

# The Inevitable Journey: Understanding the Conversion Process of Muslim Converts in Malaysia and How They Overcame the Challenges from Interracial Marriages

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## ABSTRACT

Interracial marriages in Malaysia have been increasing due to increased interaction between people of different religions and ethnicities in Malaysia. Nevertheless, interracial marriages are generally frowned upon and those who choose to do so may experience resistance from their own families as well as from the public. This study was conducted to understand the conversion process of Muslim converts in Malaysia and how they overcame the challenges of interracial marriages. A semi-structured qualitative interview was used to elicit the issues in this study. A total of seven (7) informants were recruited across Peninsular Malaysia through the purposive sampling method by snowball strategy. Interviews with informants were conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms. Findings from this study include ten themes consisting of experiences of the informants before, during, and after their conversion process to Islam. The themes derived from this study were similar yet different and have their uniqueness from past works of literature. Each stage of the process was crucial for the subsequent themes of the next stage to be achieved. The conclusion drawn from this study is that converts generally still face prejudice and biases from society despite successfully converting and becoming legalised Muslims. Nevertheless, most of the converts have developed high tolerance levels and adaptive methods on their journey. This study aims to provide a deeper insight to the public, providing clear guidance to new Muslim converts in Malaysia on the various stages of the conversion process, the challenges involved and how some couples manage interracial marriages.

**Keywords:** conversion, Muslim converts, experiences, challenges, interracial marriages

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a multiracial, multi-religious country located in Asia comprised of individuals who are from different races and cultures, and practising different religions. The major ethnicities that constitute Malaysia's population are Malays, Chinese and Indians, with the Malays primarily being Muslims and making up 61.8% of the total population (My Government, 2016). For this study, it is important to establish the terminology that is used throughout. Multiracial is defined as individuals of several different races, where their background included two or more races whereas interracial is defined as involving people of different races (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Interfaith marriages are defined as partners who are from different religions marrying one another (Islam, 2014). Both 'interfaith marriages' and 'mixed-marriages' have the same meaning and can be used interchangeably.

## BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Interracial marriages had upsurged for the past few years which led to an increased population of multiracial individuals (Reddy, 2020). Data and statistics regarding Malaysia's marriage and divorce in 2018 demonstrated that interracial marriages made up 9% of total marriages, and among that figure, 48.3% involved Muslim

individuals (Tang & Ling, 2019). Although Malaysians respect each other's culture and religion, when it comes to marriages, especially involving interracial couples, it still horrifies most families (Reddy, 2020). Besides, the Malaysian Islamic Family Law Act does not only restrain conversion from Islam but also demands conversion to Islam when one of the partners is Muslim (Tan, 2012).

From a worldwide lens, couples from interracial marriages have greater possibilities of developing stress compared to same-raced couples (Frame, 2003). There also exists marital instability among interracial couples, leading to higher divorce rates (Bratter & King, 2008). Surprisingly in Malaysia, controversy in family conflicts exists between non-Muslim and Muslim partners. This is because the Islamic Department is unable to intervene as the Islamic Law of Malaysia does not cover issues on this matter (Jones, Leng & Mohamad, 2009). Interracial marriages are, in such a way, highly unacceptable by the family and society (Rocha & Aspinall, 2020). Moreover, the public views interracial marriages as challenging, especially when one partner has to convert to another partner's religion (Rocha & Aspinall, 2020). Hence, this study aims to reveal the experiences of Muslim converts in Malaysia before, during, and after their conversion.

### **Theoretical Approach**

Rambo (1993) defines conversion of religion as "turning from and to new religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality" (Kahn & Greene, 2003, p. 234). Rambo's integrative model consists of seven stages. It discloses how the religious maturity of converts aid in their religious conversion process (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). In Stage one (context), individuals are considering whether to undergo the conversion; in Stage two (crisis), the individual undergoes personal or social crisis or both; in Stage three (quest), individuals will have intentional activity; in Stage four (encounter), individuals start to accept and recognise alternative religious options; Stage five (interaction), individuals have extended engagement with the new religious option; in Stage six (commitment), individuals identify realities of the new religion; and in Stage seven (consequences), the transformation process is completed, resulting in a new commitment to the new religion (Rambo, 1993 cited in Hood et al., 2018). When converters are at a higher stage of the conversion process, they are likely to be more mature in their intrapsychic and interpersonal framework (Yee, et al., 2019). The stages are not unidirectional, it can occur by jumping to different stages for each individual. Any of these stages can influence the later stages or even the earlier ones (Hood et al., 2018).

Inter-racial marriages exist worldwide and there have been many studies conducted to investigate the issues related to these marriages. In one such study, Daneshpour (2003) had researched Muslim men from the Middle East with European-American wives. The findings found that the husbands wished to help their future wives to practise Islam before marriage to let them comprehend and hold onto an Islamic background more easily. However, the inadequacy of comprehending the Islamic religion was a struggle for their wives. This increased the confusion of their wives who converted to Islam. The couples acknowledged the existence of misunderstandings at the start but claimed Islam was not difficult for them to accept after marriage. However, there is a need to look at their satisfaction with marriage across the years, as embracing Islam does not mean they will be satisfied with their marriage lives (Daneshpour, 2003). Along with these lines, an individual's awareness of their own beliefs and attitude is crucial in maintaining lasting relationships between interracial couples (Daneshpour, 2003).

Another study from Corral (2019) pointed to the issue of American South Asian Muslim women living in the United States on their views on interracial marriage. The findings found that most of them are still adapting to the Muslim's perceived collectivistic culture, meaning that all individual's needs and interests are secondary. Hence, a marriage is considered an important life event with the involvement of the couple's families, instead of two individuals. Although interracial marriage is legal in the United States, challenges still exist between interracial couples. Compared to couples of similar cultures, interracial couples are at increased risk to have conflicts in their marriage due to different beliefs, value systems, habits, cultural traditions, parenting styles and language barriers (Romano, 2008).

### **(ii) Malaysian context.**

It is common for (inter-religion) conversions to exist, such as (at times due to) marriages (Kassim, Abdullah, & Baba, 2013). In Malaysia, Muslims are not allowed to convert into a different religion, so anyone who marries a Muslim must embrace Islam (AsiaNews, 2018). Although all Malays are born Muslims, there are also Muslim Chinese and Indians in the country. In this study, the focus is on marriages between the Muslim Malays and those who are from another race, whether Chinese, Indian, or any other nationalities, whose initial religion is not Islam. If the couple intends to get married, they have three choices; to convert to Islam, leave Malaysia, or live together outside of marriage. A study by Yee et al. (2019) explored how Chinese-Muslim converts in Malaysia coped when they were converting into Islam. The conversion process was deemed to be complex and dynamic because it was

a brand new, personal and unique process for all converts. However, there was no guarantee for converts to experience a high level of satisfaction in their marriage life. This process involves not only the converts but also their families and the wider community (Yee et al., 2019). About 1% of Malaysian Chinese are Muslim converts and officially converted to Islam upon marriage, but they are treated as 'impure' Muslims and backstabbers of their previous religion, so, they are rejected by both the Muslim and Chinese communities (Yee et al., 2019). Even though the process might be the same as other converts, the experience each individual derives from the process varies. Some converts might enjoy the process while some may feel distressed (Yee et al., 2019).

### **Experience of Muslim Converts**

#### **(i) Worldwide context.**

Experiences of American Muslim converts during their conversion to Islam include fusing their previous identity with their new Muslim identity (Duncan, 2019). Adjustment ranges from small to drastic behaviours such as changing eating habits to refining their true Muslim identity. Generally, tension from the converts' family will lead to arguments with their partner, who face both social and family discord. Therefore, some converts developed their perceptions of 'Islamophobia', a fear of the Islamic religion. There were interracial couples who experienced marital satisfaction or marital conflict or both (Corral, 2019). Some couples are aware of their cultural differences and will help each other deal with the adjustments by effective communication, developing a strong interpersonal foundation. On the other hand, couples who faced marital conflicts reported that at least one moderate or severe issue in their marital relationship including conflicts with in-laws, family and friends (Corral, 2019).

Converts also reported that they were discriminated against and treated differently by others (Duncan, 2019). However, some reported that they experience a positive conversion impact as they gained strength and peace from 'Allah' (God) (Duncan, 2019). The teachings of Islam include the Islamic brotherhood because Muslims will serve as 'brothers' to support newcomers (Mohd Dali et al., 2016). There are also programmes and events organized for converts who are facing a crisis such as losing their spouse or family members. Likewise, the converts will start to live as 'real' Muslims, accepting and gaining understanding, and eventually, assimilating fully into the religion (Mohd Dali et al., 2016).

#### **(ii) Malaysian context.**

A Malaysian Non-Governmental Organization, PERKIM (*Pertubuhan Kabajikan Islam Se-Malaysia*, or All Malaysia Muslim Welfare Association) reported as many as 4,581 people converting to Islam from different races each year (Kawangit, 2016). Hence, conversion to Islam is presumed to be relatively common in Malaysia. Nevertheless, conversion indicates the start of continuous issues for Muslim converts because they need to start fulfilling their religious duties. To fully grasp a convert's faith, it is important to understand the psychological transformation of human cognitive change (Kassim et al., 2013). This is because sincere conversions only occur through physical acceptance by the individual. Converts often face difficulties when they are fitting into the Muslim community, due to lacking knowledge of the religion. If converts can develop effective coping methods from emotional, mental and physical aspects, they can change their perspective and successfully integrate into the Muslim community (Kassim et al., 2013). Furthermore, some Indians in Malaysia converted to Islam and became Indian-Muslim (Chuah, Shukri, & Yeoh, 2011). As a marginalized minority, they faced discrimination by society and are not entitled to receive 'Bumiputera' (natives) benefits. This further creates an image to the public that only 'pure' Muslims have the right to enjoy government privileges (Chuah, Shukri & Yeoh, 2011).

A study by Lam (2005) also looked at the issues faced by Chinese-Muslim in Malaysia where the Chinese individuals converted into Muslims to marry a Muslim partner. However, they find themselves in an uncomfortable position in Malaysian society as they are not treated as real Muslims or Malay by society. This happened due to the intimate association between the Constitutional definition of what defines a real Malay or Muslim, and Islam becomes the most distinctive indicator to distinguish Malays from the other ethnic groups (Lam, 2005). Hence, the continued discouraging of interracial marriages by the public, especially if religious conversion is involved.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

A qualitative design case study method utilising a semi-structured questionnaire was used for this research. It allows researchers to gain quality meanings of the unique contents constructed by each individual. An in-depth interview using a list of questions as a guide was conducted to extract crucial information from informants (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). A life-story approach attained by narration from the individual contributed information to the research in regards to gaining insights and in-depth grasp of the topic (Pang, 2018).

## Participants

Ten (10) informants were recruited initially across peninsular Malaysia using purposive sampling and snowball strategy to collect applicable information needed to conduct the study (Palinkas et al., 2013). The recruitment of informants was stopped when the point of data saturation was reached during the recruitment and data collection process. The six (6) inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. married a Muslim in Malaysia and is a Muslim convert
2. aged 21 years and above
3. have at least one child who is aged 12 years and above
4. able to speak and correspond in basic English
5. a Malaysian or a Permanent Resident of Malaysia (through marrying a Malaysian)
6. successfully managed to overcome challenges from the conversion process

All informants were given a pseudonym for confidentiality and safety purpose. The demographic data of informants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Informants demographic information

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Previous religion</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>
Iago	Male	Catholic	Eurasian	51
Naomi	Female	Buddhist	Chinese	55
Sierra	Female	Catholic	Filipino	51
Salvatore	Male	Catholic	Chinese	52
Lucia	Female	Buddhist	Chinese	65
Natalia	Female	Buddhist	Chinese	40
Daniella	Female	Taoist	Chinese	55

## PROCEDURE

After gaining approval from the International Medical University Joint Committee on research and ethics board, informants were recruited through posts on social media platforms. They were further screened by a short phone call to ensure they fit the inclusion criteria. Informed consent and demographic information were obtained from the informants, followed by a briefing on the objective of the study. A token of appreciation was given at the end of the session, together with a list of Muslim support hotlines. A second follow-up session was conducted to clarify quotes given during the first session.

### Data collection method

Face-to-face or online semi-structured interviews were conducted on seven informants. All sessions were recorded using an audio recorder with permission from informants. Information gathered was then compiled for transcription and analysis purposes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, a thematic analysis of the data collected was conducted. The final report was produced following six important steps once data saturation was reached (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

1. Researcher self-familiarised with the data collected.
2. Generation of initial codes across the entire data set.
3. Searching and identifying for potential themes.
4. Reviewing and refining the themes identified.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Final analysis and production of the report.

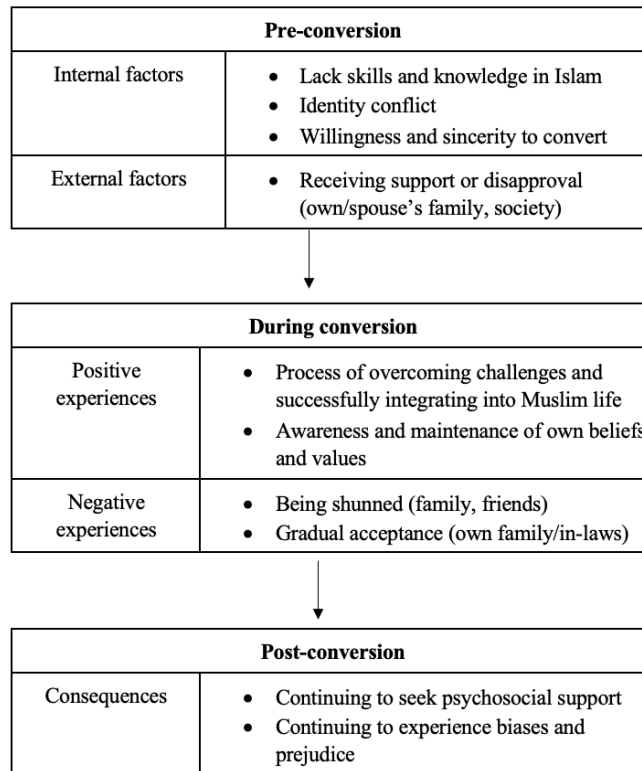
To establish the trustworthiness of data, member checks were conducted by presenting transcribed data to the respective informants, ensuring the accuracy of the data. Furthermore, triangulation was applied by doing a continuous comparison of experiences and perspectives from the data until the consistency was achieved. Bracketing methods were used by having constant reflection under the guidance of a supervisor, preventing personal bias and assuring the validity of the data. The identified personal biases identified from the researchers were: (i) The researchers had different beliefs from the informants; (ii) The researchers were from different races and religions from the informants.

**Ethical considerations**

To ensure participants’ well-being, informants were provided with a secure and comfortable environment to share their experiences. Short breaks were given when needed. To ensure researchers’ well-being, researchers needed to be aware of their beliefs at all times as information shared by informants during an interview could cause discomfort. Likewise, a short pause of the session was taken by the researchers to readjust back into a neutral emotional state as necessary.

**FINDINGS**

Figure 2 summarises the ten themes that emerged in this study, explaining the experiences of converts during pre-conversion, conversion and post-conversion processes. Each stage was crucial for the subsequent themes of the next stage to be achieved.



**Figure 2:** Experiences of converts during pre-conversion, conversion and post-conversion process

**Pre-conversion Stage:**

(i) Lack of skills and knowledge in Islam.

Most informants mentioned that they lacked skills and knowledge in Islam such as speaking in Malay and praying five times daily, resulting in their hesitation to convert. Informants found it difficult in adjusting from their pre-conversion lifestyle to an Islamic lifestyle.

*“Because as a Muslim, need to know all these things... need to learn to ‘sembahyang’ (pray), must learn everything. Because I am Chinese previously, a lot of rules I don’t know.”*

(Naomi/Female/Line 5-8)

*“It was difficult to me (to convert into Islam) because I did not learn the in-depth of Islam.” (Lucia/Female/Line 86-87)*

(ii) Identity conflict.

During the decision-making process, a few informants shared they might not be able to cope with the new religion and this would cause them to lose their identity.

*“If I convert (to Islam), I need continue. If I give up halfway, (I am) neither Chinese nor Muslim, I will become no one.” (Naomi/Female/Line 191-193)*

Informants also mentioned that the idea of reverting to their previous religion would cease if their decision would affect their children’s future.

*“Will my kids in the future question me if I were to revert to my previous religion? How should I respond to them?” (Sierra/Female/Line 595-597)*

(iii) Willingness and sincerity to convert.

Informants highlighted that their willingness and sincerity to convert was a determining factor of their willingness to practise the Islamic religion.

*“Everything comes from the heart. My children now follow exactly the Islamic things without questioning me.” (Lucia/Female/Line 261-262)*

A few informants also pointed out the differences between individuals who were ‘born Muslim’ and individuals who chose to become Muslim. This was particularly true when it came to certain acts and practices.

*“My mom asked, ‘Why do I need to follow when other Muslims did not follow?’ I said, ‘They have no choice, they were born-to-be Muslim, I have a choice, so I must follow’.” (Lucia/Female/Line 255-260)*

Moreover, informants commented on Malaysia’s Islamic Family Law, because a non-Muslim must convert to Islam if they wanted to marry a Muslim partner.

*“Ninety percent (of the reason for converting) is because of the legal requirement. But I must be willing, (as) you have to change everything about your lifestyle.” (Iago/Male/Line 57-59)*

(iv) Receiving support or disapproval (own/spouse’s family, society).

Support from the converts and spouses’ families had a great impact on an individual’s journey in converting to Islam.

*“My mom and my husband’s side are against this relationship. They wanted their son to marry a ‘pure Muslim’ (a Muslim since birth).” (Daniella/Female/Line 3-14)*

Some informants received full support from their own family and in-laws which encouraged them to convert to Islam quicker as compared to those who strongly opposed the conversion.

*“The parents were quite ok, the only ‘syarat’(requirement) was to convert. My late in-laws told us, ‘As long you both are happy and making the right decision, then we support you.’” (Iago/Male/Line 160-163)*

All informants sought approval from their families before making the important decision to convert.

*“I don’t really care what outsiders think of me. As long my family is OK, then I will go with it (converting to Islam).” (Sierra/Female/Line 258-259, 282-284)*

### **During Conversion Stage**

(i) Process of overcoming challenges and successfully integrating into Muslim life.

All informants found various ways to manage and solve any issues they faced during the conversion process.

*"I was assigned to the religious officer ('Ustaz') in the army, in case I have any questions, I will go to him."* (Iago/Male/Line 84-86)

*"If I have any sensitive point of view that I do not dare to refer to a normal 'Ustaz', my husband become my 'Ustaz'."* (Lucia/Female/Line 159-163)

Most informants would go to their closest friends, sharing emotions and issues with them.

*"When it comes to other aspects of life, I shared all my things with my close friends... they are non-Muslim but they are open-minded."* (Lucia/Female/Line 163-164)

A few informants went to their Muslim friends for help.

*"I am not ashamed to learn new things, I hang out with people (other Muslims) to learn the religion. I also learn how to speak better in 'Melayu' (Malay language)."* (Naomi/Female/Line 290-291)

Informants bought books or watched videos from the Internet to enhance their understanding of Islamic history and knowledge.

*"I do reading, Al-Quran in English version."* (Sierra/Female/Line 155-157)

*"I go to YouTube and see how those people convert to Islam and get through the whole process."* (Salvatore/Male/Line 398-399)

One participant successfully integrated into Muslim life by using Islamic teachings to find inner peace when he faced problems in life or issues related to Islam.

*"There were challenging times where I needed religion most when I have things disturbing my emotions, and this new religion (Islam) had helped me find peace."* (Salvatore/Male/Line 39-41)

(ii) Awareness and maintenance of own beliefs and values.

Informants were aware of their previous beliefs and values and integrated meaningful cultural aspects from their previous religion into their current Muslim lifestyle.

*"I don't totally agree with Islam saying that we shouldn't celebrate Christmas. We live in a multiracial country. I just go back and celebrate, the most important is family togetherness."* (Lucia/Female/Line 61-67)

Most converts had a clear stand regarding their race and religion. They explained the differences between the race they had and the religion they adopted.

*"I told my mother I changed religion but still same race. Talking about race, I am Chinese, on religion, I am a Muslim."* (Lucia/Female/Line 92-93)

Informants also shared the assumptions that locals had, such as expecting Chinese to be Buddhists, Malays to be Muslims, and Indians to be Hindu.

*"My mother got upset when she saw me in hijab. Because she identified it as Melayu (Malay race)."* (Lucia/Female/Line 109)

(iii) Being shunned (by family, friends).

Those in the convert's sphere who were not supportive of the conversion avoided having interaction with the converts. They treated the converts as betrayers to their family ancestry, and this was particularly more so for Chinese families.

*“My mother was reluctant to go out with me because I was wearing hijab, she was malu (felt disgraceful).” (Lucia/Female/Line 81-83)*

*“My friends who were not Muslims distanced themselves away from me when I converted to Islam.” (Natalia/Female/Line 26-27)*

(iv) Gradual acceptance (my family/in-laws).

Acceptance from family members increased when converts tried to communicate with them. From the converts' family side, gradual acceptance started when they realised their future Muslim son or daughter-in-law treated their child well. Muslim partners who accepted their partner's family culture aids in the acceptance of the convert's family over time. Most families accepted their child's decisions because they wanted them to be happy.

*“My mother had problems on inter-religious issues but not interracial... but now we are alright. My sister and my wife are like sisters now, she realised how nice is my wife” (Iago/Male/Line 167-170, 184-185)*

From the in-laws' side, acceptance started when the converts were willing to practice Islam and live like a real Muslim.

*“They told me I was not a real Muslim last time when I converted, but I become one now. They slowly accepted me.” (Daniella/Female/Line 60-62)*

Acceptance from both sides of the family increased if there was a birth of a child.

*“My father realised my husband is a good man over time, and I gave him a grandchild, so he changed (accepted her husband).” (Sierra/Female/Line 49-50)*

### **Post Conversion Stage**

(i) Continuing to seek psychosocial support.

Individuals developed the habit of seeking support after realising the importance of having psychosocial support.

*“Whenever I am going through a tough time, I will seek support from my friends in the same university.” (Natalia/Female/Line 26-27)*

*“When you keep your problems for a long time, it will be (like a) bomb, it will burst. So now my kids grew up, I will share with my kids.” (Daniella/Female/Line 130-132)*

One participant signed up for online courses to gain more knowledge of the Islamic religion.

*“I attended ‘Kelas Mengaji’ (reciting classes for Al-Quran) from YouTube.” (Daniella/Female/ Line 283)*

A few informants mentioned they sought support from friends who were in a similar situation because they could relate and empathize with them.

*“I go to my friends who are the same as me. We share both sympathy and empathy.” (Sierra/Female/Line 203-205)*

(ii) Continuing to experience biases and prejudice.

Some female converts were questioned on their attire and were treated differently by the public.

*“I was criticized, I was questioned for why wearing hijab. Is it because of fashion? And it hurts me.” (Sierra/Female/Line 98-99)*

*“They (the aunties) treated me differently, discriminate against me when they know I converted.” (Naomi/Female/Line 333)*



One participant mentioned her father-in-law was still slowly accepting her. He had no problem with the convert's personality but does mind that she has Chinese lineage.

*"My father-in-law tell others (his friends) that I am not a pure Muslim and he told my husband to educate me more on Islam things because I am a convert..... even though I am following all the rituals."*(Daniella/Female/Line 213-214)

One convert mentioned Muslims have a negative image of non-Muslims particularly in regards to the Chinese due to political issues. Therefore, Chinese converts tend to be discriminated against by the Muslim community.

*"Because of the political issues in Malaysia... they can live with Chinese people, but if the Chinese were to go into their family, they will feel threatened."*  
(Daniella/Female/Line 42-44)

## DISCUSSION

This study focused on the experience of Muslim converts in Malaysia and how they managed to overcome the challenges of their conversion process. In comparison to findings from previous studies, a similar yet different experience was derived from the informants which are discussed in the following section. The key difference of this study compared to the previous, is that the emerged themes are surrounded by Malaysian context, which will be further discussed in the following sections.

### Pre-conversion stage

(i) Lack of skills and knowledge in Islam.

Informants were unsure whether to convert to Islam due to having limited knowledge of the Islamic religion. Most Malaysians are not familiar with other religions in Malaysia (Ushama and Moten, 2006). Non-Muslims acquire most of their Islamic knowledge from social media. Although there is Islamic literature written in Malaysia, misunderstanding from the readers, likely due to having limited prior knowledge as well as being unfamiliar with the Malay language could lead to an increasing relationship gap between Muslims and non-Muslims (Ushama & Moten, 2006).

Moreover, Malaysia's Islamic Law has made it compulsory for all Malaysian Muslims to attend the Integrated Module for Premarital Course (IMPC) before their marriage (Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department; Hasan, personal communication, 2013, Salleh, personal communication, 2012 as cited by Saidon, Ishak, Alias, Ismail & Aris, 2016). Unfortunately, due to a lack of enforcement to attend this course, most Muslims may not be aware of this programme. There are some individuals who were aware but chose not to attend because there were no penalties involved in skipping the course (Saidon et al., 2016). Relating to this study, informants shared that the government did not request them to attend a premarital course before marriage. They were only aware of courses offered by non-governmental organisations in which they needed to pay for such courses.

Since Malaysia is an Islamic country, the government founded PERKIM (Islamic Welfare Organisation of Malaysia), in the hope that citizens would have a better understanding of the Islamic religion (Ma, 2005). However, most non-Muslims would not take part in activities organised by PERKIM, because they were afraid to be judged by the public (Ma, 2005), further compounding the lack of knowledge of Islam.

(ii) Identity conflict.

In a collectivistic country such as Malaysia, conversion to another religion is one of the most stressful events, especially for those who are Chinese. Chinese culture emphasizes greatly respecting one's ancestors, as well as inheriting and passing on the culture (Yee, Elias & Ghani, 2019). As a result, individuals who intend to convert to Islam may face doubts about their identity, as to being Chinese and Muslim at the same time. Another article in the Malaysian context stated that the Chinese emphasized greatly on passing down family lines ('香火' in Chinese) and identities from their ancestors, which is too significant for a Chinese to surrender (Lam, 2005).

(iii) Willingness and sincerity to convert.

Informants mentioned that a person's willingness and sincerity to the conversion was crucial. An article by Kassim, Abdullah and Baba (2013) states that purposeful conversion only occurs via physical acceptance such as wearing a 'hijab' (a scarf that covers the Muslim women's hair and neck). Assuming that an individual is keen to

accept challenges to face adversities, the process of learning and the amount of effort that an individual would expend would increase (Yee, Elias & Ghani, 2019).

From the legal perspective, Islamic conversion is personal and can be done anytime by simply declaring '*kalimah shahadah*' (The Muslim testimony of faith) (Kassim, Abdullah & Baba, 2013). Therefore, converts must have a strong affinity from their inner conscience for true conversion to happen, in becoming a '*mu min*' (true believer) rather than just identifying themselves as Muslim with written documents as proof (Kassim, Abdullah & Baba, 2013).

### **During Conversion Stage**

(i) Receiving support or disapproval (from own/spouse's family, society).

Family support or hostility served to be among the main factors affecting an individual's decision-making process (Lam, 2005). It serves as an essential key where individuals could reconcile the dissonance between their ethnicity and religious identity to gain support from their family. Pue and Sulaiman (2013) found that issues arose when inter-ethnic couples declared their intention to marry a partner from a different ethnicity. For inter-ethnic marriages that involve one partner undergoing a religious conversion, their families would normally go against the marriage compared to those who are not undergoing a religious conversion. A possible explanation would be that parents were unwilling to see their children face hardships after converting to Islam (Pue & Sulaiman, 2013).

In a collectivist society like Malaysia, parents were regarded as major players in the family. For Chinese families, making decisions without seeking consent from parents would be considered disrespectful. Therefore, individuals needed to inform their parents of any big decision they made beforehand, regardless of their age and status in the family (Sumari, Baharudin, Md Khalid, Ibrahim & Ahmed Tharbe, 2019). This phenomenon can be seen when informants would seek consent from both their own and future families before getting married.

(ii) Overcoming challenges and successfully integrating into Muslim life.

Most informants mentioned putting in effort when they were trying to practise and adapt to Islam. They wanted to be fully accepted by Muslims as well as their community. Each participant expressed their unique way of overcoming these challenges.

According to Ma (2005), new converts would realize that they needed to internalize a new way of living as a Muslim, by starting to learn and accept the religion for better assimilation with other Muslims. However, possible misunderstandings and anxieties are likely to be developed between converts and society (Sintang et al., 2013). Therefore, the practice of being tolerant is essential to form mutual respect and to maintain harmony between both parties (Sintang et al., 2013).

An interesting fact would be the informants' tendency in choosing friends with whom they trusted and could share similar experiences. Friendships that include trust can link two individuals, creating greater emotional intensity (Silver, 1989). Friends who trust one another are always deemed as an ideal selection to convey and express their inner feelings without being scared of being betrayed. The elements of 'trust' and 'similarities' can serve as a bonus to maximise the sympathies and empathies between both parties (Silver, 1989).

(iii) Awareness and maintenance of beliefs and values.

The main reason for informants to retain their beliefs and values, in particular, their ethnicity is because they did not wish their family to have a perception that they were going to betray or abandon them. Apart from family issues, informants believed that it was acceptable to keep the good values from their previous religion (e.g. filial piety), as long as it did not interfere with the teachings of Islam.

Another issue to point out is the assumption of Malays as Muslims. This can be related to labelling theory, to further grasp the fundamental scenario among Malays in Malaysia. Although 'labelling' will help in enhancing one's identity (Shaharuddin, Usman & Marlon, 2016), nevertheless, although one can change their religion, they cannot change their race and this is where the internal struggle to maintain one's identity arises.

In a study by Shaharuddin, Usman and Marlon (2016), they found that most '*muallaf*' (converts) have a relatively good understanding of the Malay cultural community while still maintaining cultural integration between their previous and current religion in Malaysia. By converting to Islam, the converts' identity will now slide more towards Islamic characteristics. However, many Chinese converts decide to conserve aspects of their Chinese heritage, such as speaking Mandarin and other dialects (Ma, 2005).

(iv) Being shunned (by family, friends)

Other than the racial element, Muslim families had greater concern for the religious ‘impurity’ of the converts. They would likely be looked down upon or avoided by the Muslim community due to this issue (Ma, 2005). The reason for this is because they assume that the converts did non-halal things before converting, such as consuming alcoholic drinks and gambling. There are also Malays who are suspicious of the converts’ real agenda on their conversion. The Malays believed that they converted because of the ‘Bumiputera’ (natives) benefits given by the government (Ma, 2005). Additionally, new converts are usually not entirely accepted by the Muslim community unless they fully internalise themselves into the Malay Muslim lifestyle (Yee, Elias & Ghani, 2019).

It was tough on some converts’ families, as their child had embraced Islam and became a ‘Malay’ (Ma, 2005). The sense of betrayal to the family race and religion intensified their emotions, further leading to the thought that they had lost a family line (‘香火’ in Chinese) forever. Often, the projected feelings of the convert’s family cause converts to have thoughts of bringing shame to the family, decreasing the self-esteem of the converts (Ma, 2005; Demo, Small & Savin-Williams, 1987).

(v) Gradual acceptance (own family/ in-laws).

Most families accepted the convert, using getting to know more about their partner or with the birth of a child. This can be further justified through research done by Sintang and Hambali (2018), explaining the inter-religious dimension converts may face with their non-Muslim family, starting from a strained relationship to accommodative, followed by neutral and finally, to a supportive relationship.

Whereas from the in-laws’ side, the Muslim family will start to accept the converts gradually if they are willing to practise Islam and adopt an Islamic lifestyle just like them (Ma, 2005). Most Malays in Malaysia prefer other Muslims, including the converts, to live within the same cultural bounds as them. This is because Malays perceive themselves to be integrated and had fully combined with the Islamic religion, therefore, most Muslims in Malaysia identified themselves as Malay (Ma, 2005).

### Post-Conversion Stage

(i) Continue to seek psychosocial support.

After the conversion process, informants are still seeking psychosocial support from their family, friends, and the Muslim community. Research has shown that human beings will attempt to attain psychosocial requirements to cultivate their well-being (Majid, Shaharuddin, Usman & Sungit, 2016). Among the needs that a human being requires includes reaching internal satisfaction within their religious affairs.

Converts in Malaysia will try to socialize with other Muslims to gain more information about Islam (Awang and Hambali, 2014). A link between an individual the religion is then developed, known as the ‘dialogue of life’. It is regarded as one of the motivations for converts to delve more into Islam and hence, increase their religious confidence. The dialogue of life within the Malaysian context includes elements of socializing with the surrounding Malay Muslim community and taking up self-facilitated readings (Awang & Hambali, 2014).

(ii) Continue to experience biases and prejudices.

Most informants still face biases and prejudice from the public despite having successfully integrated into the Islamic lifestyle. The appearance of converts seems to be one leading factor. It can be explained through findings by Ushama and Moten (2006) because one-fourth of the non-Muslim samples in Malaysia still hold negative opinions about Malays and Muslims. This can be due to the political issues happening in Malaysia. There are also non-Muslims who criticise Islam, taking into account that all Muslims and Malays are the same when it comes to political affairs (Ushama & Moten, 2006).

Some Muslims do not think of a Chinese as being a Muslim. They instead assume the Chinese Muslim to be adopted by a Malay family when they were a baby (Ma, 2005). From the Malay context, a Malay who has Chinese ancestry is something that is not allowed and is seen as a disgrace in the Muslim community (Ma, 2005). Cohen (1975:x-xii) mentioned that an individual’s cultural identity is formed based on noticeable symbols of culture used to identify the culture (Meng, 2011). Therefore, Malay Muslims usually use attire such as ‘*hijab*’ (scarf) and ‘*songkok*’ (hat for Muslim males) to enhance their Muslim identity (Meng, 2011). However, for a Chinese convert to wear the ‘*hijab*’, they are regarded as ‘*masuk Melayu*’ (acquisition of elements of Malay culture, Islamic religion and the Malay language), hence, the ‘Chinese identity of them vanishes as their attire changes drastically (Pue & Sulaiman, 2013).

### LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

This study only involved informants from the peninsular, or West Malaysia, thus the findings are cannot be generalised as people from East Malaysia may have different experiences and cultures. The findings of this research are also mostly from one race - the Chinese race. There exist challenges in getting more informants due to the sensitivity of the research topic. Lastly, due to the language barrier, even though informants recruited may have rich experience in their conversion process, they face difficulties in articulating and expressing themselves in English. Some explicit terms used in Malay or Mandarin can serve different meanings when the informants convey them in English.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The ten themes that emerged in this study summarizes the experiences of the converts during their pre-conversion, during conversion and post-conversion processes. It is hoped that this study can provide deeper insight to the public and new Muslim converts, helping converts to identify and prepare for the challenges that they might face, especially after their conversion. New findings include converts still facing biases and prejudice from society despite having successfully integrated into being a Muslim. However, most of the converts did not dwell on negative comments. They developed significantly higher tolerance after their conversion. They successfully integrated their previous cultures with support from their Muslim spouses. This can be further discussed from the multiracial aspects in Malaysia. The cultures from the three main races (Malay, Chinese and Indian) are much assimilated into the new 'Malaysian culture', practised by the locals throughout Malaysia. An example of this would be in food such as 'Nasi Lemak' (coconut milk rice), a traditional Malay dish that is now popular with all the races in Malaysia and is now symbolised as the 'national dish of Malaysia'. Hence, despite the spiciness of the dish, it is the integration of all the unique flavours that blend to make this a uniquely Malaysian dish that best symbolises the challenges and the journey of the conversion process to lend support for converts for adapting to their new religion.

Future studies could be conducted by including more diverse Muslim converts from different races. By doing this, the interaction among race, culture and religion may be more deeply explored as it is a complex and sensitive topic that has historical, social and political implications. For example, future studies could explore how religion and culture are closely intertwined in Malaysia and how one's race or ethnicity may influence their relationship with religion.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this study.

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