The present study is primarily guided by the Intergroup Contact Theory proposed by Gordon Allport (1954). The theory argues that meaningful interaction between members of different ethnic, religious, or social groups can reduce prejudice and improve mutual understanding. In university settings, students from diverse backgrounds interact through academic activities, student organizations, and social engagements, creating opportunities for positive intergroup contact. Such interactions can challenge stereotypes, promote empathy, and foster more positive attitudes toward minority groups.

In addition, Social Identity Theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) provides a useful framework for understanding ethnic attitudes. The theory suggests that individuals classify themselves and others into social groups, developing a sense of belonging and identity based on group membership. This process may lead to in-group preference and the formation of stereotypes about out-groups. Within Sri Lankan universities, ethnic identities may influence students' perceptions, social relationships, and interactions with peers from different ethnic backgrounds.

Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how interaction, identity, and group dynamics shape the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities.

2.7. Research Gap

Existing literature provides substantial insights into ethnic relations, post-war reconciliation, diversity, and inclusion in Sri Lanka. However, most studies focus on broad ethnic relations, Sinhala–Tamil dynamics, reconciliation processes, or general university diversity. Limited research has specifically examined the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim undergraduates across multiple Sri Lankan universities. Furthermore, existing studies often focus on single institutions or broader ethnic communities rather than investigating how university environments, social interactions, demographic characteristics, and stereotypes collectively shape Sinhala-speaking students' attitudes toward Muslim students. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by providing a focused analysis of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates' attitudes toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. The quantitative component used a structured survey to collect numerical data on students' attitudes, while the qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. The combination of these approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of inter-ethnic attitudes within university settings.

3.2. Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in five public universities in Sri Lanka: the University of Colombo, University of Peradeniya, University of Kelaniya, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and University of Sri Jayewardenepura. These institutions were selected to represent diverse geographical, cultural, and demographic contexts.

The target population consisted of Sinhala-speaking and Muslim undergraduates enrolled in the selected universities. Sinhala-speaking undergraduates were examined as the majority group, while Muslim undergraduates represented the minority group, allowing the study to explore inter-ethnic attitudes within higher education institutions.

3.3. Sampling and Sample Size

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of students across universities and ethnic groups. The sample consisted of 150 undergraduate students, including 100 Sinhala-speaking undergraduates and 50 Muslim undergraduates from multiple universities in Sri Lanka. This sampling strategy facilitated meaningful comparisons between groups while ensuring representation from different institutional settings.

3.4. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through an online survey administered using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of structured questions and Likert-scale statements designed to measure students' attitudes toward ethnic minorities and inter-ethnic interactions. Prior to the main survey, a pilot study was conducted to assess the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire.

To complement the survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected group of participants who volunteered through the survey process. These interviews explored students' personal experiences, perceptions of inter-ethnic relationships, and factors influencing their attitudes within university environments.

Secondary data were obtained from academic publications, university reports, policy documents, and relevant literature related to ethnic relations, diversity, and higher education in Sri Lanka.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying information from the dataset and ensuring secure storage of research materials. Particular attention was given to cultural sensitivity due to the study's focus on ethnic relations. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

3.6. Limitations

The study was limited by its reliance on self-reported data collected through online surveys, which may be influenced by response bias. Although the sample included students from five universities, the findings may not fully represent all undergraduate populations in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the qualitative component involved a relatively small number of participants, limiting the generalizability of those findings. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach provided valuable insights into attitudes toward ethnic minorities within Sri Lankan universities.

4. Findings and Discussions

This research set out to explore the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim students in Sri Lankan universities. Through a mixed-method approach including surveys, semi-structured interviews with Sinhala students, and a focus group discussion with Muslim undergraduates the study uncovered several important patterns related to perceptions, interactions, and the underlying dynamics of ethnic coexistence within the academic environment.

Firstly, the quantitative survey among Sinhala-speaking students revealed that a majority expressed neutral or positive attitudes toward Muslim peers in academic settings. Many Sinhala respondents believed that Muslim students are given equal treatment, and they reported having no personal bias against them. A significant number indicated that they felt comfortable working in group assignments or classroom discussions with Muslim students. However, deeper qualitative data challenged this surface-level inclusiveness.

The semi-structured interviews with Sinhala-speaking students provided more nuanced insights. Although many respondents stated that they do not intentionally discriminate, some acknowledged hold implicit biases or discomfort rooted in cultural and religious unfamiliarity. Several students admitted that their initial interactions with Muslim peers were shaped by stereotypes, especially those related to dress (e.g., hijab or abaya), language barriers, or broader political narratives. For example, one Sinhala student admitted that during the first year, he was hesitant to approach Muslim students because he assumed they “wanted to be among themselves” or “might not be open to making friends.” These initial misperceptions were not based on personal experiences but on generalized assumptions.

However, the data also showed that attitudes are not static. Many Sinhala students described positive changes in their attitudes over time, particularly through close collaboration in academic and extracurricular activities. This shift aligns with the contact hypothesis, which suggests that increased intergroup interaction can reduce prejudice. Students who shared hostel rooms or participated in student societies with Muslim peers reported growing respect and understanding. One interviewee stated, “I used to think they were very reserved, but when we worked together for a project, I realized how supportive and smart they are.” Such statements point to the role of personal interaction in humanizing the ‘other’ and breaking down preconceived notions.

Nonetheless, subtle forms of ethnic privilege and exclusivity persisted in social practices and leadership structures. While Sinhala students did not openly express negative attitudes, some justified exclusionary behavior by referring to practical limitations, such as language proficiency. For instance, in an incident reported by a Muslim student, a Sinhala senior discouraged her from applying for a departmental leadership post on the grounds that she did not know Sinhala well despite the program being conducted in English. The Sinhala students involved may not have perceived this as discriminatory, but it reflected an underlying ethnolinguistic bias that served to gatekeep certain spaces.

Further, language emerged as both a practical and symbolic marker of division. Sinhala students often defaulted to Sinhala in group discussions and even during lectures. Although they did not view this behavior as exclusionary, it created a barrier for Muslim students. When questioned about this, several Sinhala students explained it was "more comfortable" or "easier to express in our own language." This reveals an unconscious privileging of the majority identity, where the burden of adjustment falls on the minority.

In terms of social inclusion, Sinhala students showed mixed responses. While many said they had no objection to participating in events with Muslim students, few took proactive steps to integrate them into informal circles. Some Sinhala students acknowledged that Muslim students often kept to themselves, yet they did not reflect on how subtle forms of social distancing such as inside jokes, language, or cultural ignorance may have contributed to that separation. This demonstrates that while hostility is minimal, there is a significant degree of passive indifference or unawareness about the lived realities of ethnic minorities.

Interestingly, the focus group discussion with Muslim undergraduates highlighted that some of the discriminatory incidents experienced by Muslim students were not perceived as such by Sinhala peers. For example, joking about attire, making inappropriate religious comments, or stereotyping based on the beard were dismissed by Sinhala students as "harmless" or "misunderstood." This gap underscores a disconnect between self-perceived inclusiveness among Sinhala students and the actual impact of their attitudes and behaviors.

The findings reveal a complex picture of Sinhala-speaking students' attitudes: formally inclusive, often passive, sometimes misinformed, and occasionally transforming positively through interaction. While overt hostility or institutional discrimination is limited, subtle exclusions, linguistic dominance, and cultural insensitivity persist. Positive change is possible and often observed, but it depends heavily on meaningful engagement and mutual understanding. These insights are crucial for designing interventions aimed at fostering ethnic harmony within university environments.

4.1. Contradictions and Gaps

While the overall findings of this study suggest an evolving and moderately positive relationship between Sinhala-speaking and Muslim undergraduates in university settings, several contradictions and gaps emerged across the data sets that complicate this narrative.

Firstly, one of the most prominent contradictions lies between the perceived inclusiveness expressed by Sinhala-speaking students in the survey and interviews, and the lived experiences of exclusion and discrimination reported by Muslim undergraduates in the focus group discussion. Sinhala students largely maintained that there was no active discrimination or bias and that all students were treated equally in academic contexts. However, Muslim students described several instances of both direct and indirect exclusion, particularly in leadership selection processes, language use in classrooms, and interpersonal interactions.

This disparity points to a gap in awareness among Sinhala students. While they may not intend to exclude or offend, their behavior such as defaulting to Sinhala in group settings, or discouraging Muslim peers from leadership roles due to language or cultural attire reveals implicit biases that often go unacknowledged. These microaggressions are not recognized as problematic by the majority group, yet they have a significant emotional and social impact on Muslim students.

Another contradiction lies in the self-reported openness to diversity by Sinhala students, contrasted with their limited efforts toward active social integration. Many Sinhala-speaking undergraduates stated they were willing to befriend and collaborate with Muslim peers, yet Muslim participants consistently observed that social interaction remained minimal beyond formal academic activities. This suggests a form of passive coexistence rather than active inclusion. Sinhala students may not harbor overt prejudice, but neither do they take steps to challenge existing social silos or reach across ethnic boundaries.

Moreover, while Sinhala participants acknowledged some stereotypes in earlier stages of university life, most described a positive shift in attitudes over time through interaction. This reflects the value of interethnic contact. However, the inconsistency in these experiences across faculties or departments was another gap revealed during interviews. In some faculties where students were required to work closely, Sinhala students reported significant attitude change. In others, where ethnic groups remained more segregated, such changes were absent or minimal. This indicates that structural opportunities for interaction directly influence the potential for positive attitudinal transformation.

Additionally, there was a disconnect between policy and practice. Although universities promote inclusive values and conduct lectures in English medium, Sinhala students and sometimes even lecturers frequently used Sinhala in academic discussions. This unintentional language dominance led to exclusion of Muslim students who were not proficient in Sinhala, especially in group work or when clarifying doubts with lecturers. This gap between institutional intentions and ground-level behavior suggests the need for clearer communication, enforcement, and language support mechanisms.

Lastly, gender emerged as a dimension where attitudes intersected with cultural misinterpretations. While Sinhala students often viewed hijab or conservative attire as a cultural choice, some also stereotyped it as a barrier to communication or integration. This led to awkward or insensitive behavior, including mockery or inappropriate advances, which were not seen as discriminatory by Sinhala students but were deeply distressing for the affected Muslim women. This again underscores the gap between perception and impact.

The contradictions and gaps identified in this study highlight that attitudes of Sinhala-speaking students toward Muslim peers are not monolithic or uniformly negative, but neither are they fully inclusive. Good intentions are often undermined by unexamined biases, passive attitudes, and a lack of institutional follow-through. Understanding these contradictions is essential for shaping future strategies to promote genuine ethnic harmony and active inclusion in university environments.

4.2. Comparative Reflections

A comparative reflection between the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study reveals both convergence and divergence in the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim students in Sri Lankan universities. While the survey responses and qualitative insights (from interviews and focus group discussions) share common ground in several areas, they also expose subtle contradictions, hidden perceptions, and unspoken experiences that are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of interethnic relations in the university context.

In the quantitative findings, the majority of Sinhala-speaking students expressed neutral to positive attitudes toward their Muslim peers. Many respondents indicated a general willingness to engage in group work with Muslim students, shared classroom experiences, and acceptance of cultural and religious diversity. Notably, Sinhala-speaking students scored high on statements promoting equality in academic participation, showing a positive inclination toward multicultural coexistence. This data reflects a surface-level harmony, suggesting that overt ethnic prejudice is not dominant in university environments.

However, the semi-structured interviews with Sinhala students nuanced these survey results by uncovering that, despite the absence of open hostility, there still exists a lack of meaningful interaction. Sinhala students often described their relationships with Muslim peers as “respectful” or “cordial,” but also admitted to not actively socializing or forming close friendships outside academic work. This reveals a form of passive coexistence, where coexistence is maintained more through non-engagement than intentional inclusion.

On the other hand, the focus group discussion with Muslim undergraduates provided deeper insights into how this passive attitude manifests as indirect exclusion and cultural insensitivity. For instance, while Sinhala students believed group work dynamics were fair, Muslim participants recounted language-based barriers, instances where leadership opportunities were discouraged, and episodes of cultural misinterpretation or disrespect all of which remained invisible in the quantitative data. This highlights a clear perception gap between the two groups.

Another point of reflection lies in the area of attitudinal change through interaction. Both data sets supported the idea that exposure to diversity and collaborative activities positively influenced Sinhala students’ attitudes. Sinhala interviewees frequently described initial hesitation or stereotypes which gradually changed through personal interactions, especially in mixed-faculty settings. Muslim students also acknowledged this trend, noting that those Sinhala students who had Muslim friends or roommates were more respectful and understanding. However, the depth

and consistency of this change were better captured through qualitative data than the surveys, which lacked the nuance to explore the underlying emotional and social dynamics.

Moreover, while survey data showed a general rejection of ethnic discrimination, qualitative findings highlighted contradictions between values and behavior. For example, Sinhala-speaking students did not consider the use of Sinhala in classroom discussions as discriminatory, but Muslim students saw it as a barrier to equal participation. These comparative reflections suggest that intentions and perceptions do not always align with the actual experiences of minority students.

Finally, in terms of gender-specific issues, this dimension was largely absent in the survey questions but emerged strongly in the focus group discussion. Muslim female students reported discriminatory incidents related to their attire and religious identity, while male students experienced stereotyping related to their appearance (e.g., beards). These identity based discriminations were not acknowledged by Sinhala students in interviews or reflected in the survey data highlighting a blind spot in majority perspectives.

While the quantitative data provided a general understanding of the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates toward Muslim students, the qualitative data added depth, emotion, and contradiction to this picture. The comparison reveals that visible harmony may mask underlying discomfort, misunderstanding, or exclusion. Thus, both data types are essential: the quantitative for identifying broad patterns, and the qualitative for unpacking the real-life implications of those patterns. This mixed-method approach strengthens the credibility of the study and reveals critical areas where policy, training, and campus engagement initiatives are needed to promote genuine inclusivity.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the attitudes of Sinhala-speaking students toward Muslim undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities, with an emphasis on understanding the factors that shape these attitudes and the potential for improving ethnic harmony on campuses. By employing a combination of quantitative surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, this study has examined the dynamics between these two ethnic groups within the academic environment, providing a detailed account of their experiences, perceptions, and interactions.

The findings of the research indicate that while there are areas of positive interaction and inclusion in academic settings, subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion remain prevalent. Sinhala-speaking students generally exhibit a willingness to engage with Muslim students, but these interactions are often influenced by ingrained stereotypes and misunderstandings that prevent deeper and more meaningful connections. Discrimination, whether direct or indirect, emerged as a recurring theme in the data. For instance, Muslim students reported facing exclusion due to language barriers, religious attire, and cultural practices, highlighting the role these factors play in shaping their experiences at university.

While Muslim students generally felt that academic and social settings were inclusive, there were moments where direct discrimination occurred, such as when a Muslim student was discouraged from applying for a leadership position due to perceived language barriers, or when a male student was stereotyped as a “terrorist” because of his beard. Such incidents underscore the challenges faced by Muslim students in navigating spaces where cultural and religious practices differ significantly from the majority.

Indirect discrimination was also evident in the form of communication barriers when lecturers used Sinhala instead of English during class discussions, which further contributed to the marginalization of Muslim students.

Despite these challenges, the study also revealed signs of positive attitudinal change over time, especially when students from both ethnic groups had opportunities to interact, share experiences, and work together in academic and extracurricular settings. Sinhala-speaking students who initially expressed discomfort with Muslim students showed increased openness and understanding after engaging in structured interactions, suggesting that these interactions can be instrumental in fostering long-term changes in attitudes and perceptions.

One of the key findings of this research is that university life presents a complex landscape for Muslim students, where they are both included and excluded in different contexts. The inclusion of Muslim students in academic settings is more apparent, particularly when students are able to contribute to group work in a collaborative environment.

However, the social integration of Muslim students in extracurricular activities remains a challenge, with Muslim students reporting that they often feel excluded from social circles dominated by Sinhala-speaking students. This points

to the need for more inclusive social spaces and initiatives aimed at encouraging interethnic interactions beyond the classroom.

The research also highlights several factors that contribute to the development of positive interethnic relations. First, a key finding was the importance of exposure to diverse cultural and religious practices. As Sinhala-speaking students became more familiar with the practices and traditions of Muslim students, they began to question their preconceived notions and stereotypes. This suggests that more initiatives to educate students about the rich diversity within Sri Lanka, especially in terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds, can significantly improve ethnic relations. Awareness programs and intercultural training could help bridge gaps and foster mutual respect among students.

While the findings of this study contribute to our understanding of interethnic relations in Sri Lankan universities, they also present several areas for further investigation. Future studies could extend the scope of this research to other universities across the country, as well as explore the role of faculty members and university staff in promoting an inclusive environment.

Additionally, a longitudinal study could track the changes in students' attitudes over time, helping to assess the long-term impact of interventions aimed at improving ethnic harmony.

Overall, this research underscores the complexity of ethnic relations in Sri Lankan universities, particularly between Sinhala-speaking and Muslim students. It reveals both the challenges and opportunities that exist for improving interethnic harmony, particularly in academic and social settings. The findings suggest that while there are barriers to full integration, there is also significant potential for change. By fostering greater understanding, improving communication, and promoting inclusive practices, universities can play a critical role in shaping a more harmonious and inclusive society. As such, the insights gained from this research can inform policy and practice within universities, offering a roadmap for creating more inclusive educational environments that embrace diversity and promote mutual respect.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, it is clear that while overt hostility between Sinhala-speaking and Muslim undergraduates is limited, underlying issues such as subtle exclusion, language barriers, cultural insensitivity, and limited cross-cultural interaction remain significant. To address these issues and enhance ethnic harmony in universities, the following key recommendations are proposed:

5.1.1. Recommendations for Sinhala-Speaking Undergraduates

Sinhala-speaking undergraduates should actively engage in intercultural dialogue initiatives with Muslim students. These programs can be in the form of workshops, discussion panels, or informal gatherings that encourage mutual understanding and communication.

Sinhala-speaking students are encouraged to ensure that Muslim students are equally included in group work and academic collaborations. When working in groups, it's important to recognize the diverse strengths of each member and avoid any exclusion based on ethnicity or religion

If Sinhala-speaking students observe or experience discriminatory behavior towards Muslim students, they should speak out against it. This could include standing up against any microaggressions, stereotyping, or prejudiced remarks in academic or social settings. Developing a culture of zero tolerance for discrimination within student groups will contribute to a more inclusive university environment.

Sinhala-speaking students should take the initiative to learn more about the diverse cultures and backgrounds present in their university. Participating in cultural exchange events, reading about different religions and traditions, or attending lectures on diversity can help them better understand the Muslim community's perspectives, challenges, and experiences.

Supporting student-run initiatives that promote inclusivity is crucial. Sinhala-speaking students should actively participate in or lead efforts such as multicultural events, diversity workshops, and awareness campaigns. This will not only help create an inclusive environment but also serve as a platform for sharing and celebrating cultural diversity within the university.

5.1.2. Recommendations for Muslim Undergraduates

Muslim students should actively seek leadership positions in student unions, departmental committees, and campus organizations. Representation in leadership roles will ensure that Muslim students have a voice in decision-making processes and can advocate for their needs, concerns, and perspectives in university governance.

Muslim students are encouraged to make an effort to build strong, positive relationships with their Sinhala-speaking peers. Engaging in social activities, study groups, or collaborative academic projects will help overcome barriers and encourage mutual respect.

Muslim students should increase their participation in extracurricular activities and campus events. This can include joining cultural clubs, attending university fairs, or participating in university-led initiatives.

5.1.3. Recommendations for University Administration

The university should enforce strict anti-discrimination policies and ensure that they are actively implemented across all areas of campus life. This includes monitoring and responding to incidents of racial or religious discrimination, ensuring that students from all ethnic and religious backgrounds feel safe and valued.

The administration should invest in and promote programs that encourage intercultural communication and collaboration among students. This can include organizing workshops, cultural exchange programs, or diversity celebrations that provide students with opportunities to engage with peers from different backgrounds in a structured and supportive environment.

Given that language can be a barrier for Muslim students in academic settings, particularly in Sinhala-medium courses, the university should offer language support programs. These programs can help Muslim students improve their Sinhala language skills, which will enable them to participate more fully in academic discussions and integrate better with their Sinhala-speaking peers.

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