Conviction or convenience? conversion to Islam in the West, Korea, and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The phenomenon of religious conversion to Islam has grown steadily across various societies. However, whilst much attention has focused on the personal and spiritual dimensions of conversion, less has been said about the divergence between converts of conviction (those who embrace Islam owing to deeply held personal beliefs) and converts of convenience (those who convert due to external pressures and strategic interests, or to enter into a marriage with an existing Muslim). This paper examines the complex motivations behind conversion to Islam, particularly in Western, Korean, and Southeast Asian contexts. It proposes a theoretical framework to distinguish between faith-driven and circumstantially driven conversions. More explicitly, the study aims to: (a) map the range of motivations shaping conversion; (b) analyse how both converts and born-Muslims interpret sincerity, intention, and authenticity; and (c) evaluate the social, ethical, and theological implications of convenience-based conversions. Whilst acknowledging the difficulty of placing individuals into the categories of 'conviction' or 'convenience,' intention remains a central element of the Islamic tradition. This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach based on unstructured interviews with converts and born-Muslims, seeking to deepen understanding of the diverse trajectories of conversion, the influence of socio-political forces on religious identity, and the responsibilities of Muslim communities in engaging with both sincere and nominal converts. The findings indicate that although both conviction and convenience exist, extensive grey

areas persist, particularly regarding 'cultural Islam' and the performance of rituals shaped more by personal habit or social custom than by deep religious commitment.

Fenomena konversi agama ke Islam terus meningkat di berbagai masyarakat. Namun, meskipun banyak kajian menyoroti dimensi personal dan spiritual dari konversi, perhatian terhadap perbedaan antara mualaf karena keyakinan (mereka yang memeluk Islam berdasarkan kepercayaan pribadi yang mendalam) dan mualaf karena kepentingan (mereka yang berpindah agama karena tekanan eksternal, kepentingan strategis, keuntungan sosial atau finansial, atau untuk memasuki pernikahan dengan seorang Muslim) masih relatif terbatas. Artikel ini mengkaji kompleksitas motivasi di balik konversi ke Islam, khususnya dalam konteks Barat, Korea, dan Asia Tenggara, serta mengajukan sebuah kerangka teoretis untuk membedakan antara konversi yang didorong oleh iman dan konversi yang bersifat situasional atau pragmatis. Secara lebih rinci, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk: (a) memetakan ragam motivasi yang membentuk proses konversi; (b) menganalisis bagaimana para mualaf dan Muslim sejak lahir menafsirkan ketulusan, niat, dan autentisitas; serta (c) mengevaluasi implikasi sosial, etis, dan teologis dari konversi berbasis kepentingan, termasuk konversi yang memungkinkan terjadinya pernikahan lintas iman. Dengan mengakui sulitnya mengklasifikasikan individu secara tegas ke dalam kategori "keyakinan" atau "kepentingan", konsep niat (*niyyah*) tetap dipandang sebagai elemen sentral dalam tradisi Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif berbasis wawancara tidak terstruktur dengan para mualaf dan Muslim sejak lahir, untuk memperdalam pemahaman tentang beragam lintasan konversi, pengaruh faktor sosio-politik terhadap identitas keagamaan, serta tanggung jawab komunitas Muslim dalam berinteraksi dengan mualaf yang tulus maupun yang bersifat nominal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun konversi berbasis keyakinan dan kepentingan sama-sama ada, wilayah abu-abu tetap luas, terutama terkait dengan fenomena "Islam kultural" dan praktik ritual yang lebih dibentuk oleh kebiasaan personal atau adat sosial daripada oleh komitmen religius yang mendalam.

Keywords: *Conversion to Islam, Faith, Intention, Conviction, Convenience.*

Introduction

Religious conversion has long been a subject of fascination, debate, and controversy, drawing responses from academics, theologians, policy-makers, and the public alike. Put simply, anyone can be or become a Muslim, regardless of class, colour, employment status, educational background, ethnicity, nationality, wealth, or other identifiers. Within the Islamic tradition, conversion (or reversion, as some in the Malay-Indonesian world prefer: *mu'allaf*) is understood as a profound act, representing a return to the natural state (*fitrah*) and an explicit submission to God's will. By pronouncing the *shahada* (Islamic creed), namely by uttering *ashhad an la ilaha illallah wa ashhad anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah* (I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah), one formally enters the religion of Islam. This declaration typically marks a pivotal shift in belief and identity, often producing visible changes in lifestyle, diet, behavior, and worldview. However, alongside the spiritual and ceremonial grandeur of conversion (Oestergaard, 2009), a nuanced and sometimes contentious reality exists: not all who enter the fold of Islam do so with the same intentions (*niyyah*), convictions, or motivations. With conversion numbers increasing across several jurisdictions, it is timely to examine the motivations underpinning this phenomenon (Martinot & Ozalp, 2020).

Becoming Muslim entails joining both the global 'Muslim Ummah' and an ethical-religious tradition that extends beyond doctrine. It influences moral decision-making, community participation, daily practice, and social role. Religiosity in Islam is seen to have real-world and spiritual consequences, shaping personal conduct, communal relations, and one's broader socio-economic environment.

In recent years, conversions to Islam have risen steadily across diverse regions. This is evident in Western nations, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, as well as in Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia and Malaysia (Abidin, 2022; Pambek et al., 2024; Pranoto, 2021). Islam

is also gaining traction in Korea and Japan despite social resistance and cases of persistent Islamophobia (Allison, 2023; Razaq, 2023). While such growth is sometimes framed in celebratory terms (highlighting Islam's universality and appeal), it also calls for deeper reflection. Why do people convert to Islam? What distinguishes a conviction-based conversion from one driven by convenience, necessity, or broader socio-political factors? To what extent do such motivations shape a convert's legitimacy or standing within Muslim communities, and within Islam more broadly?

This study focuses on the distinction between Muslims of conviction and Muslims of convenience. The former category refers to individuals who adopt Islam based on sincere belief, spiritual resonance, or theological conviction. The latter encompasses those who enter Islam primarily for non-doctrinal reasons, such as marital requirements, legal advantage, immigration status, commercial opportunity, or assimilation into Muslim-majority contexts. Although the term "convenience" might be interpreted negatively, it is employed here analytically and without judgment to denote pragmatic rather than spiritual motivations.

It is necessary to acknowledge that this binary is intentionally reductive. Human motivations are seldom linear or binary; rather, they operate across a fluid spectrum. A person who initially converts for pragmatic or social reasons may later become genuinely committed to Islamic belief and practice. Conversely, someone who appears sincere at first may shift towards ritualistic behavior without deeper conviction. Some born Muslims may themselves be seen as 'cultural Muslims', practising to sustain identity rather than belief (Yilmaz, 2014). Nevertheless, this imperfect framework offers a useful lens for analysis and helps structure the theological, sociological, and ethical questions surrounding conversion to Islam in the contemporary context.

The implications of conversion extend beyond private belief. In Western settings, converts often face challenges of alienation, cultural dislocation, and racialisation, requiring a re-evaluation of identity in relation to both the new

religious community and the broader societal context (Younis & Hassan, 2017). A convert of conviction may struggle for acceptance within tightly knit ethnic-based Muslim groups (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, or Arab communities), while a convert of convenience may be initially welcomed (particularly in marriage contexts) yet later face disillusionment or exclusion. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, conversion can provide socio-political belonging, legal recognition, media visibility, and even commercial opportunities (Jones, 2021; Salim & Othman, 2025). Budiawan (2020) notes the rise of "infotainment conversions", where celebrities or influencers gain visibility through becoming Muslim, prompting questions about whether celebrity conversion is driven by religious sincerity, algorithmic advantage, or both.

Likewise, in countries such as Malaysia, Islam is constitutionally privileged, giving Muslims certain legal and social rights. In Singapore, access to Syariah courts and certain family-law provisions is contingent on one's religious status. The Philippines has a similar framework, where only Muslims may access most divorce proceedings (other groups can only annul their marriages). In such contexts, conversion may bring tangible benefits; however, questions of authenticity and sincerity persist beneath formal religious categorisation.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore and critically examine the motivations and implications of conversion to Islam, particularly in relation to the conviction/convenience distinction. This was achieved through qualitative methods; unstructured interviews with both converts and born Muslims across Western, Korean, and Southeast Asian settings, as well as documentary analysis and case studies. The aim is to reveal how converts themselves understand their journeys into Islam and how existing Muslim communities perceive and categorise such individuals. The study also brings these findings into conversation with Islamic theological perspectives on intention, sincerity, and authenticity in conversion.

A further aim is to foster reflective engagement within existing Muslim communities regarding their treatment of converts. Too often, converts are idealised as spiritual trophies, objectified as potential spouses, or treated with suspicion as impostors. Such responses undermine sincerity and make integration more difficult. This research proposes that communities should avoid both romanticisation and cynicism, instead adopting a more nuanced and principled approach, rooted in prophetic ethics, that balances discernment with mercy, and orthodoxy with empathy. Judgement may at times be necessary, but should not override compassion, hospitality, or the opportunity to learn from new voices entering the faith or to teach converts about the faith.

In doing so, this study contributes to a wider discourse on religious identity, sincerity, and belonging in an increasingly interconnected and culturally anxious world. In an age shaped by migration, online media, economic precarity, and shifting moral paradigms, religious affiliation often intersects with ethnicity, legal status, social capital, and identity performance. These intersections complicate any straightforward assessment of "true" conviction. By placing empirical testimony alongside Islamic theological principles, this study offers a clearer lens through which to understand diverse and sometimes contradictory pathways to Islam, and the lived realities behind the declaration: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger."

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach to examine the nuanced and deeply personal motivations behind conversion to Islam, with particular attention to conversions arising from conviction and those driven by convenience or pragmatic necessity. The interpretivist orientation is appropriate because participants' experiences, perceptions, and accounts of intention are best understood through their own narratives and meaning-making practices. Given the subjectivity of religious experience and the centrality of *niyyah* (intention) within Islamic theology, a qualitative design enables rich, in-depth engagement with lived experiences rather than reducing complex trajectories to quantifiable

indicators. This approach aligns with prior scholarship that treats conversion as a socially and emotionally layered process (Zebiri, 2008; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Woodberry, 2011).

The study was informed by existing theoretical and theological frameworks, including Islamic perspectives on niyyah, academic discussions of religious identity and authenticity, and contemporary discourse on Islam in secular and postcolonial contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia and Korea. These perspectives were used to sensitise the analysis while allowing space for emergent themes to arise from the data, consistent with an unstructured, exploratory qualitative design oriented toward understanding why people convert to Islam and how born Muslims interpret the authenticity of conversion.

Data were generated through unstructured interviews with 36 participants. The sample comprised 27 converts to Islam from diverse backgrounds, including the United Kingdom and the United States, South Korea, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, and Singapore (including participants of Chinese ethnic origin). In addition, nine born Muslims were interviewed, primarily from Muslim-majority or Muslim-community contexts in the United Kingdom, the United States, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco, and other Arab contexts, to explore community perceptions of sincerity, authenticity, and legitimacy.

Unstructured interviews were selected to enable participants to narrate ideas, perceptions, and experiences freely in their own words, without being constrained by fixed questionnaires. This was particularly important for capturing the internal and external dynamics of conversion, including motivations, conflicts, spiritual turning points, "journeys to Islam," and social pressures, in a manner that respects the complexity and individualised nature of conversion trajectories. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and informal community connections, including Islamic centres, online platforms, and personal networks. Interviews were conducted in English, which limited the inclusion of individuals and communities where English is not used. Interviews

were conducted both face-to-face and via online modalities, including video calls and online chats.

Interview narratives were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The researcher first familiarised themself with the data through repeated reading of interview notes, then generated initial codes capturing key ideas, motivations, emotional responses, and community interactions. Codes were subsequently clustered into broader themes that reflected both the study's sensitising categories and patterns emerging from the data, including conviction-based conversion, convenience-based conversion, post-conversion experiences, and perceptions of authenticity within born-Muslim communities. Themes were then reviewed for internal coherence and theoretical relevance, refined through iterative definition and naming, and written up by integrating participants' accounts with analytical commentary and relevant scholarly literature.

The analysis combined inductive and deductive logics. While "Muslims of conviction" and "Muslims of convenience" operated as interpretive frames, the analysis remained open to themes that did not fit neatly within binary categorisations, reflecting the spectrum-like nature of religiosity and the possibility of movement across motivational positions over time. In addition, Islamic theological discussions of sincerity, awareness of God, intention, and the hadith principle that "actions are judged by intentions" were employed as interpretive lenses to illuminate how participants narrated the internal dimensions of faith and authenticity.

The study has several limitations. First, reliance on self-reported narratives restricts the extent to which motivations or levels of sincerity can be independently verified, and notions of sincerity are inherently subjective and variable across individuals. Second, while the sample size is adequate for qualitative inquiry, it is not statistically representative and therefore cannot support broad generalisations about Muslim converts globally. Third, researcher

positionality may shape interpretation. For transparency, the researcher is from a Muslim convert family, is a practising Muslim, and self-identifies as a Muslim of conviction. This positionality may be beneficial in facilitating contextual understanding, while also carrying risks of bias; reflexivity was therefore maintained throughout the analytic process.

Motivation for conversion

Every individual is different, so there are potentially as many reasons for conversion as there are converts to Islam. However, key themes can certainly be obtained, illustrated, and understood. In many cultural contexts, conversion to Islam can be extremely beneficial, and even financially lucrative. This is notwithstanding the sincerity of the conversion, and benefits can be obtained by converts of convenience and converts of conscience alike. In Southeast Asia, especially in the Indonesian context, conversion to Islam can open doors to socio-political belonging, legal recognition, social media and online virality and exposure, fame, and even create the potential for huge financial benefits and business opportunities (Jones, 2021; Mudasiru, 2021). Also, in countries like Malaysia, Islam is constitutionally privileged, and becoming a Muslim can bring about social and legal benefits. The same applies to Singapore, where Islam and Muslims are constitutionally and legally protected, and have access to a parallel legal system in personal status, marriage, probate, and inheritance matters through the Sharia Court (known locally as The Syariah Court of Singapore, through the Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966).

Conversion to Islam can be, and is, influenced by a myriad of factors, often categorised into spiritual, intellectual, social, and pragmatic motivations. Kocalan (2022) identifies four primary motivators among Japanese converts, which can be extrapolated across the board. These include: social integration, intellectual curiosity, psychological fulfilment, and pragmatic considerations. Intellectual curiosity and psychological fulfilment likely fall on the side of conversion of

conscience. Conversely, social integration and pragmatic considerations lean towards a conversion of convenience.

Correspondingly, the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST, 2016) outlines that conversions may stem from personal crises, relationships with Muslims, or a search for identity and community. However interesting these ideas are or adept at explaining some motivations for conversion, they are not particularly useful in categorizing conversion as arising out of conviction or convenience.

In Western contexts, converts often cite the egalitarian nature of Islam (with everyone being judged fairly by an impartial God and a lack of doctrinally prescribed and hierarchical priestly order), its emphasis on monotheism, and the sense of discipline it instils as compelling reasons for embracing Islam (CBN, 1990). From a Western standpoint, Islam is the only faith that remains true to its time-honoured values, such as the promotion of traditional family life, awe, love, respect, and worship of the one true God, and remaining robustly enshrined in beliefs against what can be seen as social degeneracy, transgenderism, and homosexuality. The natural proximity of Islam with the fitrah (natural inclinations of mankind) is likely one of the reasons for huge numbers of men from the West converting to Islam, apparently owing to their convictions (Ejjbair, 2023). One of the key pull-factors responsible for many Western men becoming Muslim is due to Islam promoting what they see as true masculinity, where men are valued, fulfil responsibilities and key functions, and act in a chivalrous and benevolent manner. It can be the ultimate rejection of liberal hyper-modern society, where morality is entirely subjective, and is only limited by legislative provisions, which can one day criminalise a certain behaviour, and then legalise the said behaviour and criminalise criticism of such behaviour only a short time thereafter. In summary, Islam is seen as being attractive in the West due to its social, economic, political, emotional, philosophical and logical prowess, with an

unwavering, unchanging, objective, and monolithic moral basis. Thus, converts of conscience from the West are likely to continue to rise.

Conversely, in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, conversions may be influenced by socio-political factors, including marriage, legal benefits, and societal acceptance (Jones, 2021). Especially in situations where relatively wealthy foreign non-Muslim Males seek to marry Muslim females, a marriage cannot take place unless the non-Muslim male converts to Islam (Maloko et al., 2024; Sim, 2010). Musta'in (2022) explored the various problems that the body responsible for registering Muslim marriages (KUA/ Kantor Urusan Agama: under the auspices of the Kementarian Agama/ Ministry of Religious Affairs), and regulating conversion to Islam, regularly had issues with potential converts to Islam because many existing Muslims were sceptical of the motivations of some converts, and the apprehension that numerous converts primarily 'converted' to Islam to effect a marriage contract and enter into a marriage with a Muslim.

In corroboration of this, Aziz and Hakim (2024) performed legal anthropological research into couples where one partner converted to Islam shortly prior to marriage. It was found that all individuals who 'converted' to Islam did so solely for the convenience of it, allowing them to marry a Muslim, and all participants reverted to being non-Muslims after some time, and were clearly converts of convenience. Accordingly, the apprehension that some many take on the status and become nominally Muslim for the sake of convenience is grounded in reality and can be a reasonable apprehension to have in some social, legal, and cultural contexts.

However, there are many instances where this is not the case, as evidenced by a heartwarming story by the National Heritage Board of Singapore (2020). Brice (2015) also illustrates several instances of converts of convenience becoming truly converts of conscience (and being seen as 'pious foreign spouses'). Vroon-Najem (2019) states that a large number of converts to Islam,

who are converts of conscience, robustly criticise 'cultural Muslims' who fail to discharge their religious obligations diligently, and firmly asserts the view that many converts to Islam are more diligent and pious in their religious obligations than born-Muslims. Accordingly, Muslims (both born and converted) sit on every part of the spectrum of religiosity, from being absolutely converts of convenience to enter a marriage, to being faithful and attentive worshippers (far more than most born-Muslims).

Post-conversion experiences

The post-conversion experience that converts undergo can profoundly shape their perception of Islam and Muslims, and can cause them to reassess their faith. Post-conversion experiences vary widely among converts, and are influenced by factors such as ethnicity, cultural context, community acceptance, cultural integration, and personal strength (fortitude and resilience). In Western societies, converts tend to face challenges related to racialisation, cultural dislocation, isolation and skepticism from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike (Younis & Hassan, 2017). The potential lack acceptance of the Muslim community that they are affiliated with (either in reality, or solely according to their own perceptions), and this can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. In the Korean cultural context, similar issues exist to the western context. However, with so few ethnic-Korean Muslims, the isolation can be even more pronounced, and hostility and Islamophobia can be felt more robustly. Within Korea, there are so few Muslims and mosques, and availability of halal food is extremely limited, hence converts of conscience must make even more of an effort to join in with the local Muslim communities (Allison, 2023).

In Southeast Asia, converts may experience both opportunities and challenges. While conversion can facilitate social integration and access to certain privileges, it may also subject individuals to scrutiny regarding the authenticity of

their faith, especially when conversions are perceived as strategic (such as to provide access to business ventures), opportunistic, or to enter into a marriage.

The role of education

Education inherently has exceptional importance when it comes to religion and faith, for converts and born Muslims alike. Islamic education plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of converts, providing them with the knowledge and support necessary to navigate their new faith. Allison (2023; 2024) compares the provision of Islamic education in South Korea and Indonesia, highlighting significant disparities. In Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country, Islamic education is deeply integrated into the national education system, offering structured support for both born Muslims and converts.

This is particularly the case with education provided by the incredibly popular religious schools like the *pesantren* (Indonesian traditional Islamic boarding school) (Hussin et al., 2017). Conversely, in South Korea, Islamic education is limited, often informal, and lacks state support, posing challenges for converts seeking religious knowledge and community integration. This is also the case in some parts of the UK, leaving some converts vulnerable due to their lack of knowledge. Nevertheless, the importance of education cannot be understated. The availability and quality of Islamic education can significantly influence the depth of a convert's understanding and practice of Islam, potentially affecting their classification as a convert of conviction or convenience.

The shadow of cultural Islam

Cultural Islam refers generally to the practice of Islamic rituals and customs driven by cultural norms rather than personal belief and conviction, or sanction by religious law or convention. This phenomenon complicates the understanding of conversion, as individuals may outwardly conform to Islamic practices without internalising the faith's core beliefs. Yilmaz (2014) discusses how cultural

Muslims may engage in religious practices out of habit or social expectation, having seen other Muslims within their cultural context doing so, blurring the lines between genuine belief and cultural conformity.

For converts, navigating cultural Islam can be particularly challenging, as they may struggle to distinguish between religious obligations and cultural customs, impacting their integration and spiritual development. Many cultural customs can be extremely localised and can even be contrary to the tenets of Islam. Good examples of this include superstitions and the realm of some forms of magic. Despite being entirely contradictory to the concept of Tawheed in Islam, many Indian and Pakistani Muslims use charms, bracelets and amulets called 'taweez' (Tahir, et al., 2018). Another example is the belief in the undead potentially roaming the world of the living in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, as exemplified by the belief in ghouls, spectres, and undead individuals like the *pocong* (shrouded ghost), *kuntilanak* (astral female spirit) (Duile, 2020).

The legend of the *kuntilanak*, a woman with long, straight black hair, wearing a long white dress (sometimes red/ stained with blood), who remains vengefully undead owing to her death being occasioned during childbirth, haunts Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, and informs several cultural phenomena and customs devised to protect against her. Whilst such notions of the partially-deceased contradict the mainstream Islamic orthodoxy, they are deeply held concepts by many Muslims in numerous cultural contexts. So deeply rooted is the legend, it has inspired thousands of videos on Youtube, with millions of views, by creators such as "Expose Cisoka" and "AWB Horor Media".

Motivation and thematic patterns

The findings of this study reflect a varied, multifaceted, and deeply human portrayal of conversion to Islam, revealing a prevailing trend toward sincere, conviction-based religious change among participants, whilst also recognising and accepting the existence of conversions rooted in convenience. Access to

'Muslims of convenience' may be limited for several reasons, such as not being known to the community, not holding themselves out to be Muslim, and blending in with wider (non-Muslim) society. Being a 'Muslim of convenience' inherently contains an element of deception, in that they claim to be Muslim, but are not true believers. The overwhelming majority of the 27 convert participants expressed motivations consistent with what this study labels as "Muslims of conviction". Their journeys were often marked by a search for spiritual fulfilment, faith-based clarity, ideals of how life ought to be lived and how they wished society ought to look, and a theological resonance of Islam within their hearts and consciences. Many reported that initial exposure to Islam occurred through Muslim friends, partners, or potential spouses, or through travel to Muslim-majority countries such as Morocco or the UAE. Such encounters, though sometimes appearing superficial, consistently sparked genuine spiritual inquiry and became gateways to deeper engagement, rather than endpoints. The online world also played a key role in shaping their perception of Islam, with even negative portrayals leading participants to fact-check sensationalist or hubristic claims (Omar, Hassan & Sallehuddin, 2015).

These observations align with research by Martinot and Ozalp (2020), who highlight how exposure to Islamic environments often catalyses deeper exploration. Participants frequently mirrored the stages outlined by Pranoto (2021), moving from curiosity toward the synthesis of experience, knowledge, and identity as Muslims. Kocalan's (2022) motivational framework (intellectual, emotional, relational, and circumstantial) was also reflected across many narratives, indicating that social, cultural, and philosophical ideals shaped participants' movement toward Islam. This was particularly the case for men.

A minority (three participants) fell clearly into the category of "Muslims of convenience". Their conversions occurred primarily to satisfy marriage-related requirements. These individuals continued to consume pork or alcohol, sometimes "almost on a secretive basis", but avoided doing so in front of in-laws

or partners out of respect. One participant stated that "it was the only way her parents and family would accept me," emphasising the familial pressures involved when it came to agreeing to marriage. Their narratives reflect findings in Aziz and Hakim (2024) and Sim (2010), who describe conversion as a formal prerequisite for marriage in many contexts. In Indonesia, it is not lawful for a Muslim to marry a non-Muslim; similarly, under s89 of the Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966, the Singapore Registry of Muslim Marriages will not register a marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim and may dissolve a Muslim marriage under s49(1)(g) if one spouse leaves Islam. Consequently, "conversion on paper" was seen by participants as necessary to legally permit the marriage.

Born-Muslim relatives also shaped expectations. One Muslim spouse stated they had hoped for a "soleh bule" spouse but recognised the rarity of realising this. Another stated that their partner needed to be "a good imam [leader] in the relationship," though added that "we can learn together, too," capturing the hope that potentially convenience-based conversions might evolve into conviction. A senior figure at a Korean mosque commented that "in my experience…, the probability that a Korean man converts… and continues to practice it is less than 1%," highlighting how common it is for conversion to serve primarily as a legal or social tool. In these cases, conversion functioned more as a transactional and administrative formality than a transformative spiritual process. One participant reiterated that "It was the only way her parents and family would accept me," summarising the pragmatic necessity behind their action.

Their approach to Islam generally remained symbolic. Many described holding a "certificate of conversion to Islam" or adopting superficial compliance while expressing uncertainty about raising future children. Their wish that children might "choose for themselves" reflects an understanding of religious identity as culturally negotiable rather than fixed. These accounts corroborate Brice (2015) and Musta'in (2022), who identify systemic limitations in assessing

sincerity in marriage-driven conversions. Yet, as participants themselves acknowledged, the possibility of later conviction remains, and even convenience-based beginnings can later become deeply sincere.

Experiential and social processes

Regardless of initial motivations, participants shared similar post-conversion experiences. Many described the often challenging process of mastering salat, learning Arabic words and the motions carried out during salat, and becoming familiar with the minutiae of religious, social and cultural expectations. One participant, after praying with the researcher, asked "why are you counting on your fingers after salat?", not realising the sunnah of making zikr in this manner. This illustrates how subtle religious practices, taken for granted by born Muslims, can be unfamiliar yet pivotal for new Muslims seeking acceptance. Such experiences resonate with the findings of Oestergaard (2009), who examines embodiment and ritualisation in post-conversion identity.

Participants also expressed apprehension about mosque attendance, fear of judgment and uncertainty about communal expectations. Regular attendance, however, helped many overcome such barriers. Male converts voiced anxiety about being expected to lead salat within the household or occasionally at the mosque, despite rarely being asked to do so. The possibility that someone might challenge their understanding, interpretation or ask them to recite something they did not know (such as to read the Qur'an aloud or lead prayers) intensified these anxieties. These challenges align with Younis and Hassan (2017), who highlight identity navigation as central for new Muslims. Islam, with its inherently social nature and the requirement for Friday congregational prayer, meant certain issues had to be directly confronted.

Feelings of alienation were also common. Some worried about being seen as "not Muslim enough," while others appreciated particular religious figures who supported them. Fears about appearing as an outsider (especially in ethnically

homogenous contexts where converts did not share the dominant culture) were reported. This aligns with Yilmaz's (2014) concept of "cultural Muslims," where religiosity is judged through cultural, not theological, lenses. The expectation to conform quickly to visible signs of religiosity (dress codes, prayer routines, mosque attendance) also created stress; however, born Muslims did not generally regard Islamic dress as essential for assessing sincerity in new Muslims.

Despite these challenges, positive experiences were widespread. Participants described profound spiritual clarity, a sense of belonging within the global ummah, and supportive relationships with other Muslims. Many stated that these connections were essential for sustaining their faith during difficult periods. This was particularly noted by converts in the UK, USA and Korea. These findings resonate with Abidin (2022) and Pambek et al. (2024), who highlight the pivotal role of local organisations and convert communities.

The theme of "support versus suspicion" emerged frequently. Some communities welcomed converts warmly; others expressed scepticism about sincerity, especially when the convert was seen only during the conversion process and not thereafter. A faith leader reported witnessing a convert, whose conversion had been conducted to facilitate marriage, later found in an inebriated state. The same convert reportedly phoned a religious figure to renounce Islam during marital conflict. Conversely, a Dutch female convert was described as "far more pious than born Muslims," and a British male convert mocked "cultural Muslims" who engaged in prohibited acts under the guise of culture. These narratives reflect Vroon-Najem's (2019) findings that converts often pursue a "culture-free Islam."

Gendered expectations also influenced experiences. Men feared being asked to lead prayer, even though this seldom occurred. Women described navigating expectations surrounding hijab, childcare and social norms, especially during Ramadan, Eid, funerals and marriages. Warmansyah et al. (2023) highlighted that religious and moral values are primarily imbued in childhood,

which may explain why women with younger children felt more judged by others, owing to their responsibility for their own actions, as well as those of their children. Concerns about circumcision were mentioned, particularly regarding whether it is the sine qua non of being a Muslim man. Many born Muslims and converts believed that adopting "a Muslim name" was necessary, although Islamic law does not require it unless the existing name is inappropriate. Some born Muslims consider names when judging sincerity. One British participant, Luke, did not legally change his name but was affectionately called "Sheikh Lukman", which greatly aided his integration.

Family pressures also shaped conversion timing. Some converted shortly before the marriage ceremonies to meet legal or familial expectations. In Southeast Asia, conversion is required for Muslim marriage (Maloko et al., 2024), reflecting Indonesian Law Number 1 of 1974 Concerning Marriage, consistently upheld by the Constitutional Court. Conversion can be easily completed through shahadah and documentation, without the need for circumcision or name change.

Cultural and religious entanglements were a recurring theme. Many converts struggled to distinguish cultural customs from religious obligations, particularly those unfamiliar with Arabic terms or South Asian or Arab dress styles. This led to feelings of inadequacy or fear of judgment. Born Muslims similarly expressed a desire to practise Islam without cultural accretions. Vroon-Najem (2019) argues that the pursuit of a "culture-free Islam" reflects this shared desire to practise Islam on its theological terms, rather than culturally infused variants.

Interpretive and theoretical implications

The question of intention is central to Islamic theology and to this study. Participants referenced the hadith "Actions are judged by intentions" when reflecting on their motivations, including learning how to observe a halal diet or adopting a more consistent Muslim lifestyle. Several individuals who began their

journey for seemingly superficial reasons, such as dating a Muslim partner, described how this initial exposure led to sincere exploration and eventual conviction. This reveals the complexity of human motivation and supports the interpretivist approach of this research. While the study categorised participants as "Muslims of conviction" or "Muslims of convenience," it also recognises the fluid spectrum between these poles. Religious identity is frequently dynamic and evolving, not a fixed or binary state.

Ejjbair (2023) notes that many Western men convert to Islam due to its structured lifestyle and clear moral framework. Several participants echoed this, describing Islam as providing "a clear and unwavering objective yardstick of both truth and morality", which they found especially appealing amidst perceived societal instability in the West. CBN (1990) and CREST (2016) similarly argue that Islam's emphasis on discipline and morality appeals to those disillusioned by subjective or secular worldviews.

The interaction between culture and religion further illustrates the complexities of Muslim identity formation. Participants frequently struggled to separate cultural expectations from religious doctrine, with misinterpretation leading to feelings of inadequacy. Born-Muslims also expressed frustration with cultural impositions. This demonstrates the difficulty both groups face in pursuing Islam free from cultural interjection.

In summary, the findings indicate that most converts to Islam are sincere in their faith and fall into the category of Muslims of conviction, even when initial motivations included elements of convenience. The journey toward religious identity is complex, continuous, and shaped by theological reflection, community dynamics, and personal growth. A minority were Muslims of convenience, converting primarily as a legal or social requirement; however, their later development may lead to conviction, as religious identity remains fluid. This study contributes to broader literature by positioning conversion as a deeply personal yet socially situated process. The emphasis on intention and the

interplay of identity, authenticity and community offers a robust framework for future research. As Islam continues to grow globally, understanding converts' nuanced experiences is essential for fostering inclusive and supportive Muslim communities.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the difference between Muslims of conviction and Muslims of convenience is not always so clear, despite both certainly existing. Across cultural contexts, it is extremely difficult to neatly categorise individuals, and many conversion stories are complex and change over time. While some may appear to have initially converted for 'convenient' reasons such as marriage or moving to a Muslim country, what begins as a practical decision can develop into sincere faith; as one participant noted, "I thought I was just doing this to marry him, but later, it became something between me and God." These findings reinforce that religiosity sits along a wide spectrum, and that conversion should be understood as a continuous process shaped by theological reflection, community dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and personal growth.

A central implication of these findings is the importance of support and community in sustaining conviction and enabling converts to learn, belong, and grow. Converts who experienced welcoming mosques, understanding spouses, and kind mentors were more likely to integrate and strengthen their practice, whereas those left alone often felt isolated and unsure. At the same time, perceptions of sincerity are frequently clouded by cultural expectations and prior experiences, and the question of what makes someone 'real Muslim' ultimately reaches beyond outward performance to sincerity and intent known fully only to Allah. Accordingly, this study calls for greater care, humility, and principled support in engaging with converts, avoiding both romanticisation and suspicion, so that communities walk beside them with sincerity (*ikhlas*) as they learn, reaffirm faith, and become Muslim over time.

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