Intrapersonal Communication Dynamics Among Ethnic Chinese Muslim Converts in Indonesia

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Abstract

This research explores intrapersonal communication among Indonesian ethnic Chinese Muslim converts. The paper examines how participants make sense of themselves, including identity construction and social interactions, after religious conversion. The research adopts an interpretivist paradigm based on Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, and the research participants were five ethnic Chinese Muslim converts from Masjid Lautze 2 Bandung. Participants were chosen by means of purposeful sampling. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. The findings show that religious conversion becomes a turning point in life experience and leads to changes in spirituality, personal identity, and social interactions. Intrapersonal communication became an important tool for self-understanding and interpreting the experience, helping participants overcome tensions related to family rejection, cultural norms, and social stigmatisation. The participants constructed a hybrid identity by combining Chinese culture with Islamic beliefs without giving up their ethnicity. The research contributes to communication studies by showing that intrapersonal communication plays an integral role in meaning-making, identity negotiation, and resilience among ethnic Chinese Muslims who have converted. The research also contributes to Alfred Schutz's notion of the lifeworld by revealing how subjectivity shapes identity reconstruction in the context of conversion.

Keywords: religious conversion, intrapersonal communication, lifeworld, Chinese Muslim converts, identity reconstruction

INTRODUCTION

Conversion in the ethnic Chinese community of Indonesia is a radical transformation that can lead to serious family disputes and uncertainty regarding social status. Such converts often experience a "double burden" because their social milieu views their conversion as a rejection of their traditional cultural background, creating difficulties related to stigmatisation, social estrangement, and even financial constraints. These external pressures thus become substantial internal obstacles that require effective management through intrapersonal communication

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processes. In such situations, intrapersonal communication becomes a crucial mechanism through which individuals engage in self-dialogue to integrate their cultural roots with their new religion, Islam. Recent research describes conversion as a complex, multifaceted process of meaning construction in which people build new spiritual frameworks to cope with daily life and preserve their psychological integrity (Krotofil et al., 2023). Examining these inner dialogues is therefore essential to understanding how converts establish their spiritual balance and reinvent themselves within the dynamic sociocultural environment of Indonesia.

This study builds on research papers that examine the complex issues surrounding religious conversion and identity formation. First, Awang et al.'s (2018) paper is important for its discussion of intrapersonal communication as an essential medium through which converts can reconcile new Islamic values with their existing belief systems. Second, Umam and Syafiq (2014) is important for its comprehensive sociopsychological analysis of ethnic Chinese Muslims in Indonesia and their conversion to Islam, highlighting the significance of culture and social relationships in the quest for spiritual truths. Third, Solin (2023) discusses the difficulties Muslim converts face in adjusting socially in Indonesia. Fourth, Geelhoed's (2014) study is crucial in recognising the "turbulent trajectories" of converts, showing that embracing a new religion is a quest for stability and direction amid significant identity crises. Lastly, Ismail's (2017) work offers a profound analysis of self-reflection as an introspective activity, emphasising how mualafs reassess their outlook on life and spirituality through internal processes after converting to Islam. Together, these papers lay the groundwork for a theoretical framework in which self-reflection and external pressures converge, creating a context for this study to examine the "inner battle."

The main goal of the study is to examine and develop an understanding of how ethnic Chinese Muslim converts construe their conversion experience as identity building through self-realisation. In particular, the study aims to examine their subjective experiences in their lifeworld, assess their internal motivations for upholding their beliefs, and ultimately develop a model of intrapersonal communication for identity reconstruction within the parameters of Chinese culture. Recent studies of religion highlight the complexity of the meaning-making process in religious conversion, in which people create new spiritual paradigms to make sense of their experiences and maintain psychological balance (Krotofil et al., 2023). To accomplish these objectives, the research uses a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm, guided by Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology, to investigate the inner workings of the research subjects. This method is grounded in the idea that people are internal communication systems that "cure" themselves through their experiences to ensure their well-being (Bainbridge et al., 2025). The data were collected through semi-structured phenomenological interviews with five purposively sampled converts, aimed at capturing the participants' "stream of consciousness," as well as through participant observation and document analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is a basic psychological process through which individuals develop personal identity, including during religious conversion. Moreover, self-talk and internal reflection form the basis for how individuals interpret internal messages and evaluate their self-concept before engaging with external social environments (DeVito, 2021). Religious conversion is not simply switching from one religion to another; it entails a continuous internal conversation in which individuals reflect on past religious beliefs, assess new religious values, and make sense of inconsistencies between their old self and new spiritual being. Intrapersonal communication helps individuals respond to the different voices coming from their families, society, and themselves and develop a consistent sense of self. According to Krotofil et al. (2023), religious conversion is a process of dialogical transformation of the self, in which an individual negotiates different voices and creates a consistent religious identity.

In the process of transitioning to a new religion, intrapersonal communication serves as an important psychological safeguard for mualaf (converts to Islam), especially when they face situations where social exclusion and family rejection may occur. Through constant intrapersonal communication, converts can cope with the emotional turmoil they experience and assess their spiritual decisions, while developing emotional resilience amid the cultural identity crisis of adopting new beliefs. By using self-talk and spiritual reflection, converts can navigate complex social environments, reassert their faith, and turn psychological weaknesses into spiritual strengths (Sulaiman et al., 2025).

B. Alfred Schutz's Social Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that examines how individuals perceive a phenomenon through their lived experiences. Phenomenologically grounded qualitative research enables researchers to investigate individuals' fundamental 'modes of being in the world' by analyzing how they assign subjective meaning to their lived experiences (Køster & Fernandez, 2023). Phenomenology differs from most qualitative methodologies because its focus is not on explaining objectively or causally but rather on finding the essential meaning of the individual's lived experiences as they engage with the world around them. Phenomenology gives the researcher an opportunity to explore the participant's subjectivity to understand how reality is interpreted through consciousness and individual interpretations. According to Alhazmi and Kaufmann (2022), phenomenological research methodology focuses on understanding the nature of human experience through how individuals describe their lived experiences in a certain context.

Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology provides a useful theoretical basis for understanding the subjective experience of religious converts because it explains how people create meaningful structures in their lifeworld. Schutz states that individuals construct and interpret reality through their experiences, social interactions, and accumulated store of knowledge. Becoming a Muslim convert can be viewed as a process in which an individual interprets their previous experience and creates new meaningful structures that define who they are. Converts

continually reinterpret the meaning of their family relations, culture, and religion and construct a new structure of meaning that influences their behaviour. Recent phenomenological studies further emphasise the analysis of lived experiences from a first-person viewpoint, hence enabling the researchers to understand how people experience significant life events and interpret them in the context of their social world (Zahavi, 2021). Furthermore, empirical examinations of cultural and religious shifts show how individuals utilise their 'life-world' as a primary framework for redefining personal identity and renewing religious categories in everyday life (Chi & Liu, 2024).

C. Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory

According to the book Theories of Human Communication, cognitive dissonance theory is built on two basic concepts: cognition and dissonance. Cognition represents an individual's internal dimensions such as attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, while dissonance refers to a state of conflict or inconsistency (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). This theory views human cognitive elements as interconnected in three categories: irrelevant relationships, consonant relationships, and dissonant relationships (Dainton & Zelley, 2022). According to Festinger, two interrelated but inconsistent cognitive elements trigger dissonance, which leads to psychological discomfort. According to social psychology studies, social pressure or negative signs from the environment can function as a source of dissonance-arousing information (information that gives rise to dissonance), and social support from the new community functions as dissonance-reducing information that helps individuals maintain their new identity.

According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory, people have an intrinsic need for consistency between beliefs, attitudes, and actions, especially in times of major life transitions. Psychological tension arises when cognitions conflict, prompting people to restore consistency by changing beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours (Vaidis & Bran, 2019). In religious conversion, cognitive dissonance arises from inconsistencies between newly embraced beliefs and cultural norms, family expectations, or one's former self. This creates psychological tension, which facilitates intrapersonal communication and helps converts make sense of their experiences.

D. George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism

George Herbert Mead (1934), a pioneer of this theory, emphasised the importance of symbolic communication, where individuals learn and develop concepts about themselves and the social world through symbolic interaction. In his book, Mind, Self, and Society, Mead explains that "meaning is the result of social processes and symbolic communication, which enable individuals to develop a sense of self and society". Symbolic Interaction Theory is used to analyse how new religious symbols are interpreted amid identity conflicts within families. Meanwhile, Cooley argued that a person's self-concept is determined by their perception of how others view them.

In the case of ethnic Chinese Muslim converts in Indonesia, internal

communication becomes a complex field for resolving a dual identity. As a result of these active internal negotiations, converts do not simply give in to external socio-cultural conflicts but actively reconstruct symbolic meanings and redefine social reality to establish internal consistency (Stets & Huft, 2026).

E. Chinese Muslims and Masjid Lautze

During the New Order, ethnic Chinese Indonesians were under immense pressure to assimilate, so that conversion to Islam often appeared as a tool of social assimilation rather than a purely spiritual matter (Hoon, 2008). After the 1998 Reform, however, greater cultural openness allowed converts to negotiate their identity on both the ethnic and religious levels with the help of organisations such as PITI and Chinese-style mosques such as Masjid Lautze. This dynamic process highlights distinct Chinese ways of being Muslim in contemporary Indonesia, where converts continuously negotiate their cultural heritage and religious devotion within space provided by organisations like PITI and Chinese-style mosques such as Masjid Lautze (Hew, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study used an interpretive research design with a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of ethnic Chinese Muslim converts and how they derive meaning from their religious conversion process. In this design, reality is viewed as socially constructed through interpretation and experience, not objectively measured (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Using Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology as its guiding framework, the study explored participants' lifeworlds to uncover their interpretations of identity, religion, and social relations through intrapersonal communication (Pula, 2024). Data collection was conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2025 at Masjid Lautze 2 Bandung, a prominent centre for Chinese Muslim converts in West Java. Five ethnic Chinese Muslim converts from Masjid Lautze 2 Bandung—identified by the initials B, CL, OKW, P, and L, respectively —were selected through purposive sampling because they had firsthand experience of post-conversion family conflicts.

Data were gathered using a multi-method qualitative design involving semi-structured phenomenological interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source and lasted 60 to 90 minutes, using an open-ended interview guide that explored participants' inner thoughts, emotional conflicts, and stream of consciousness. The participants were interviewed twice to enable reflection and elaboration. Participant observation was also done by attending religious study meetings (*pengajian*), Friday prayers, and cultural events at Masjid Lautze 2 to allow the researchers to observe actual interaction and behavior among the people in the community. Document analysis was another data-collection method, using personal notes, social media reflections, conversion certificates, and institutional documents from Masjid Lautze 2. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data through different stages, including familiarisation with the data, initial coding,

generating potential themes, reviewing and defining the themes, and interpreting the findings.

DISCUSSION

1. Conversion as an Existential Turning Point

The participants viewed conversion not merely as adopting a new belief, but as an existential transformation of personal identity involving spiritual and existential questions. Previous research suggests that religious conversion stems from internal conflict, as individuals seek meaning and integration in their lives (Safitri et al., 2025). During such times, individuals tend to reflect on their beliefs in association with their newly found spirituality.

Participants' experiences reveal that religious conversion was a continuous process of self-reflection and reinterpreting their beliefs.

> "*Before converting, I felt a deep inner emptiness despite my financial stability. Late at night, I constantly engaged in self-dialogue, asking myself about the true purpose of my life. Praying and talking to myself helped me realise that Islam provided the spiritual structure I was longing for. It was not just a change of religion; it was a complete restart of my existence.*" (Participant B, May 2025)

The findings further suggest that religious conversion represents an existential turning point that fundamentally transforms the participants' understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Rather than perceiving conversion as a single decision to adopt a new religion, participants described it as a gradual journey of personal transformation involving continuous self-reflection, emotional adjustment, and the reconstruction of life meaning. This process required them to reinterpret past experiences, reassess long-held beliefs, and develop new perspectives that could accommodate both their religious commitment and their cultural identity. Throughout this journey, participants consistently engaged in internal dialogue to evaluate their choices, manage uncertainty, and establish psychological consistency between their beliefs and everyday behaviours. Conversion therefore became an ongoing process of meaning-making that shaped not only spiritual practices but also interpersonal relationships, future aspirations, and personal values. The participants' experiences show that existential transformation is sustained through continuous reflection rather than a single moment of change, allowing them to gradually develop a more integrated identity that reconciles religious conviction with cultural heritage.

2. Familial Conflict and Emotional Negotiation

One of the major challenges faced by Chinese Muslim converts in their lifeworld is the tension in family relations that arises as a result of conversion. In the Chinese cultural setting, family and family traditions are central. Therefore, conversion to another faith can be viewed as the breakdown of family continuity. Participants shared several challenges in their family relationships after conversion. The converts had to cope with the family tensions and emotions that followed. In

some cases, family members were disappointed and did not understand the reasons behind the conversion.

The participants reported facing emotional distress, disappointment, and rejection from their immediate families.

> *"When my parents found out, they felt I was turning my back on our Chinese heritage and ancestors. They were deeply hurt, and I felt immense guilt. Instead of arguing back, I spent a lot of time in silent prayer and inner dialogue, reminding myself to remain patient and respectful. I told myself that the best way to convince them was not through words, but by proving that becoming a Muslim made me a more loving and dutiful son."* (Participant CL, May 2025)

Participants' accounts suggest that familial conflict stemmed not only from religious differences, but also from the emotional complexity of adopting new identities within close family relationships. Conversion required participants to reconcile their commitment to Islam with their need to maintain close emotional ties with parents, siblings, and relatives who viewed their conversion as a rejection of their common cultural values. The participants did not confront their families with their choice but engaged in an ongoing process of emotional negotiation based on patience, understanding and sensitivity to other people's needs. Self-reflection played a key role in dealing with the emotions of guilt, disappointment and insecurity in the process of reinforcing their commitment to religion. Gradually, participants developed more effective ways of communicating with their families, focusing on mutual respect and consistency of their behaviour rather than persuading people through confrontation. In this context, it becomes clear that emotional negotiation not only helps cope with negative emotions but also gradually helps reconcile religious and family identity.

Previous studies have found that religious converts often encounter interpersonal problems and emotional pressures in the initial phase of their religious conversion process (Rosyida, 2023). In particular, Chinese Muslim converts may encounter heightened conflicts between their religious identity and ethnic cultural factors.

3. Social Stigma and Identity Negotiation

The participants' experiences show that social stigma did not simply involve negative stereotypes but became an influential factor of how the participants represented themselves and understood their identities. After becoming converts, the participants constantly faced certain assumptions about their faith or culture, which forced them to defend or justify their decisions in these particular situations. Rather than seeing these experiences only as discrimination, the participants developed coping strategies that helped them negotiate their identities across social contexts. They learned how to present their beliefs more tactfully, consider the positions of other people, and understand when to speak and when to remain silent. At the same time, identity negotiation was closely linked to intrapersonal communication because the participants constantly reflected on what image they

wanted to present to society while still maintaining their religious beliefs. As a result of repeated exposure to social stigma, the participants developed self-confidence and achieved a higher level of integration, where their Chinese ethnicity and Muslim faith were not seen as contradictory aspects of their identity but as complementary parts of it. The hybrid identity was formed as a result of intrapersonal reflection which combines Chinese ethnicity with Islam.

> "*Some of my Chinese friends distanced themselves, calling me a traitor to our culture, while some non-Chinese Muslims questioned whether I was genuinely sincere. In my quiet moments, I reflected deeply on who I was. I came to the realisation that being Chinese is my ethnicity given by God, while Islam is my spiritual path. I don't have to erase my Chinese identity to be a good Muslim.*" (Participant CL, May 2025)

Based on the results, the negotiation of identity among ethnic Chinese Muslim converts is not one of abandoning their ethnic background but, rather, one of integrating both cultural and religious identities. Religious conversion leads participants to reinterpret their culture in light of their new Islamic identity, engaging in a continuous reconstruction of meaning rather than replacing their cultural identity. This result reinforces past studies about religious conversion that show how participants re-negotiate multiple aspects of their identity, including religion, ethnicity, and culture (Pradana & Prastya, 2025). In this case, the participants' identity construction is considered a hybrid identity wherein Chinese ethnic culture coexists with Islamic beliefs rather than conflicting with them (Mukaromah, 2024). Moreover, participants gained more confidence in sharing their new identity once they were accepted in Muslim communities that are culturally sensitive. This result is supported by research on religious learning and identity formation among Chinese Muslim converts at Masjid Lautze through culturally adaptive da'wah (Nur, 2025).

4. Spiritual Resilience and Meaning-Making

Despite the social and emotional challenges they encountered, the participants showed high spiritual resilience. Their newfound religious beliefs were a significant source of psychological strength and emotional stability. Participants often cited religious activities, such as prayer, Qur'an recitation, and participation in the Muslim community, as sources of personal guidance and emotional stability. These activities not only provided spiritual fulfilment but also offered emotional support during times of social tension.

Studies of conversion experiences show that spiritual participation helps individuals cope with identity changes and social influences (Krotofil et al., 2023). By engaging in religious activities, converts view adverse experiences as part of a spiritual journey. From a phenomenological viewpoint, this shows how individuals find meaning in their lifeworld through spiritual reflection and religious living. Religion is not only a body of beliefs but also a way to view life events and achieve psychological stability.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religious conversion among ethnic Chinese Muslim converts is a continuous process of meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and social adaptation rather than merely a change of religious affiliation. Intrapersonal communication plays a central role in enabling converts to interpret their lived experiences, negotiate family and social challenges, and integrate Chinese cultural heritage with Islamic values. By combining Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology with communication perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of identity negotiation and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive support in facilitating successful post-conversion adaptation.

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