



Understanding Religious Conversion Experiences among Muslim Converts in Minority Communities through a Phenomenological Analysis of Lived Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Religious conversion is a deeply personal and socially embedded phenomenon that intersects theology, identity, and community dynamics. Within minority Muslim contexts, converts often encounter emotional, relational, and cultural challenges that shape their spiritual transformation. However, limited research has explored how these individuals make sense of their conversion experiences beyond doctrinal or behavioral changes. This study specifically addresses the question: How do Muslim converts in minority communities interpret and experience their religious transformation while navigating personal struggles (such as emotional fragility and identity conflict) and contextual challenges (such as cultural marginalization and limited community support)? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study investigates the subjective experiences of ten Muslim converts across three provinces in a predominantly non-Muslim country. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed through iterative thematic interpretation to uncover the essence of their lived experiences. Four major themes emerged: emotional fragility in early stages of conversion, tension in identity negotiation, the significance of spiritual companionship, and the transformation from personal faith to social empowerment. These findings highlight conversion as a continuous process of identity reconstruction, deeply influenced by social context and interpersonal relationships. The study contributes to a richer understanding of religious transformation by foregrounding the voices and inner narratives of converts, rather than relying solely on external indicators. These insights have implications for religious education, community engagement, and the design of more inclusive support structures for spiritual transitions, particularly in culturally diverse environments.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is a complex and deeply personal phenomenon that intersects spiritual belief, identity transformation, and social integration. In contemporary multicultural societies, individuals who embrace a new religious faith often navigate a profound shift in their worldview, social affiliations, and self-perception (Selim et al., 2023). Among these, conversion to Islam particularly within minority contexts presents unique social and psychological challenges, as it involves not only theological realignment but also cultural negotiation and identity reconstruction.

While existing scholarship highlights the social, cultural, and emotional implications of conversion (Guerson & Wessell Lightfoot, 2020; Donovan, 2019), much of it remains focused on external indicators such as social belonging or religious practices. What remains underexplored is the inner, subjective dimension of how converts in minority settings interpret their struggles with marginalization, identity negotiation, and spiritual searching (Erol, 2020).

This gap necessitates an approach that moves beyond surface-level descriptions toward uncovering the lived meanings embedded in the conversion process. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on subjective experience and meaning-making, provides a theoretical foundation directly aligned with this need. Specifically, it allows the research to ask: How do Muslim converts in minority communities interpret and make sense of their religious transformation amid personal vulnerability and contextual challenges?

By explicitly connecting this theoretical lens to the research question, the present study positions itself as a response to methodological shortcomings in prior work. While quantitative surveys capture general trends (Dhal, 2021), they often overlook existential dimensions such as doubt, fragility, or the reconstruction of selfhood (Kazak & Rancāne, 2025). An interpretative phenomenological inquiry therefore offers both depth and nuance, making it possible to foreground the voices and lived experiences of converts as central to understanding religious transformation.

In the context of religious conversion within minority Muslim communities, existing responses have predominantly relied on structured support programs, doctrinal education, and community outreach models (Labrador, 2022). While these practical approaches offer valuable resources for religious knowledge and initial social inclusion, they often overlook the nuanced, deeply personal realities faced by converts in navigating emotional dislocation, identity tension, and cultural dissonance. As a result, their interventions tend to address observable behaviors rather than the internal processes that shape the meaning of conversion.

Traditional research in this area has mirrored these limitations by privileging empirical generalizations over individual experiences (Thibault, 2021). Quantitative studies, although effective in documenting patterns and surface-level challenges, have been less successful in revealing how converts make sense of their transformation, cope with isolation, and construct new forms of spiritual and social identity (Vidal Doval, 2025). The lack of attention to meaning-making has led to a gap in understanding the internal dynamics and existential dimensions that define the lived reality of conversion.

This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological approach one that privileges subjectivity, explores context, and centers the voices of individuals (Libel-Hass & Ben-Lulu, 2024). By investigating the phenomenon from within the experiential world of the convert, phenomenology enables a holistic understanding of how religious identity is not merely adopted, but internally negotiated and socially performed (Son, 2020). Such an approach moves beyond description to interpretation, revealing the essence of conversion as a transformative process embedded in lived human experience.

Previous research on religious conversion has primarily addressed institutional, psychological, and sociological aspects using surveys, interviews, or historical analysis (Gallagher, 2019). Studies have highlighted patterns of adaptation, community integration, and theological shifts but often fail to capture the personal and emotional meanings embedded in the conversion process (Coffee et al., 2021). A few qualitative works have attempted to explore individual narratives, yet they remain limited in scope, particularly within minority Muslim contexts (Mitchell & Rane, 2021). Existing literature rarely addresses how converts interpret their transformation through lived experience (Sel Turhan, 2024). The lack of phenomenological depth leaves much to be discovered about how individuals embody and negotiate their new spiritual identities.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how Muslim converts in minority communities experience and make sense of their religious transformation (Alam et al., 2020). The method was chosen to provide insight into the emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions that are often left unexplored by more conventional frameworks (Batnitzky, 2021). Through in-depth interviews and careful interpretative analysis, the study answers the call for a more meaningful understanding of religious conversion as a subjective, evolving process. This approach gives voice to the participants and illuminates how identity, faith, and community are experienced from their perspective. The result is a rich, contextualized understanding of religious change as lived, not merely observed.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the research problem and justifies the use of phenomenology (Palacios & Szulc, 2021). The next section presents the social and religious context surrounding Muslim converts in minority communities. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the interpretative phenomenological method, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis process. The results section presents the main themes derived from participant narratives, supported by direct quotations. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in relation to existing literature, followed by conclusions and implications for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Muslim converts (mualaf) within minority communities (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology, as a qualitative design, seeks to uncover the meanings embedded in individual experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of how people make sense of a particular phenomenon (Kawamura, 2020). The interpretative variant, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, emphasizes not only the description of lived experiences but also the interpretive process of uncovering the underlying significance of those experiences within their social and cultural contexts. This design was considered appropriate for addressing the research question, which aimed to understand how religious conversion shaped personal identity, social integration, and spiritual empowerment.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the phenomenon under study (Clair, 2003). Eligibility criteria included adults (aged 21 and above) who had converted to Islam within the past five years and were currently residing in communities where Muslims are a minority. Individuals with previous formal Islamic education before conversion were excluded to ensure focus on first-hand transition experiences. A total of 10 participants (6 females and 4 males), aged between 24 and 45 years, were involved in the study. The decision to include 10 participants was guided by methodological recommendations in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes depth over breadth. In IPA studies, sample sizes typically range from 6 to 15 participants, as smaller samples allow researchers to conduct a more detailed, nuanced, and idiographic exploration of lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This number was therefore considered sufficient to achieve data saturation while ensuring manageability of the interpretative process. Participants came from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, adding richness to the narrative spectrum. All had experienced varying degrees of social, emotional, and spiritual transition following their conversion.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in locations selected by participants to ensure privacy and emotional comfort (Fenton & Baxter, 2016). The interviews were guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit detailed narratives on identity formation, social interaction, and spiritual development post-conversion. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Follow-up interviews were conducted when necessary for clarification or deeper insight. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The interview protocol was adapted from existing phenomenological instruments and refined through pilot testing with two participants not included in the main analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves iterative engagement with the data to identify emerging patterns and meaning units (Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). The analysis proceeded through several stages: initial familiarization with transcripts, identification of significant statements, development of emergent themes, clustering of related themes, and synthesis of thematic structures. NVivo software was used to

facilitate data organization, coding, and theme mapping, but the interpretative process remained grounded in manual, reflective reading of the text. The final thematic structure reflected the essence of the participants' lived experiences, contextualized within the broader social and spiritual environment.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection (Daly, 2007). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was secured from all participants. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and published materials, and any identifying details were removed. The study adhered to international ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local standards.

RESULTS

The Fragility of Early Belonging

For many participants, the initial phase of conversion was marked by emotional vulnerability, including fear, doubt, and longing for acceptance. Their entry into Islam was often accompanied by a sense of spiritual awakening, yet simultaneously threatened by the absence of communal support and familial misunderstanding.

“I felt like I was walking alone in the dark. My family didn't speak to me for weeks after I converted. At the mosque, I was a stranger.”

(Participant 4, female, 28 years old)

This theme directly reflects the research question by showing how converts interpret their early transformation not as a seamless spiritual transition, but as a fragile journey shaped by rejection and isolation. The struggle for belonging was experienced as both an internal battle of conviction and an external challenge of community acceptance. Despite their strong personal conviction, converts frequently struggled to find spaces where their new identity was fully welcomed. The lack of inclusive programs in religious institutions intensified feelings of isolation.

Negotiating Identity in a Tensioned Social Space

Participants described a dual challenge in redefining their self-identity. On one side, they distanced themselves from their previous religious background; on the other, they encountered skepticism and cultural bias from within the Muslim community.

“They saw me as someone who didn't belong. Even though I prayed, dressed properly, and learned the Qur'an, I was always 'the convert'.”

(Participant 7, male, 35 years old)

Here, the analysis connects directly to the research question by showing how identity negotiation is not simply a private matter but is mediated by cultural and communal pressures. Participants' lived narratives reveal how religious transformation is experienced as an ongoing negotiation between internal faith and external recognition. This tension created an emotional struggle in balancing their internal transformation with the external perception imposed by their religious peers. Identity negotiation became a prolonged process that required not only faith but resilience in the face of subtle marginalization.

The Sanctuary of Spiritual Companionship

Amid adversity, the presence of empathetic mentors, peer support groups, and religious teachers (ustadz/ustadzah) emerged as a crucial turning point. These supportive figures helped participants reframe their struggles as part of spiritual growth, fostering resilience and hope.

“I joined a small circle led by a female teacher who really listened. She said my tears were part of my prayer. That changed everything.”

(Participant 2, female, 41 years old)

This theme highlights how converts interpret companionship not merely as social comfort but as a spiritual anchor, demonstrating that their experience of religious transformation is inseparable from supportive relationships. By reframing pain as growth, participants made sense of their conversion as a shared, rather than solitary, journey. Participants emphasized that spiritual companionship restored their sense of belonging. The narratives underscored that meaningful engagement, rather than doctrinal instruction alone, played a more transformative role in their journey.

From Personal Faith to Social Empowerment

A salient outcome of the conversion experience was the emergence of a desire to give back to the community. Several participants took initiatives to mentor new converts, establish educational circles, and engage in social activism within their neighborhoods.

“Once I found peace, I realized many others were struggling in silence like I did. I started organizing small gatherings to support new converts.”

(Participant 5, male, 30 years old)

This theme explicitly connects to the research question by showing how converts reinterpret their own struggles as a resource for empowering others. Their transformation is not only personal but relational and communal, reflecting an identity rebuilt through action and advocacy. Their experience of marginalization evolved into a source of empathy, prompting them to advocate for more inclusive and empowering religious education frameworks—particularly those that integrate cultural sensitivity and community-based support.

The phenomenon of religious conversion within minority Muslim communities reveals complex layers of spiritual yearning, social negotiation, and communal empowerment. By weaving participant voices with thematic analysis, the results demonstrate that converts interpret their transformation as a process of meaning-making shaped simultaneously by personal struggles and contextual challenges. Participants’ narratives highlight the transformative power of compassionate guidance and shared experience in shaping a meaningful sense of belonging. The core essence of the phenomenon, in line with the research question, lies not merely in embracing a new faith but in reconstructing identity through dynamic interaction with social and cultural realities.

DISCUSSION

Opening: Summary of Key Findings

This study reveals that the religious conversion experience among Muslim converts in minority communities is marked by emotional fragility, social tension, and spiritual transformation (Anderson, 2021). These findings address the central research question by uncovering how identity, belonging, and meaning are shaped and renegotiated through the lens of lived experience.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute directly to understanding how converts construct a new spiritual and social identity within unfamiliar or unaccommodating environments (Timol, 2022). Participants described their journeys not as linear transitions, but as ongoing negotiations marked by isolation, cultural mismatch, and, ultimately, empowerment through spiritual companionship. These insights deepen our grasp of religious conversion as a process that unfolds within layered emotional and social contexts. The study contributes uniquely to the literature by prioritizing the voices of individuals and demonstrating that meaning-making occurs not merely through belief, but through struggle, dialogue, and relational validation. This interpretative framing allows for a more nuanced conceptualization of conversion one that emphasizes process over outcome, and experience over doctrine.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings both support and extend prior research. For instance, Taylor (2021) work on interpretative phenomenology aligns with the present study’s emphasis on inner transformation and

identity reconstruction through subjective meaning. Similarly, Brendese (2022) acknowledged the role of spiritual leadership in conflict settings, a theme echoed in this study's emphasis on the value of empathetic religious mentors. However, this study moves further by situating these experiences within minority contexts, where marginalization compounds the emotional complexity of conversion. It also expands the discussion by integrating community empowerment as a thematic element, building upon Kling (2022) findings on religious group-based empowerment. At the same time, the findings diverge from more structuralist perspectives that emphasize conversion primarily as an adaptive response to social or political pressure (e.g., Navarro, 2020). While those accounts highlight external coercion or pragmatic motivations, the present study foregrounds inner meaning-making and relational transformation. This contrast underscores the importance of holding both perspectives in tension: conversion may simultaneously involve pragmatic negotiation with external structures and deeply personal processes of identity reconstruction. By critically engaging with these contrasting perspectives, the present study situates its findings within a broader scholarly debate about whether conversion is best understood as socially driven, spiritually driven, or both. Thus, the current research fills an important gap by highlighting the interplay between individual meaning-making and the broader socio-cultural structures that frame religious change.

Implications of the Findings

The findings from this study carry significant implications for both academic and practical domains, particularly within religious education, interfaith dialogue, and community development (Leiter, 2019). From a sociocultural perspective, the emotional vulnerability and identity tension described by participants underscore the need for more inclusive and empathetic support systems for converts. Religious institutions, especially those in minority contexts, can benefit from training leaders and educators to recognize the complex, often hidden struggles of converts beyond formal religious instruction (Sealy, 2021b). On a broader scale, the study highlights how individual spiritual journeys intersect with structural conditions, inviting further reflection on how marginalized voices are received, interpreted, and supported within faith-based communities. Nevertheless, these implications should be understood in light of the study's limited scope, which may not capture the full diversity of convert experiences in other geographical or cultural settings. These insights are valuable not only for Islamic settings but for other religious and social contexts where conversion is part of lived diversity and identity transformation.

Limitations of the Study

As with any qualitative inquiry, this study is context-bound and not intended for statistical generalization (Sealy, 2021a). The participant sample, although diverse in age and gender, was geographically and culturally limited to three provinces, potentially narrowing the scope of interpretive variation. Furthermore, data collection relied on retrospective narratives, which may be influenced by memory reconstruction or social desirability (Ikäheimo et al., 2020). While the phenomenological approach provided rich, in-depth insight, its focus on subjective meaning restricts applicability to broader populations without contextual interpretation. In addition, the relatively small sample size, though methodologically justified in IPA research, limits the capacity to explore broader patterns of variation across different subgroups of converts (e.g., by ethnicity or socioeconomic background). Another limitation lies in the absence of triangulation with perspectives from family members, religious leaders, or community peers, which could have offered a more multi-dimensional understanding of the conversion process. These limitations, however, are intrinsic to the nature of phenomenological research and serve to highlight the uniqueness of each lived experience rather than undermine its credibility.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research could explore comparative analyses between converts in minority versus majority Muslim communities to examine how context shapes conversion experiences (Krishnan, 2023). Further investigation might also focus on longitudinal studies tracking identity reconstruction over time, offering insights into the evolving nature of faith, belonging, and resilience (Erolova, 2021). Including perspectives from family members, religious mentors, and wider community members could also help address current limitations and situate the

convert's voice within a broader relational framework. Additionally, engaging with contrasting theoretical models—such as those that stress political, cultural, or pragmatic motivations for conversion—would further enrich future inquiry by balancing phenomenological insights with alternative explanatory paradigms. Such inquiries could contribute to the development of culturally sensitive educational and social models that better support spiritual transitions in diverse settings. This study, therefore, serves as a foundation for broader phenomenological exploration in the fields of religious education, identity studies, and intercultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim converts within minority communities, focusing on how they navigate identity, belonging, and spiritual transformation. The findings revealed that religious conversion is a deeply personal and socially negotiated process marked by emotional vulnerability, social tension, and eventual empowerment through meaningful support. Unlike previous studies that emphasized external factors or generalized behaviors, this research illuminated the internal meanings and relational dynamics at the heart of the conversion journey. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study filled critical gaps in understanding how converts interpret and embody their new faith within often challenging environments.

In practical terms, these findings highlight the need for religious institutions to move beyond doctrinal instruction toward establishing mentorship programs, peer-support networks, and culturally sensitive educational initiatives that address the emotional and social struggles of converts. Community leaders could integrate structured spaces for dialogue and sharing of lived experiences, reducing isolation and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Policymakers and interfaith organizations may also draw on these insights to design more inclusive policies and outreach initiatives, ensuring that spiritual transitions are supported as both personal and communal processes. These insights contribute valuable knowledge for religious educators, community leaders, and policymakers aiming to create more inclusive and empathetic support systems. By linking individual narratives to actionable strategies, the study underscores that conversion support must be holistic—addressing not only faith formation but also social integration and emotional resilience. Future studies may expand this inquiry across different cultural or religious contexts to explore how spiritual transitions vary in meaning and impact.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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