



Exploring Muslim Students' Lived Experiences in Interfaith Dialogues at Multicultural Universities: An Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) Approach

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogues are significant in multicultural societies, fostering understanding and social cohesion. This study focuses on Muslim students in higher education, who often face challenges in negotiating religious identity during interfaith engagement. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study explores their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants. Thematic analysis identified four key themes: navigating religious identity, experiencing spiritual enrichment, overcoming prejudice through empathy, and confronting challenges in sustaining dialogue. Findings show that interfaith dialogues can reinforce faith commitments while cultivating openness to diverse worldviews, contributing to both spiritual and social growth. The study advances knowledge in comparative religion and theology and offers practical insights for designing inclusive interfaith programs that support identity formation, empathy-building, and religious pluralism.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious diversity has become an increasingly prominent feature of modern societies, particularly within multicultural contexts where individuals from different faith traditions interact on a daily basis (Abokhodair et al., 2020; Dong, 2024). Globalization, migration, and the expansion of higher education have created spaces where people of diverse religious backgrounds encounter one another more frequently than ever before. Within this sociocultural landscape, interfaith dialogue has emerged as an important platform for fostering mutual understanding, reducing prejudice, and promoting peaceful coexistence among communities with differing theological perspectives. In higher education settings, especially universities with multicultural environments, interfaith initiatives have become critical arenas for exploring how young adults negotiate their religious identities while engaging with others who hold different worldviews.

In contemporary Indonesia, where Islam represents the majority while numerous minority faiths coexist, universities serve as microcosms of broader societal dynamics. Multicultural campuses offer opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of religious pluralism, but they also present challenges related to identity negotiation, cultural integration, and spiritual meaning-making. Muslim students, in particular, often navigate complex social and theological terrains as they participate in interfaith programs while maintaining commitments to their personal beliefs and traditions. Such experiences are shaped not only by institutional policies and program structures but also by broader sociocultural discourses surrounding interreligious engagement and coexistence.

Understanding these experiences is essential because interfaith encounters represent more than simple exchanges of knowledge; they embody deeply personal processes of reflection, transformation, and identity formation (Alharbey et al., 2022; Alothman et al., 2024). Previous

research suggests that interfaith dialogues can enhance empathy and cultivate spiritual growth, yet outcomes are highly context-dependent and often vary based on participants' personal, cultural, and religious backgrounds. These dynamics highlight the need to investigate how students experience, interpret, and derive meaning from their participation in interfaith settings rather than relying solely on externally imposed assumptions about interreligious engagement.

Given the complexity of religious identity construction and meaning-making processes, a phenomenological approach provides an appropriate framework for exploring these lived experiences. By focusing on participants' subjective realities, phenomenology enables a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their involvement in interfaith dialogues within their unique sociocultural contexts. This approach moves beyond surface-level descriptions and seeks to uncover the essence of personal experiences, offering valuable insights into the interplay between faith, identity, and community in pluralistic societies. Such an exploration contributes not only to academic discourse in comparative religion and theology but also to broader societal efforts toward fostering mutual understanding and coexistence.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals within interfaith contexts has become an increasingly important area of inquiry in the fields of comparative religion, theology, and sociology of religion (Cerchiaro, 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2019). Scholars have sought to understand how individuals navigate complex intersections of faith, identity, and community within multicultural environments, particularly in higher education settings. These studies highlight that interfaith encounters are not merely cognitive or informational exchanges; rather, they represent deeply personal and emotional processes that shape participants' spiritual understandings, social relationships, and sense of belonging. As a result, investigating the subjective dimensions of these experiences has become essential for generating a more holistic understanding of religious engagement in pluralistic societies.

Despite the growing scholarly interest, significant methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Much of the existing research relies heavily on quantitative surveys or structured questionnaires to measure interfaith attitudes, tolerance levels, or perceptions of religious diversity. While such methods provide valuable statistical insights, they are inherently limited in their capacity to illuminate the subjective meanings individuals attach to their participation in interfaith dialogues. Quantitative approaches tend to reduce multidimensional experiences into numerical indicators, thereby overlooking the nuanced, lived realities of participants' spiritual and emotional journeys.

These limitations have resulted in an incomplete understanding of the essence of interfaith experiences, particularly among Muslim students navigating multicultural university environments. Previous studies often fail to address the dynamic processes of identity negotiation, spiritual transformation, and meaning-making that occur when individuals engage in interreligious conversations. Consequently, current research struggles to explain how interfaith dialogues contribute to the formation of personal and collective religious identities or how these experiences influence broader patterns of coexistence and social cohesion.

This methodological gap underscores the need for phenomenological inquiry as a framework capable of capturing the richness of participants' lived experiences (Gzoyan et al., 2024; Ridwan & Zain, 2021). Unlike positivist approaches that prioritize objectivity and generalizability, phenomenology emphasizes participants' subjective realities and seeks to uncover the underlying meanings embedded in their narratives. By foregrounding personal experiences and interpretations, this study aims to offer a deeper, more authentic understanding of how Muslim students perceive, engage with, and make sense of interfaith dialogues in multicultural academic settings.

Although numerous studies have investigated interfaith engagement within multicultural settings, much of the existing literature has relied on practical approaches that primarily assess participants' attitudes, perceptions, or levels of tolerance through quantitative instruments such as surveys and structured questionnaires. While these approaches provide a general overview of how interfaith initiatives function, they often fail to capture the subjective depth of participants' lived experiences. The essence of interfaith encounters how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign

meaning to their experiences remains insufficiently understood, especially within contexts where religious identity negotiation plays a central role.

Existing studies have also tended to focus on programmatic outcomes, such as measuring levels of interreligious tolerance or evaluating institutional policies, rather than exploring the personal meaning-making processes of participants (Saloom, 2019; Shtofer et al., 2020). Consequently, these approaches overlook the internal transformations that occur as participants engage in dialogues, confront stereotypes, and reconstruct their religious and social identities. Without understanding these experiential dimensions, the field lacks a comprehensive view of how interfaith dialogues shape individual and collective perspectives in pluralistic societies.

Furthermore, previous research has rarely addressed the complexity of interfaith experiences among Muslim students in multicultural universities, particularly in Indonesia, where socio-religious diversity intersects with deeply rooted theological traditions. This gap is critical because participants often face tensions between maintaining personal religious commitments and embracing openness to other worldviews. Understanding how these dynamics unfold requires an exploration of lived experiences rather than relying on predetermined categories or abstract frameworks.

Given these limitations, there is a clear need for a phenomenological approach to investigate the essence of interfaith engagement. Phenomenology offers a methodological lens that prioritizes participants' voices and subjective interpretations, enabling researchers to uncover the meanings embedded in personal narratives and the transformative processes underlying these experiences. By adopting this perspective, the current study seeks to fill the existing gap by providing a richer and more holistic understanding of how Muslim students perceive, experience, and construct meaning around interfaith dialogues within multicultural academic environments.

Recent studies have explored interfaith engagement within multicultural contexts, focusing on its potential to foster mutual understanding, empathy, and coexistence. Research by Choi & Lee, (2024) highlighted how interfaith dialogues in higher education settings encourage cross-cultural learning, while Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, (2023) demonstrated that students often experience identity negotiation during these interactions. However, most of these studies adopt quantitative frameworks or focus on program-level assessments rather than exploring participants' lived experiences. Theoretical perspectives on religious identity construction and social integration have been discussed, but the subjective meanings behind interfaith encounters remain underexplored. This research builds on existing literature by addressing the experiential and interpretive dimensions often overlooked in previous studies.

To fill this gap, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to investigate how Muslim students perceive and make sense of their participation in interfaith dialogues within multicultural universities (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This method is chosen because it enables a deeper exploration of subjective realities, allowing the voices of participants to remain central to the analysis. Through IPA, the study focuses on capturing the essence of participants' experiences and uncovering the transformative processes within these dialogues. By doing so, it responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier, providing insights into how interfaith interactions shape spiritual understanding, social relationships, and identity development. The methodological choice reflects the study's commitment to a holistic and participant-centered interpretation of meaning.

This article is structured to guide readers through a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdottir, 2019a; Derakhshan et al., 2024). The introduction outlines the context and significance of interfaith dialogues in higher education, while the general and specific backgrounds establish the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study. The method section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures. The results section presents the themes that emerged from participants' narratives, highlighting the essence of their experiences. Finally, the discussion and conclusion connect these findings to existing scholarship, emphasize the study's contributions, and propose directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the essence of Muslim students' lived experiences while participating in interfaith dialogues within multicultural university contexts (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). Phenomenology focuses on understanding subjective perceptions and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, making it an appropriate approach for investigating the personal and spiritual dimensions of interfaith engagement.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was specifically applied to uncover the nuanced ways in which participants make sense of their interfaith encounters. IPA emphasizes the double hermeneutic process, where participants interpret their experiences while the researcher interprets those interpretations. This methodological orientation allowed the study to capture both the individual uniqueness of each participant's narrative and the shared patterns across participants, leading to a deeper understanding of religious identity, spiritual transformation, and interfaith meaning-making.

Participants

The participants consisted of 12 Muslim undergraduate students enrolled in multicultural universities across Indonesia, all of whom had actively engaged in interfaith dialogue programs (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that those included had direct, meaningful, and relevant experiences with the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria required that participants had attended at least two interfaith dialogue sessions, were between 18 and 24 years old, and were enrolled in academic institutions that provided structured interfaith programs. The final sample included seven female and five male participants, with an average age of 21.2 years. These individuals represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which enriched the variety of perspectives captured in the data. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and any potentially identifying details were omitted from the transcripts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about participants' interfaith experiences (Longhofer et al., 2012). An interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was developed to allow participants to freely express their thoughts, emotions, and reflections, while maintaining consistency across interviews. Sample questions included: "Can you describe your initial experience participating in an interfaith dialogue?" and "How has the dialogue influenced your personal understanding of religious identity?"

All interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and private spaces within university facilities to ensure participants' comfort and psychological safety. Each session lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent from participants. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that supported the interpretation of findings. Following data collection, all recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness in representing participants' voices.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover the essential meanings embedded in participants' narratives. Analysis was conducted in a systematic and iterative manner. First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion and familiarity with the content. Second, significant statements or meaning units were identified, segmented, and coded to capture the core elements of participants' lived experiences. Third, these codes were clustered into preliminary categories and refined into emergent themes representing the shared essence of the phenomenon.

Cross-case analysis was conducted to compare themes across participants while retaining the uniqueness of individual perspectives. NVivo 12 software was employed to facilitate data management and support systematic coding; however, interpretive depth was achieved through reflective engagement with the transcripts rather than reliance on automated outputs. The final themes were synthesized into an integrated framework that captured both the diversity of experiences and the underlying commonalities, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' interfaith encounters.

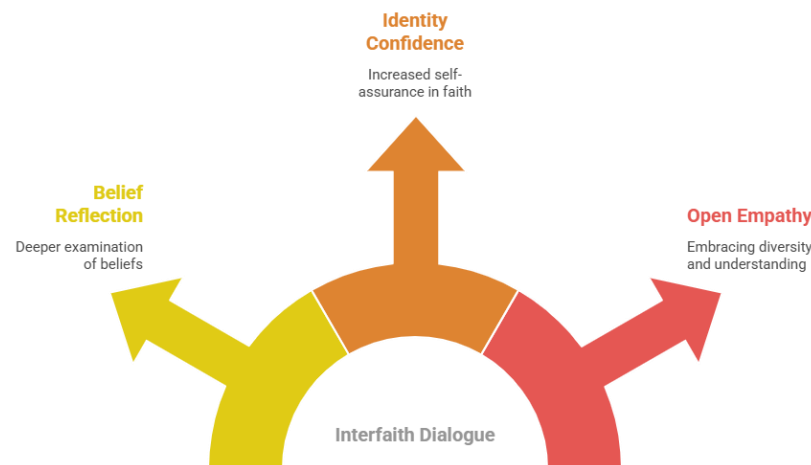
RESULTS

Navigating Religious Identity in Multicultural Spaces

Participants described their interfaith dialogues as transformative experiences that reshaped their understanding of religious identity. Engaging with peers from different faith traditions challenged their assumptions and prompted deeper reflection on personal beliefs.

“At first, I felt nervous joining the interfaith dialogue because I thought my beliefs might be questioned. But during the sessions, I realized that sharing our stories made me more confident about my identity as a Muslim.” (Participant 3, Female, 21)

Interfaith Dialogue Reshapes Religious Identity



For many participants, the dialogues became spaces of self-reaffirmation rather than confrontation. The experience fostered openness and empathy, enabling them to embrace diversity without compromising their faith commitments.

Experiencing Spiritual Enrichment through Interfaith Encounters

Across participants, there was a recurring sense of spiritual growth derived from interacting with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. These dialogues often encouraged introspection and motivated participants to engage more meaningfully with their own spiritual practices.

“Listening to my Christian friend explaining her prayer experience made me reflect on my own connection with God. It didn't weaken my faith it actually deepened it.” (Participant 7, Male, 22)

This theme highlights how spiritual enrichment can emerge from differences. Rather than perceiving interfaith dialogue as a threat, participants viewed it as an opportunity for mutual learning and spiritual expansion.

Overcoming Prejudice and Building Empathy

Prior to the interfaith program, several participants admitted holding stereotypes or negative assumptions about other religions. Through sustained interaction, these prejudices gradually dissolved, replaced by empathy and mutual respect.

“Before, I believed people from other religions wouldn’t understand me. But after talking to them, I realized we share many similar struggles and values.” (Participant 5, Female, 23)

The findings suggest that dialogue fosters perspective-taking and breaks down barriers rooted in religious misconceptions. This process cultivated an inclusive mindset, enabling participants to see common humanity beyond theological differences.

Challenges in Sustaining Interfaith Engagement

Despite the positive outcomes, participants also encountered challenges, including institutional barriers, social stigma, and personal insecurities. Some expressed concerns about potential backlash from peers or family members who misunderstood their involvement.

“I was excited to join the dialogue, but some of my friends said I shouldn’t interact too much with non-Muslims. It was difficult to balance my personal curiosity with community expectations.” (Participant 9, Male, 20)

These findings reveal that while interfaith dialogues can be empowering, they also require institutional support and safe spaces to address participants’ concerns and ensure long-term sustainability.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Muslim students’ participation in interfaith dialogues within multicultural universities fosters spiritual growth, strengthens religious identity, and enhances empathy toward individuals from different faith traditions (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). These experiences respond directly to the overarching research question, demonstrating how interfaith encounters provide participants with transformative opportunities for self-reflection and meaning-making while navigating diverse social and religious contexts.

Contributions of Findings to the Research Question

This study offers significant contributions by revealing how Muslim students make sense of their involvement in interfaith dialogues and how these experiences shape their perceptions of identity and spirituality (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdottir, 2019b; Zonne-Gätjens, 2024). The results show that interfaith engagement encourages participants to reaffirm personal beliefs while simultaneously developing openness toward alternative religious worldviews. Participants reported that their involvement helped them navigate tensions between maintaining personal faith commitments and fostering interreligious understanding, highlighting the dynamic negotiation of identity within multicultural spaces.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that interfaith dialogues function as transformative platforms where students engage in deep introspection about their spiritual practices and religious commitments. While prior research has predominantly examined interfaith programs from an institutional or programmatic perspective, this study provides a participant-centered understanding by uncovering the personal meanings embedded within students’ narratives. The phenomenological approach enabled a holistic exploration of these experiences, offering insights into the subtle interplay between individual spirituality, communal belonging, and intercultural empathy that are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The results align with prior studies emphasizing the potential of interfaith dialogues to promote mutual understanding and empathy (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Consistent with social identity theory, participants’ narratives demonstrate that interfaith encounters can reduce ingroup-outgroup boundaries by facilitating perspective-taking and highlighting shared human values. At the same time, the findings extend this theoretical perspective by showing that identity transformation does not require abandoning personal faith commitments;

rather, interfaith engagement deepens participants' connection to their own beliefs while fostering respect for others.

Interestingly, the results also challenge earlier studies that suggest interfaith dialogues primarily lead to assimilation or loss of religious distinctiveness. In contrast, participants in this study reported experiencing spiritual enrichment and identity reinforcement rather than compromise, suggesting that interfaith spaces can function as mutually affirming environments rather than sites of theological dilution. These findings contribute to comparative religion and theology by offering a nuanced understanding of how interfaith dialogues facilitate constructive coexistence in pluralistic societies.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding interfaith engagement in multicultural academic settings (Benediktsson et al., 2019; Black, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, the results contribute to comparative religion and theology by highlighting how interfaith dialogues can simultaneously reinforce personal religious identity while fostering openness to diverse beliefs. This dual process challenges simplistic assumptions that interfaith participation necessarily leads to theological compromise; instead, it underscores the possibility of identity transformation without identity loss.

From a practical standpoint, the study emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive educational spaces that encourage interfaith interaction while safeguarding participants' religious commitments. For policymakers and higher education institutions, the results suggest the need to establish structured interfaith programs that not only promote dialogue but also create safe spaces for participants to express vulnerabilities and negotiate identity. On a broader societal level, these findings provide insights into how empathy-building practices within interfaith initiatives can enhance social cohesion, reduce prejudice, and foster mutual respect in diverse.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that should inform the interpretation of its findings (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). First, the research was conducted within a specific cultural and institutional context multicultural universities in Indonesia which may limit the generalizability of the results to other sociocultural settings. Second, the relatively small sample size of 12 participants, though appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the ability to draw broader statistical inferences. Third, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which are subject to personal bias, selective memory, and social desirability effects.

Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on Muslim participants, thereby excluding insights from students of other religious traditions who also participate in interfaith dialogues. While this choice provided a concentrated perspective on Muslim students' experiences, future studies should adopt a more inclusive participant pool to capture multiple perspectives within interfaith contexts. These limitations do not undermine the significance of the findings but highlight the need for cautious interpretation and point toward opportunities for further investigation.

Directions for Future Research

Building on the insights of this study, future research should explore cross-religious perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of interfaith dynamics in multicultural contexts (Bruen et al., 2025; Nasir & Rijal, 2021). Comparative phenomenological studies involving participants from different faith traditions could deepen understanding of shared experiences and divergent meanings across religious groups. Expanding the research to include diverse institutional settings such as secular universities, faith-based colleges, and international campuses would further enrich the understanding of how sociocultural factors shape interfaith engagement.

Additionally, longitudinal research could investigate the long-term impact of interfaith dialogues on participants' religious identities, spiritual practices, and attitudes toward diversity. By integrating phenomenological insights with mixed-method designs, future studies can triangulate subjective experiences with broader social patterns, leading to a more holistic understanding of

interfaith dialogue and its role in fostering pluralism. Such research would not only advance scholarship in comparative religion and theology but also inform policy and educational practices aimed at promoting mutual respect, empathy, and coexistence in diverse societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim students participating in interfaith dialogues within multicultural universities, focusing on how they perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from these encounters. The findings reveal that interfaith dialogues foster spiritual growth, strengthen religious identity, and promote empathy and mutual understanding across diverse faith traditions. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study provides a deeper insight into the subjective realities of participants, addressing limitations in previous research that relied heavily on quantitative assessments. These results contribute to the broader discourse in comparative religion and theology by demonstrating how interfaith engagement can simultaneously reinforce personal faith while cultivating openness to religious diversity. The originality of this study lies in its focus on Muslim students' perspectives within multicultural higher education settings, offering insights that are rarely addressed in existing literature. Based on these findings, universities should develop structured interfaith programs that integrate dialogue into curricula, provide safe spaces for identity negotiation, and include training for faculty to facilitate inclusive discussions. Policymakers and educational leaders are also encouraged to adopt interfaith initiatives as part of broader diversity and inclusion strategies. While the findings are context-specific, future studies could expand this research by including participants from multiple faith traditions and diverse educational settings to capture a more holistic understanding of interfaith dynamics. Ultimately, the study offers both theoretical and practical contributions, highlighting its potential to inform policy, shape educational practice, and strengthen interfaith understanding in increasingly diverse societies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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