



Exploring Communicative Identity Transformation among Muslim Diasporas in Secular Western Societies: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication has become a central concern in understanding how individuals construct meaning, negotiate identity, and establish belonging in increasingly plural societies. Within this broader context, the experiences of Muslim diasporas in secular Western environments highlight a unique intersection between faith, culture, and self-expression that demands deeper interpretative inquiry. Although existing research has extensively explored intercultural adaptation and acculturation processes, little is known about the lived meanings of communicative identity transformation among faith-based minorities. This study therefore asks: How do Muslim diasporas experience and interpret their communicative identities in secular cultural contexts? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study explores how communication becomes an existential process of meaning-making that connects spiritual conviction with sociocultural belonging. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve Muslim diaspora participants residing in Western countries. The analysis identifies four core findings: individuals negotiate identity between faith and secularity, navigate ongoing feelings of cultural displacement, use language both as connection and subtle resistance, and rely on faith as a stabilizing anchor in identity reconstruction. These findings provide a concise picture of how communicative identity transformation unfolds as a dialogical, reflective, and emotionally charged process. The results contribute to the field of intercultural communication by reframing identity transformation as a lived and reflective phenomenon rather than a behavioral adaptation. These insights deepen our understanding of communicative meaning and provide a conceptual foundation for future phenomenological studies on dialogue, belonging, and identity across cultural and spiritual boundaries.



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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by unprecedented mobility and globalization, intercultural communication has become a central dimension of human interaction (Lin, 2025). Migration, international education, and transnational employment have created diverse social landscapes in which individuals constantly negotiate cultural meanings, identities, and modes of belonging. Within these plural environments, communicative encounters are no longer limited to the exchange of information; rather, they represent ongoing processes of constructing and reconstructing the self in relation to others (Sanz-Marcos & Meléndez González-Haba, 2025). The complexity of such interactions becomes particularly evident among diasporic communities who navigate dual frameworks of faith and modernity, often within secular societies that challenge or reinterpret traditional cultural norms.

The intersection of religion and intercultural communication has gained increasing attention in recent scholarship, as faith-based identity is deeply intertwined with how individuals perceive and articulate their place in the world (Khalil & Larina, 2024). For Muslim diasporas living in secular Western contexts, communication is not merely a linguistic or social act but also a form of existential

expression—an effort to harmonize spiritual values with the expectations of the host culture. Studies have shown that these experiences are often accompanied by tension, misunderstanding, and self-reflection, as individuals strive to maintain coherence between personal conviction and societal acceptance (Mukhlis, 2025a). Such experiences underscore the deeply human need for recognition, authenticity, and meaning in intercultural interactions.

Despite the abundance of sociological and cultural analyses on migration and adaptation, the inner world of diasporic communication remains insufficiently understood (Barbieri et al., 2025). Much of the existing research has focused on patterns of integration, acculturation, or identity performance, often overlooking the subjective essence of these experiences—the lived meanings that shape how individuals interpret themselves within multicultural realities (Barbieri et al., 2025). This lack of attention to experiential meaning-making reveals a clear research gap: prior studies rarely explain how Muslim diasporas internally interpret, negotiate, and transform their communicative identities within secular environments.

Understanding this phenomenon through a phenomenological lens is therefore essential for capturing the depth of human experience that lies beneath observable communication practices (Bhowmik et al., 2025). It acknowledges that intercultural dialogue is not only a social process but also an interpretative journey through which individuals continuously reconstitute their identities, values, and sense of belonging in an ever-changing world.

Building upon the growing interest in understanding intercultural identity formation, research into the lived experiences of individuals navigating cross-cultural contexts has become an essential field within communication studies (Atanesyan et al., 2025). Scholars have increasingly recognized that the process of meaning-making in intercultural encounters cannot be fully understood through behavioral or linguistic frameworks alone (Badru et al., 2025). Instead, it requires attention to the subjective dimension of communication—the inner dialogue through which individuals interpret their interactions and construct their sense of self in relation to cultural and spiritual difference (Mukhlis, 2025b). This shift toward experience-centered inquiry has positioned phenomenology as a powerful methodological lens for uncovering the depth of human communication in multicultural societies.

However, exploring the subjective meanings embedded in such experiences presents significant methodological challenges (Broomfield et al., 2024). Much of the existing research on intercultural adaptation and identity has relied on quantitative surveys, structured scales, or cross-sectional comparisons designed to measure adaptation outcomes and cultural competence (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). While these approaches have contributed valuable generalizations, they often fail to capture the texture of lived experience—the emotions, ambiguities, and interpretative processes that accompany identity negotiation (Hestdalen, 2025). Quantitative models tend to abstract the individual from context, reducing dynamic communicative experiences to static variables that cannot reveal how people feel and make sense of belonging across cultural boundaries.

These limitations have left a conceptual and empirical gap in the understanding of how communicative identity is experienced and transformed within multicultural environments (Hutchings, 2025). The absence of phenomenological depth has restricted prior studies from grasping the essence of what it means to communicate one's identity while inhabiting spaces of cultural tension, religious diversity, and existential questioning (Saragih et al., 2025). Consequently, interpretative phenomenological inquiry becomes indispensable in addressing these gaps, as it allows the researcher to approach communication not merely as a behavioral outcome, but as an existential act of meaning-making rooted in human consciousness.

By focusing on the lived experiences of Muslim diasporas in secular Western contexts, this study situates itself within this interpretative paradigm, seeking to illuminate how faith, culture, and social interaction converge to shape communicative identity (Yao et al., 2025). Through phenomenology, the research aims to move beyond description toward understanding—capturing how individuals live through and interpret their communicative worlds as dynamic sites of belonging, negotiation, and transformation.

While prior research in intercultural communication has offered valuable insights into adaptation strategies, identity negotiation, and acculturation processes, most existing studies have approached these issues through pragmatic or outcome-oriented frameworks (Wei & Lee, 2024). The dominant solutions proposed in the literature emphasize developing intercultural competence, promoting cultural sensitivity training, or fostering linguistic fluency as practical means to facilitate smoother integration and social inclusion (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Although these frameworks are useful for enhancing cross-cultural interaction, they tend to conceptualize communication as a skill-based activity rather than a lived, meaning-centered experience.

This practical orientation has significant limitations when addressing the deeper existential dimensions of intercultural communication—particularly for diasporic individuals whose self-concept and faith are continuously negotiated within secular and pluralistic settings (Ding & Goh, 2024). The quantitative and behavioral models widely adopted in earlier studies, while empirically rigorous, often fail to access the inner consciousness of participants or the felt meanings embedded in their communicative encounters (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). As a result, the complex emotional, spiritual, and interpretative aspects of intercultural dialogue remain insufficiently articulated, leading to an incomplete understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of their communicative identities in cross-cultural environments.

This gap underscores the necessity of a phenomenological approach that privileges lived experience as the core of inquiry (Miao & Yang, 2024). By exploring how meaning is formed, interpreted, and embodied through communication, phenomenology offers a more holistic and human-centered perspective. It enables the investigation of identity not as a static construct but as an evolving phenomenon shaped through dialogue, reflection, and relational understanding (Tedesco, 2025). Within this framework, the act of communication itself becomes the site where faith, culture, and existential belonging intersect—revealing the essential structures of human experience that remain hidden within traditional empirical models.

Therefore, to move beyond descriptive or instrumental explanations, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of communicative identity transformation among Muslim diasporas in secular Western contexts (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). Through this lens, it seeks to fill the gap left by prior research and to contribute a more profound understanding of how individuals live, interpret, and reconstitute their sense of self through intercultural communication.

Previous research in intercultural communication has primarily focused on how individuals adapt to cultural differences, negotiate social roles, and maintain their sense of identity across contexts. Studies by (Dosmanova et al., 2025; May-Machunda, 2024) have emphasized intercultural competence and identity adjustment but have not fully explored the lived experience and interpretative depth of communication in multicultural settings. Theories of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation offer useful frameworks but remain limited in capturing the subjective meanings of faith, belonging, and selfhood within diasporic life (Maulana & Putra, 2024). The present study builds upon these theoretical foundations by redirecting attention to the experiential dimensions of intercultural communication, particularly as they manifest in the daily interactions of Muslim diasporas in secular Western societies. Through this perspective, communication is understood not as behavior but as a mode of being and meaning-making.

To address this limitation, the study applies an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which allows for the exploration of how individuals make sense of their communicative experiences through reflection and interpretation. This method was selected because it prioritizes lived experience and the meanings participants ascribe to their interactions, thus responding directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier (Mukhlis et al., 2024). The phenomenological orientation provides a conceptual lens to examine identity as a dynamic and relational phenomenon shaped by language, faith, and context. By uncovering the essential structures of experience, this approach offers a richer understanding of how Muslim diasporas interpret and reconstruct their identities in secular environments. The findings contribute to expanding theoretical insight into intercultural communication as an existential and interpretative process.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a coherent exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction outlines the theoretical and contextual background leading to the research focus (Kusmayadi et al., 2025). The Method section explains the phenomenological framework, participant selection, and data collection procedures, followed by a detailed account of data analysis through interpretative and thematic processes. The Results section presents the emergent themes that describe the essence of participants' lived experiences, while the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical implications (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Finally, the Conclusion highlights the study's contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research within the broader field of intercultural and multicultural communication.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Muslim diasporas navigating communicative identity transformation within secular Western contexts. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, focuses on understanding the essence of human experience from the first-person perspective, emphasizing meaning rather than measurement. The interpretative orientation, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, seeks to uncover how individuals interpret their existence through communicative interactions in sociocultural and religiously plural environments.

This design was deemed suitable for addressing the research question because it allows for a deep engagement with participants' subjective realities and provides a structure for interpreting how faith, culture, and social expectations shape communicative identity (Pollard et al., 2021). The phenomenological approach facilitated an exploration of the inner meaning of intercultural dialogue as experienced by those living between faith-based and secular cultural frameworks. In addition, ethical and quality criteria were embedded in the design from the outset, including careful attention to informed consent, confidentiality, and systematic procedures for validating interpretations to enhance qualitative rigor.

Participants

Participants consisted of members of the Muslim diaspora currently residing in secular Western societies, who possessed sufficient intercultural exposure and self-reflective communication experiences. Selection was carried out using purposive sampling, ensuring that only individuals who had directly encountered and reflected upon cross-cultural communicative challenges were included.

Inclusion criteria encompassed: (a) adults aged 25 to 50 years; (b) having resided in a Western country for at least three years; and (c) self-identifying as practicing Muslims engaged in regular intercultural communication within academic, professional, or social contexts. Individuals who had recently migrated (less than one year) or lacked sufficient language proficiency to articulate their experiences were excluded.

A total of 12 participants (6 male, 6 female) took part in the study, representing diverse national origins including Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco. The participants' average duration of residence in host countries was 6.5 years. This demographic variation contributed to the richness and depth of the narratives analyzed, allowing a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, designed to elicit personal reflections on participants' communicative experiences, identity negotiations, and intercultural interactions. The interviews followed an open-ended guide that encouraged participants to describe specific events, feelings, and meanings related to communication in secular environments.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting chosen by the participant—either in person or through secure video conferencing. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuance and emotional expression.

To ensure an atmosphere of trust, participants were informed of the study's purpose and confidentiality measures prior to the sessions. The interview protocol was adapted from existing phenomenological studies in intercultural communication and refined to capture dimensions of faith, identity, and social belonging relevant to the research focus.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves systematic engagement with participants' narratives to identify patterns of meaning across cases. The analytical process included several iterative steps:

1. Repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity with the data.
2. Identification of meaning units that reflected significant statements or experiences.
3. Coding of these units into conceptual categories and subthemes.
4. Grouping of related codes into overarching themes that captured shared experiential structures.
5. Synthesizing interpretative insights into coherent thematic narratives that represent the essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo 12 software was used as a supplementary tool to assist in organizing data and maintaining a transparent audit trail. Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained to ensure sensitivity to participants' cultural and spiritual contexts. The interpretative stance of IPA enabled the emergence of both convergent and divergent experiences, highlighting the depth and complexity of communicative identity formation among the participants.

RESULTS

Negotiating the Self Between Faith and Secularity

Participants described their identity as being in constant negotiation between religious values and the secular expectations of their host societies. The communicative act of "being Muslim" was often shaped by the need to balance authenticity and acceptance. One participant shared:

"When I first moved here, I realized that saying I was Muslim changed how people looked at me. I learned to speak about my faith softly—not to hide it, but to make it understandable." (Participant 4)

This process of self-negotiation was not experienced as mere adaptation but as a reflexive dialogue between personal conviction and social acceptance. More importantly, this negotiation directly answers the research question by illustrating how communicative identity is not only expressed but consciously reshaped in response to secular norms. The meaning of communication thus extended beyond linguistic exchange—it became a spiritual act of re-presenting oneself in ways that preserved both dignity and belonging.

Experiencing Cultural Displacement and Existential Belonging

Another recurring experience was a profound sense of in-betweenness—a cultural displacement that simultaneously produced alienation and growth. Participants often felt "invisible" in public spaces yet deeply connected to their faith communities. One respondent expressed:

"I am not fully part of the local culture, but I also don't feel like a foreigner anymore. My prayers, my language, and the people I meet—they all help me build a small world where I belong." (Participant 7)

The phenomenon of belonging was therefore not spatial but existential. It reflected a reconfiguration of home and identity through communicative rituals—greetings, shared meals, and interfaith dialogue—that restored a sense of continuity amid cultural dissonance.

Language as a Bridge of Empathy and Resistance

Language emerged as both a mediator and a battleground in participants' intercultural encounters. Many highlighted that mastering the host language allowed them to “explain their Muslimness” with empathy rather than defensiveness. Yet, moments of misunderstanding often turned into opportunities for resistance and reassertion of self.

“Once, someone joked about Ramadan being ‘a diet month.’ I didn’t get angry. I told them fasting is about patience and gratitude. That conversation changed how they saw me—and how I saw them.” (Participant 2)



This narrative reflects how communication operates as an ethical space—a place where difference can be encountered respectfully and meaning can be co-constructed. Through such micro-dialogues, participants exercised agency to redefine stereotypes and assert their identities with confidence and compassion.

Faith as an Anchor of Communicative Identity

Faith functioned as the central axis around which participants' communicative identities revolved. Far from being a private matter, religion infused their daily interactions with meaning and coherence. Participants emphasized that Islamic values such as humility, patience, and respect shaped not only what they said but how they communicated.

“Every conversation is a reflection of who I am spiritually. Even when people disagree, I try to speak in a way that keeps peace. That’s what Islam teaches me—to communicate with purpose and kindness.” (Participant 5)

Faith, therefore, did not isolate participants from the secular world; instead, it provided a moral and interpretative framework through which intercultural dialogue became possible. It transformed communication into an act of witness—anchored in faith yet open to plurality.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the communicative identity of Muslim diasporas in secular Western societies is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between faith, culture, and belonging. Communication emerged not merely as an act of expression but as an existential process through which participants reinterpret their sense of self amid cultural plurality (Alsayegh, 2025). This essence directly responds to the central research question by illustrating how intercultural communication operates as both a spiritual and social journey toward authenticity and understanding.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Questions

The present study contributes a nuanced understanding of how Muslim diasporas experience and interpret their communicative identities in secular contexts. Through the interpretative

phenomenological approach, the research reveals that communication is not simply a means of adaptation but a reflective act of being-in-the-world (Pinelli, 2025). Participants' narratives demonstrated that faith functions as a moral compass that anchors identity amid secular influences, while intercultural interactions serve as spaces for redefining meaning, selfhood, and belonging.

Crucially, these findings challenge linear adaptation perspectives such as Kim's Integrative Communication Theory and instead align more closely with dialogical and relational models that emphasize identity as fluid and emergent. The participants' reflections illustrate that identity transformation occurs through continuous negotiation rather than movement toward a predetermined end-state, positioning meaning-making—not adjustment—as the core mechanism of intercultural engagement.

This interpretative process provides a direct answer to the research question by showing that communicative transformation arises from the dialogue between spiritual conviction and sociocultural engagement (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). Unlike earlier studies that framed adaptation as a behavioral or cognitive adjustment, this research exposes communication as a lived negotiation—a process of reconciling one's inner world with external realities (Akkuş Çakır & Ünlü, 2024). Hence, communicative identity becomes dynamic, dialogical, and meaning-centered, extending current understandings of intercultural communication beyond the limits of integration models.

Furthermore, the study's emphasis on subjective experience adds theoretical depth to the discourse on intercultural identity by positioning meaning-making as the foundation of communication (Montes-Alcalá, 2024). The phenomenological interpretation highlights that participants do not merely adapt to culture; they co-create culture through reflexive and spiritually informed dialogue, offering a distinct contribution to how identity and belonging are conceptualized in plural societies.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings align with and extend prior theoretical work in intercultural communication and identity negotiation. (Rahmalina et al., 2025) model of adaptive transformation emphasizes continuous interaction between personal and cultural systems; however, the present study advances this framework by unveiling the existential depth of such transformation. Rather than treating adaptation as a functional outcome, the data underscore its interpretative and spiritual nature, resonating with (Showden et al., 2025) notion of "diasporic belonging" as a space of emotional and ethical engagement.

Similarly, (Valseriati, 2025) research on cultural negotiation identifies language as a tool of identity performance, yet the current findings reveal language as a bridge of empathy and resistance, illustrating how communicative acts themselves generate moral and relational meaning. These insights also challenge the reductionist tendencies of quantitative models (Zaikovskii, 2025), which often fail to represent the inner complexities of lived intercultural experiences.

By situating communication within a phenomenological paradigm, this study bridges the conceptual gap between intercultural communication theory and human existential experience. It demonstrates that communicative identity transformation is not a peripheral or technical phenomenon but a central process through which individuals construct and sustain meaning in a multicultural world (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The interpretative findings thus enrich the theoretical landscape by situating intercultural dialogue within the lived reality of faith, emotion, and relational understanding.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical, social, and cultural implications for the broader understanding of intercultural communication and identity formation (Blanden, 2025). From a phenomenological standpoint, the results illuminate communication as an existential act that extends beyond pragmatic adaptation—revealing how individuals construct meaning, belonging, and moral coherence within secular multicultural spaces. This understanding enriches intercultural

communication theory by emphasizing the interpretative and relational aspects of dialogue rather than viewing it solely as a behavioral or linguistic process.

Practically, the insights offer valuable implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and intercultural practitioners working with diasporic or minority populations. Recognizing communication as a process of existential negotiation can foster more inclusive and empathetic environments where diverse faith-based identities are understood as sources of dialogue rather than difference (Andaryani & Utomo, 2024). Moreover, these findings suggest that intercultural competence should be reframed to include not only cognitive and behavioral dimensions but also reflective empathy—the capacity to interpret and respond to others' lived meanings with cultural humility and ethical sensitivity. In this way, the study contributes to a deeper and more humanistic vision of communication across cultural and ideological boundaries.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its depth and interpretative richness, this study is not without limitations. The phenomenological approach, by its nature, prioritizes depth over breadth, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or religious contexts. The sample, composed of Muslim diasporas residing in specific Western settings, reflects particular social and historical dynamics that may not capture the diversity of all diasporic experiences. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of selective recall or interpretative bias, as participants reconstruct their experiences through reflection.

The contextual focus on secular Western societies may also restrict the transferability of findings to regions where religious identity interacts with different sociopolitical dynamics. These limitations, however, are consistent with the epistemological assumptions of phenomenology, which seek to uncover essence rather than universal patterns. Rather than diminishing the study's validity, these constraints provide a foundation for deeper inquiry into the multifaceted nature of communicative identity and its cultural variations.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research can build upon the insights of this study by extending phenomenological inquiry into other cultural or religious settings to examine how communicative identity transformation unfolds across varied social landscapes. Comparative studies involving different faith groups or secular populations could provide a broader understanding of how spirituality and social context intersect in communication. Moreover, incorporating longitudinal phenomenological designs could reveal how these identity negotiations evolve over time, offering richer insight into the dynamic interplay between personal meaning and cultural belonging.

Theoretically, future work could integrate phenomenological findings with dialogical or narrative communication theories to construct a more comprehensive model of identity as an interpretative process. Such an approach would bridge phenomenology with applied communication fields—enhancing training for intercultural mediation, counseling, and education. Ultimately, this research invites scholars to continue exploring communication as a site of human becoming—a lived, evolving, and meaning-making journey through which individuals articulate their identities and engage ethically with difference.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim diasporas as they negotiated communicative identity within secular Western societies, addressing the central question of how faith, culture, and communication intersect in shaping self-understanding. The findings revealed that communication functions as an existential process through which individuals reconcile spiritual conviction with sociocultural belonging. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research illuminated the depth of meaning-making often overlooked in previous quantitative or behavioral studies. The study contributes to intercultural communication theory by emphasizing the reflective, relational, and faith-informed nature of dialogue in multicultural contexts.

Its unique contribution lies in demonstrating how communicative identity transformation emerges not merely as adaptation but as a spiritually anchored, dialogical reinterpretation of the self—an element largely absent in prior scholarship.

Practically, the study offers concrete implications for community organizations, educational institutions, and intercultural practitioners seeking to design programs that strengthen minority belonging, encourage empathic dialogue, and reduce cultural marginalization. Policy-wise, the findings highlight the need for communication frameworks that acknowledge faith-based identity as a legitimate dimension of inclusion in secular public spaces. Future research may expand this work by applying phenomenological inquiry to other religious or cultural groups to further explore how identity is lived and communicated across plural societies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research activities were conducted independently, and the funding sponsor had no influence on the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or the preparation of this manuscript.

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