

Pre-Conversion Monologues: Tracing the Experiences of Islamic Religious Seeking

Azarudin Awang^{1*}, Azman Che Mat²

¹Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), University Technology MARA (UiTM) Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia

²Academy of Language Studies, University Technology MARA (UiTM) Terengganu Branch, Dungun Campus, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100801033>

Received: 12 September 2026; Accepted: 17 September 2026; Published: 23 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The process of embracing Islam is a journey involving personal experiences, the pursuit of knowledge, the development of understanding, the resolution of questions, the evaluation of doubts, and internal deliberation before an individual decides to accept Islam. Nevertheless, pre-conversion experiences, particularly the internal thought processes that occur prior to conversion, have received limited attention in studies of converts to Islam. Therefore, this study aims to trace the forms and development of pre-conversion monologues among converts throughout their process of seeking and understanding Islam. This qualitative study employed structured interviews with 15 Muslim converts selected from five zones in Malaysia, namely Sabah, Johor, Selangor, Penang, and Kelantan. The interview data were analysed thematically until data saturation was achieved. The findings indicate that the search for Islam develops gradually through several forms of monologue, namely triggers that initiate the search for the meaning of Islam, curiosity, deeper exploration of Islam, and doubts and internal conflicts concerning the religion of origin. Exposure through everyday experiences, such as hearing the call to prayer, observing Muslim prayer practices, interacting with Muslim communities, and reading about the Qur'an, served as initial triggers for questions and curiosity. This process subsequently developed into reading, investigation, information seeking, and evaluation of Islam, while doubts concerning the religion of origin created space for religious comparison and deliberation. This study is significant because it demonstrates that the pre-conversion phase represents an important stage in an individual's journey towards embracing Islam. It also enriches convert studies by examining subjective experiences and internal thought processes prior to conversion.

Keywords: monologue; pre-conversion; converts to Islam; religious seeking; conversion to Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Embracing Islam is not merely a change in religious status but a complex journey encompassing personal experiences, the pursuit of knowledge, the development of understanding, the resolution of questions, the evaluation of doubts, reflection, and internal deliberation before an individual decides to accept Islam. Therefore, the pre-conversion experience is important because this period represents a phase in which individuals begin to encounter religious questions, become acquainted with Islam through interaction and observation, and develop their understanding based on their own experiences and search for knowledge. Nevertheless, pre-conversion experiences have often received less attention than the experiences of individuals after embracing Islam, despite the fact that the internal processes occurring before conversion can provide deeper insights into how individuals construct meaning about Islam and subsequently consider religious change.

This issue becomes particularly interesting when the process is examined through the internal monologues experienced by individuals who are in the pre-conversion phase. Such monologues can reveal the individual's inner voice and thought processes, which may not be fully captured through externally observable actions alone.

Accordingly, this study aims to trace the forms and development of pre-conversion monologues among converts in their process of seeking and understanding Islam, particularly in terms of the factors that trigger their search for a new religion, curiosity, exploration, and understanding, as well as doubts and internal conflicts. Examining pre-conversion monologues can provide deeper insights into the psychological and cognitive dynamics of individuals before embracing Islam, while also illustrating how social experiences, exposure to Islamic teachings, and the pursuit of knowledge contribute to the development of religious understanding and deliberation. The findings of this study may further contribute to a more experience-centred understanding of converts to Islam, while providing insights for *da'wah* practitioners, Islamic guidance institutions, and relevant stakeholders regarding the questions, doubts, and knowledge needs that may be experienced by individuals undergoing the process of seeking Islam before deciding to embrace the religion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Converts to Islam

Converts to Islam refer to individuals who embrace Islam after previously adhering to another religion or belief system. The process of conversion is not merely a change in religious status but also involves a process of adjustment to new understandings, religious practices, and identity within a new social environment. Aliakbar and Rasip (2024) note that converts to Islam commonly encounter various challenges after embracing Islam, including the need for guidance and support in navigating their lives as new members of the Muslim community. Another challenge faced by this community concerns the integration of their previous cultural and social lives with the requirements of Islamic teachings (Rasip et al., 2025). In this regard, Islamic guidance centres serve as important sources of information on the fundamental aspects of Islam that Muslims are expected to observe, including matters related to faith, Islamic law, and morality. These centres also play an important role in helping converts rebuild social integration both within the Muslim community and across communities (Azarudin & Azman, 2024).

The search for Islam among Muslim converts is a process that begins with efforts to acquire knowledge and develop an understanding of the religion. Basir et al. (2024) explain that the conversion experiences of Muslim converts in rural areas of Sarawak are closely associated with the *da'wah* process and life experiences encountered before and during their acceptance of Islam. Developments following conversion further demonstrate that the search for and development of Islamic understanding do not end with the declaration of the *shahadah*. (The declaration made by a person to become a Muslim). Basir et al. (2025) further highlight a process of life transformation across various dimensions of Muslim converts' lives, while Don et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of integrated and continuous *da'wah* education in developing a sound understanding of Islam and supporting converts in becoming committed Muslims. The development of technology has also created opportunities for Muslim converts to access Islamic information and guidance through digital platforms, including digital *da'wah*. Therefore, the search for Islam among Muslim converts can be understood as an ongoing process involving various channels of knowledge acquisition, the development of religious understanding, and the subsequent adjustment of life after embracing Islam.

The Dynamics of the Search for Islam among Muslim Converts

The process of becoming acquainted with Islam among pre converts develops through personal experiences, interactions with Muslim communities, and deeper exploration before individuals eventually decide to embrace Islam. Basir et al. (2024) explain that the search for Islam may emerge through life experiences, interactions with *da'wah* practitioners and Muslim leaders, as well as indirect early exposure to Islamic teachings.

This process does not necessarily begin with a desire to embrace Islam. Rather, it may originate from an experience or exposure that generates curiosity about particular teachings, practices, or values found within Islam. Through such experiences, individuals may develop an initial perception of Islam, which subsequently

motivates them to seek clearer explanations of matters that they previously did not understand. Interactions with Muslim communities, *da'wah* practitioners, and religious leaders also constitute important spaces for exploration because such relationships enable individuals to obtain information directly, raise questions, and evaluate Islam based on the experiences and understanding they acquire. In other words, the greater the opportunities individuals have to interact with and explore Islam, the more space becomes available for them to reassess their initial perceptions and develop a deeper understanding of the religion. This process may eventually transform the way individuals perceive Islam from merely a religion observed from the outside to a belief system understood through their own experiences and personal investigation. This process can be clearly observed through the monologues of converts who initially express a desire to “*try to understand Islam for themselves.*” Therefore, the decision to embrace Islam can be understood as the outcome of a gradual process of seeking, whereby individuals acquire knowledge, develop understanding, engage in internal deliberation, and eventually reach a level of readiness to make a religious decision.

Monologues among Pre Converts in Getting to Know Islam

A monologue refers to an extended speech delivered by a single speaker to express thoughts and opinions (Kamus Dewan, 2000). More broadly, it refers to a form of speech or internal discourse that takes place within an individual when thinking, reflecting, evaluating, deliberating, or assigning meaning to an experience. This concept is closely related to *inner speech*, which is also referred to in psychological literature as *internal monologue*, *internal dialogue*, and *covert self-talk* (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015). *Inner speech* is not merely unspoken speech but also plays a role in cognitive processes, reflection, and self-regulation (Jones, 2009). In the context of this study, Muslim convert monologues refer to the internal processes of thought and reflection that occur as individuals attempt to know, understand, evaluate, and assign meaning to Islam before making a decision regarding conversion. Such processes may involve questions, deliberation, doubts, the search for meaning, and the development of confidence in the new religion. This is consistent with studies of religious conversion, which demonstrate that embracing Islam involves a process of constructing meaning in relation to one's religious journey and personal identity (Casey, 2019; Lindgren, 2004).

Loo et al. (2019), in their study of Muslim Chinese converts in Malaysia, explain that religious conversion is an extraordinary life experience that may influence the development of self-differentiation, including changes in patterns of thought, behaviour, and emotion. The study further categorises the conversion process into several stages: initial attraction, absorption, adaptation, assimilation, and integration. These findings provide a basis for understanding the journey towards conversion not merely as a decision occurring at a single point in time, but as a process involving the development of an individual's thoughts and emotions. In this context, convert monologues may involve questions such as: “Why am I attracted to Islam?”, “What has caused me to question my previous beliefs?”, and “Does Islam provide answers to the questions I have been seeking?” Thus, monologue in this study is used to portray the internal space through which converts evaluate their experiences, develop understanding, and seek certainty regarding Islam. In this regard, decisions to embrace Islam among non-Muslim communities in Malaysia are closely associated with experiences of interethnic and interreligious relationships, as well as the challenges encountered (Puah Jia Min et al., 2024). Based on the discussion above, convert monologues in getting to know Islam may be understood as an initial manifestation of an internal thought process in which individuals evaluate religious questions, life experiences, and their own position before deciding to accept Islam as their new religion.

Conflict and Doubts Regarding the Religion of Origin

Doubts regarding one's religion of origin constitute part of the internal process experienced by some individuals before embracing Islam, particularly when they begin to question the beliefs, practices, and understanding of the religion in which they were raised. In such circumstances, individuals may experience doubts concerning questions related to God, the purpose of life, religious truth, and the compatibility of particular beliefs with their personal experiences. Loo et al. (2019) state that religious conversion among converts is a complex experience involving changes in thought, behaviour, and emotion. Puah Jia Min et al. (2024) similarly found that experiences before, during, and after conversion are interconnected throughout the life journey of converts. Accordingly, conflict and doubts regarding one's religion of origin can be understood as a reflective process

involving questioning, uncertainty, reassessment, the search for answers, and consideration of the implications of accepting Islam before individuals develop confidence in their religious choice.

The Formation of Muslim Convert Identity

Early experiences of Muslim converts involving indirect engagement with Muslim communities constitute an important avenue through which individuals may begin to become acquainted with and understand Islam. Such interactions expose individuals to various aspects of religious life that may previously have been unfamiliar or poorly understood, such as learning the Qur'an, performing prayer, fasting, basic matters of faith, and the ways in which Muslims establish relationships with one another in everyday life. Such exposure through interaction and observation gradually shapes an initial understanding of Muslim identity, not solely through religious teachings in theoretical terms but also through the ways in which those teachings are translated into everyday life (Azarudin & Khadijah, 2015).

In this process, experiences with Muslim communities become a form of informal learning that enables individuals to observe, experience, and subsequently evaluate the meaning underlying Islamic practices and values. This is important because religious understanding is not necessarily developed solely through formal learning; rather, it may also evolve through social experiences, observation, and interpersonal relationships with individuals who practise the religion. At the same time, such early exposure does not necessarily lead to immediate acceptance. Instead, it may generate questions, curiosity, and reflection concerning what is observed. Individuals may begin to question the meaning of particular practices, the reasons behind certain acts of worship, or the values underlying Muslim life. These questions subsequently become part of the search process, motivating individuals to seek explanations and develop a deeper understanding of Islam (Azarudin & Khadijah, 2015b). In the context of this study, this development can be traced through monologues that illustrate a gradual internal process, beginning with observations of Muslim practices, followed by questions concerning the meaning underlying those practices, and subsequently leading to a desire to read, understand, and evaluate Islam more closely.

Although numerous studies on Muslim converts to Islam have discussed the factors contributing to conversion, post-conversion challenges, social support, and processes of adaptation, the internal voice of converts during their search for Islam remains an area that warrants deeper exploration. Most studies tend to examine converts through particular variables or themes, such as factors influencing conversion, levels of religious understanding, social support, and Islamic religious practice. Such approaches are important; however, the subjective experiences occurring within converts as they question, doubt, evaluate, and eventually decide to embrace Islam may receive comparatively less attention. Therefore, the study entitled “Pre-Conversion Monologues in the Search for Islam” is proposed to explore these internal experiences. Examining convert monologues can provide deeper insights into how individuals engage with religious questions, encounter internal conflicts, and develop confidence in Islam. This approach may also enrich convert studies by incorporating a dimension of subjective experience that is more closely connected to the individual's own voice and narrative.

Nevertheless, in this study, the term “pre-conversion monologue” does not refer to internal speech recorded directly while participants were undergoing the process of religious seeking. Rather, the term refers to the internal reflections, questions, doubts, and deliberations experienced prior to conversion and subsequently recounted by the participants retrospectively during the interviews.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore in depth the experiences of converts to Islam in their religious-seeking process prior to embracing Islam, particularly their experiences, questions, considerations, motivations, and internal reflections before making the decision to convert to Islam. A qualitative approach was adopted because it enables participants' subjective experiences to be understood from their own perspectives, experiences, and narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Fieldwork was conducted across five selected zones in Malaysia, namely Sabah, Johor, Selangor, Penang, and Kelantan. The selection of these locations took into account the diversity of socio-cultural backgrounds and the possibility of different religious-seeking experiences among converts to Islam. A total of 15 converts to Islam were selected as study participants. Participants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the focus of the study and their ability to provide rich information regarding the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with the principles of sampling in qualitative research (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (i) individuals who had embraced Islam; (ii) individuals who had experienced a process of religious seeking or religious consideration prior to embracing Islam; and (iii) individuals who were willing and able to recount their experiences, questions, considerations, and reflections prior to conversion. The participants came from diverse backgrounds and had varied experiences of religious seeking. Their demographic profiles included gender, age, religion of origin, ethnicity, state/location, and length of time since conversion to Islam.

Interview Protocol and Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol developed based on the objectives of the study. This interview approach enabled the researcher to maintain a focus on the research questions while allowing participants sufficient space to elaborate on their experiences in greater depth. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences prior to embracing Islam, including factors that triggered their interest in Islam, questions and doubts regarding their religion of origin, processes of seeking information, interactions with Muslims, considerations before making the decision to convert, and internal experiences accompanying the religious-seeking process. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes per participant. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. The use of interviews as a data collection method enabled the subjective experiences of participants to be explored from their own perspectives and narratives (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

As this study employed retrospective narratives, the data obtained were not regarded as direct recordings of participants' internal speech while the pre-conversion experiences were taking place. Rather, the data represent the reflections and internal experiences that occurred prior to conversion, as remembered and subsequently recounted by the participants during the interviews. This clarification is important to ensure that the concept of "pre-conversion monologue" is not misinterpreted as a recording of inner speech occurring in real time. Accordingly, "pre-conversion monologue" in this study refers to the reflections, questions, doubts, and internal considerations experienced prior to conversion and subsequently recounted retrospectively by the participants.

Transcription and Data Analysis Procedures

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the content and meaning conveyed by the participants. The data were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from the participants' narratives. Thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). At the initial stage, the transcripts were read repeatedly to enable the researcher to become familiar with the dataset and identify units of meaning related to the participants' pre-conversion experiences. Initial codes were then developed based on information relevant to the research questions. Codes sharing similarities or conceptual relationships were subsequently grouped to form broader categories and themes. The identified themes were reviewed and refined by comparing them against the dataset as a whole to ensure that each theme was adequately supported by the participants' narratives. Finally, the themes were conceptually organised to construct the sequence of pre-conversion experiences emerging from the data. This process is consistent with the principles of thematic analysis, which emphasise a systematic process of familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, and refinement to produce a coherent interpretation of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Saturation

Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined when additional interviews no longer generated significant new codes, categories, or themes relevant to the research questions. Throughout the analytical process, the findings from each participant were continuously compared with those of previous participants to identify any new information or patterns. Once the major patterns and themes began to recur and subsequent interviews no longer contributed substantively to the established thematic structure, the researcher determined that data saturation had been reached. Thematic saturation refers to a condition in which additional data collection no longer produces significant new themes or information relevant to the focus of the study (Guest et al., 2020).

Credibility, Dependability, and Confirm Ability

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher repeatedly reviewed and compared the data to ensure that the themes developed were genuinely grounded in the participants' narratives. Original participant quotations were incorporated into the presentation of the findings to demonstrate a clear connection between the empirical data and the identified themes. Dependability was strengthened through a systematic analytical process, including documentation of the transcription, coding, code grouping, and theme development procedures. The transcripts and codes were reviewed to ensure consistency throughout the analytical process. Confirm ability was further strengthened by ensuring that the interpretations could be traced back to the original data rather than relying solely on the researcher's assumptions or interpretations. These procedures are consistent with the principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research, which encompass credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirm ability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Triggers for the Search for Meaning in Islam

Initial exposure to Islam among individuals in the pre-conversion phase triggered questions, reflection, and a desire to understand the religion. Such exposure did not necessarily occur through formal religious education; rather, it could emerge from spontaneous everyday experiences, such as hearing the call to prayer (*azan*), observing Muslim friends performing *salah*, and interacting with Muslim friends about religious matters. This can be clearly observed in Info#1, for whom the sound of the *azan* became an initial stimulus that prompted questions about Muslim beliefs. This is reflected in the following monologue:

"I don't know why, but every time I hear the *azan*, I feel like I want to know what Muslims actually believe." (Info#1)

This question subsequently developed through observations of practices performed by the Muslim community. This is illustrated in the following monologues:

"I was also curious about why Muslims pray five times a day and prostrate like that." (Info#3)

"When I watched people praying, I also wondered what they actually felt when they stood before God." (Info#4)

Meanwhile, the monologue of Info#7 demonstrates another form of trigger for seeking a deeper understanding of why the Qur'an holds such an important position in the lives of Muslims. The participant stated:

"I once read a little about the Qur'an [in translation], and I also wondered why this book is so important to Muslims." (Info#7)

These accounts demonstrate that religious seeking may begin with experiences that are seen, heard, or read, before individuals begin to think about, question, and assign meaning to those experiences. Accordingly, the four monologues above reveal a systematic pattern of development, beginning with initial exposure to Islam, followed by attention to religious practices and symbols, the emergence of questions and reflection concerning their meaning, and subsequently a growing motivation to explore Islam.

Exposure to the azan, prayer, the Qur'an, and Muslim life initially constitutes an external experience; however, these experiences are subsequently assigned meaning through processes of questioning, evaluation, and seeking explanations. The shift in participants' perceptions from initially viewing Islam as a religion primarily associated with prayer and fasting to understanding Islam as a way of life indicates a process of reconstructing meaning in relation to the religion being explored. This is consistent with Park's (2005) meaning-making model, which distinguishes between a broader global meaning system and the interpretation of specific experiences, whereby individuals seek to understand new experiences and integrate them with their existing meaning systems. In this study, the pursuit of information about Islam can be understood as an effort by participants to establish coherence between new experiences and their existing questions, beliefs, and understandings, ultimately contributing to the development of a more structured understanding of religion.

These findings are also consistent with Mohd Dali et al. (2016), who positioned the pre-conversion phase as an important stage in the experience of embracing Islam, during which individuals encounter experiences, knowledge, and considerations related to Islam before making the decision to convert. More specifically, a study of the Chinese pre-conversion community in Terengganu indicates that the relationship between religion and everyday life experiences within a Muslim society exposes individuals to elements of Islam and contributes to different levels of understanding of the religion. This development suggests that the triggers for seeking a new religion do not merely generate curiosity about what Muslims do, but gradually stimulate questions concerning the meaning and spiritual experience underlying such practices. This finding is also consistent with Azarudin and Khadijah (2015b), who demonstrated that *dialogue of life* experiences during the pre-conversion phase, including social relationships and exposure to Islamic elements, can assist individuals in understanding Islamic values and subsequently encourage them to explore the religion more deeply.

Curiosity about Islam

Curiosity represents an important element in the early stage of religious seeking. At this stage, the informants had not yet demonstrated acceptance of Islam; rather, they remained in a process of exploration and seeking understanding. This is significant because the process of embracing Islam does not necessarily begin with a decision to convert but may instead emerge from seemingly simple questions that gradually lead individuals towards more serious religious inquiry. Abdullah and Salman (2025) found that the search for information about Islam among converts is influenced by the need to develop religious understanding, with social media also serving as one of the channels through which such information is sought.

The findings indicate that the informants gradually developed a deeper curiosity about various phenomena surrounding them, particularly Islamic practices and teachings. Info#2, for instance, explained that Islam had previously received little attention in his or her thoughts, but subsequently became the subject of numerous questions. This suggests that curiosity served as a point of expansion in the religious-seeking process. A more specific question was raised by Info#6, who began to question the figure of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and why so many people followed his teachings. The participant stated:

“Who exactly was Prophet Muhammad that so many people followed the teachings he brought?” (Info#6)

Info#8, meanwhile, explained that although the participant had not yet accepted Islam as a belief system, there was already an internal motivation to learn more about various aspects of the religion:

“I can't say that I believe yet, but I feel like there is something about Islam that makes me want to know more.” (Info#8)

Similarly, Info#9 realised that the more the participant read about Islam, the more aware they became of the many aspects of the religion that remained unknown. This indicates that the process of exploring and seeking information about Islam was continuous. It further demonstrates that the search for knowledge about Islam was continuous and reflective, whereby newly acquired knowledge not only enhanced understanding but also generated further questions. This can be observed in the following monologue:

"I never really thought much about Islam before, but lately there have been so many questions running through my mind." (Info#2)

This pattern is consistent with perspectives on the religious conversion process, which view conversion not merely as a single event but as a process involving exploration, interaction, consideration, and shifts in religious orientation. Rambo (1993), for example, conceptualises conversion through several dimensions, including context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. In the context of this study, curiosity and efforts to obtain information about Islam can be understood as forms of quest, while participants' interactions with Muslim friends and exposure to Islamic practices provide experiential contexts that encourage further exploration of the religion. This perspective is also consistent with the view that the conversion process may develop from questioning and the search for meaning before an individual gradually forms a new religious orientation.

These findings are also consistent with Basir et al. (2024), who explained that the experience of embracing Islam among converts in Sarawak initially develops through individual experiences and personal journeys rather than as a sudden decision. This suggests that curiosity among the informants was not merely a temporary interest but constituted a cognitive process that encouraged them to ask questions, read, and seek information in order to develop an understanding of Islam before making any decision. The findings are also consistent with Musal Kassim et al. (2023), who explained that embracing Islam involves a process of knowing, becoming aware of, and eventually recognising the truth of Islam before an individual makes a voluntary declaration of faith.

Exploring Islam in Greater Depth

At this stage, the participants' religious seeking appeared to develop beyond merely hearing information about Islam towards active efforts to gain understanding through reading, investigation, and personal experience. The statement by Info#5 illustrates the participant's tendency to move from indirectly acquired knowledge towards a more active and personal search for information. The participant stated:

"All this time, I've only heard about Islam from other people. Maybe I should try to understand it for myself." (Info#5)

A study by Azarudin and Khadijah (2015) found that the process of embracing Islam among the Chinese community in Terengganu was also associated with research and religious seeking, alongside social relationships, marriage, family, and other factors. This process can be seen more clearly in the experience of Info#10, who described reading as a means of expanding knowledge while simultaneously becoming aware of the limitations of their previous understanding. The participant stated:

"The more I read about Islam, the more I realise that there are actually so many things about Islam that I don't know." (Info#10)

Furthermore, the monologues of Info#11 and Info#12 demonstrate a shift in perceptions of the nature of Islam, as the participants began to understand that Islam is not merely concerned with prayer, fasting, or activities in the mosque, but encompasses broader guidance for everyday life. This can be observed in the following monologues:

"I thought Islam was only about prayer and fasting, but it turns out there are also many teachings about how to live." (Info#11)

"I began to see that Islam is not just a religion about going to the mosque or performing acts of worship, but more like a way of life." (Info#12)

These findings are consistent with Basir et al. (2024), who found that Islamic education plays an important role in shaping religious understanding and practice among converts, particularly through learning and guidance processes that help them understand Islam as a way of life. The findings are also in line with Kamaruddin and Mokhtar (2024), who found that personal interest and factors motivating individuals to learn about and accept Islam constitute important aspects associated with the process of religious conversion. Therefore, the search for

Islam should not be understood as a passive process of receiving information. Rather, it represents a process of knowledge exploration and the reconstruction of understanding, through which individuals gradually develop a broader perspective of Islam, not merely as a collection of ritual practices but as a comprehensive way of life.

Internal Doubts and Conflict

At this stage, confidence in the religion of origin began to be questioned, while at the same time, there emerged a willingness to explore other religious traditions more openly. This can be observed in Info#13 through the following monologue:

“At that time, I had started to feel doubtful about my own religion. I don’t know... there were many things that I did not understand. So, I started looking into other religions as well, including Islam. I also wanted to know what Islam was actually like.” (Info#13)

The doubt expressed above does not merely indicate uncertainty regarding the participant’s existing religious beliefs, but reflects an internal evaluative process that encouraged the informant to examine religious alternatives before making any decision. This doubt emerged from an awareness of the limitations of their understanding of the religion they had previously followed, prompting them to consider other religions, including Islam, as possibilities that warranted further exploration in order to obtain greater clarity. However, doubt does not necessarily lead to rejection of one’s religion; rather, it may function as a catalyst for religious comparison and evaluation. A similar dynamic is reflected in the monologue of Info#15:

“I wasn’t planning to convert to Islam straight away. I just started to feel less certain about my original religion. So, I thought, why not get to know Islam first and see what Islam teaches? After that, I could think about what to do.” (Info#15)

The informant did not make a decision based on assumptions or initial perceptions but adopted a cautious approach by first seeking to understand Islamic teachings before determining a position. Thus, both monologues demonstrate that doubts regarding the religion of origin opened space for greater openness, exploration, and consideration of Islam. At this stage, however, the individuals remained uncertain and had not yet made a decision to convert. The experiences of these informants therefore suggest that doubts regarding the religion of origin may function as one of the triggers for religious seeking or emerge as a subsequent development of an earlier search. Nevertheless, this process does not occur immediately. Instead, the informants moved through several stages, beginning with questions concerning their existing beliefs, followed by efforts to seek answers and learn about Islam, and subsequently evaluating the understanding they acquired before eventually making a decision regarding the acceptance of Islam.

These findings are consistent with Van Nieuwkerk (2023), who described conversion to Islam as an ongoing religious journey in which the search for meaning and experiences of uncertainty regarding one’s religion of origin may occur over a period of time. The findings also correspond with Azarudin and Khadijah (2015), who demonstrated that the experiences of the Chinese pre-conversion community through interactions with Muslim communities gradually exposed them to Islamic norms, culture, and religious elements. Such processes of acculturation and interreligious interaction provided pre-conversion individuals with opportunities to become familiar with Islam before making decisions concerning conversion. The findings can also be related to Azarudin et al. (2022), who found that the process of developing Muslim identity among converts is influenced by their level of understanding and internalisation of Islamic teachings. This indicates that religious understanding is a developing process and does not necessarily become complete at the moment an individual recites the *shahadah*. From Jones’s (2009) perspective, *inner speech* is associated with the process of language internalization and functions as a medium for thought and self-regulation. The development from social interaction to inner speech enables individuals to use language to direct attention, make judgments, and resolve questions. In this study, the concept of *inner speech* does not imply that the researcher recorded the participants’ inner voices while their pre-conversion experiences were taking place. Rather, the monologues analysed represent internal reflections retrospectively recounted by the participants during the interviews. Therefore, these monologues provide an account of how participants remembered and reinterpreted the thought processes accompanying their experiences of exploring religion.

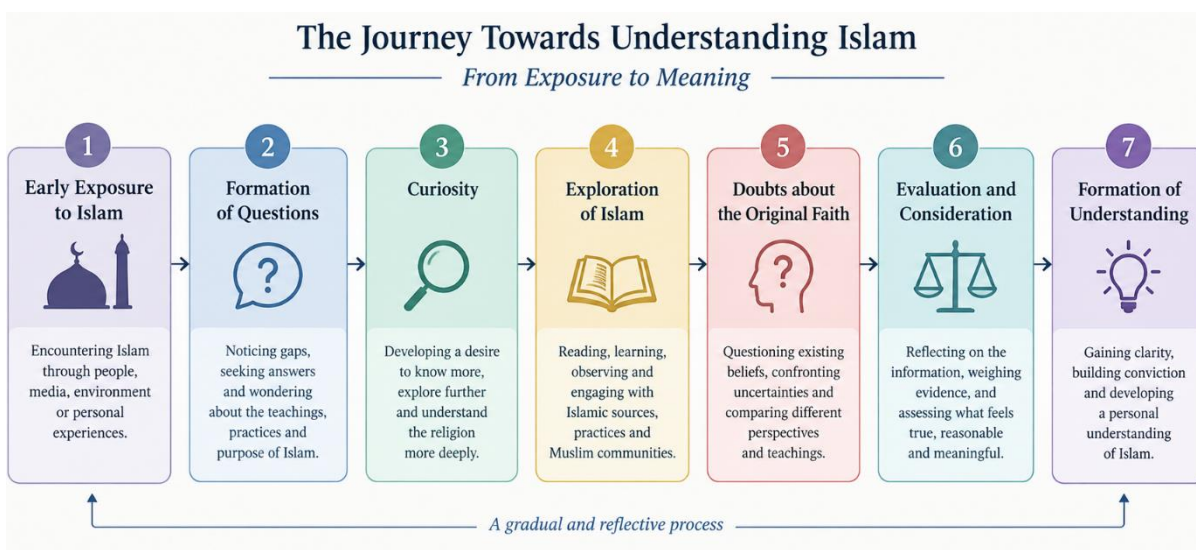
CONCLUSION

The process of coming to know Islam within the pre-conversion convert community is a complex and gradual process, shaped by personal experiences, social interactions, the pursuit of knowledge, and the evaluation of existing religious beliefs. Accordingly, the process of embracing Islam involves exposure, the formation of questions, the search for information, and consideration of the teachings of the religion. The findings of this study indicate that everyday experiences, such as hearing the call to prayer (azan), observing prayer practices, interacting with Muslim communities, and reading about the Qur'an, serve as initial triggers for curiosity about Islam. This curiosity subsequently develops into a more active process of exploration through reading, reflection, and efforts to understand Islam from a broader perspective. At the same time, doubts concerning one's original faith also constitute one of the factors that create space for individuals to examine and consider Islam with greater openness.

These findings reinforce the discussion in the literature that religious conversion should be understood as an evolving process rather than as a sudden event or one resulting from a single factor. In the context of this study, experiences of *dialogue of life*, social relationships, and exposure to Islamic practices and values contribute to creating opportunities for individuals in the pre-conversion phase to become acquainted with Islam gradually. This development suggests that religious exploration involves a shift from merely knowing about Islam towards an effort to understand the meaning of Islamic teachings and to assess their relevance to the questions and experiences arising from individuals' lives.

From a theoretical perspective, this study proposes that the pre-conversion experience can be understood as a developmental sequence that connects external experiences, cognitive processes, and the formation of religious meaning. This can be illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: The Experience of Exploring Islam among Converts



The pre-conversion experience is not merely a collection of factors that lead an individual towards Islam; rather, it represents an interconnected and dynamically evolving process. Exposure to Islam through everyday experiences and social interactions gives rise to questions; these questions subsequently develop into curiosity; curiosity encourages exploration and the pursuit of knowledge; while newly acquired knowledge and experiences are then evaluated alongside doubts and questions concerning one's original religious beliefs. This process subsequently creates space for the development of deeper meaning and understanding of Islam. This sequence contributes to the theoretical understanding of the pre-conversion phase by illustrating the relationship between experiential, cognitive, and meaning-making dimensions in the process of religious exploration. In other words, the study does not merely demonstrate that social experiences, the pursuit of knowledge, or doubts concerning one's original faith may be associated with conversion; rather, it suggests how these experiences develop from one stage to another, gradually forming a more structured process of exploration. This perspective extends the understanding of religious conversion by positioning the pre-conversion phase as a space for

meaning-making, reflection, and evaluation that precedes the decision to embrace Islam. Overall, the exploration of Islam among individuals in the pre-conversion phase can be viewed as a dynamic journey of meaning-making that develops through experience, reflection, and the exploration of knowledge before an individual makes a decision regarding the acceptance of Islam.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) [Grant No. FRGS/1/2023/SS10/UITM/02/26], administered by Universiti Teknologi MARA (Grant No. 600-RMC/FRGS 5/3 (053/2023)).

REFERENCE

1. Abdul Ghafar Don, Anuar Puteh, Ahmad Irdha Mokhtar, Hasanah Abd Khafidz, Khazri Osman, Zulkefli Aini, & Nur Nazira Rahim. (2025). The importance of Had Ta'lif and social support in enhancing the well-being of Muallaf in the State of Selangor. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(4), 2540–2547.
2. Alderson-Day, B., & Fernyhough, C. (2015). Inner speech: Development, cognitive functions, phenomenology, and neurobiology. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(5), 931–965.
3. Aliakbar, M. Z. A., & Rasip, Z. M. (2024). Cabaran mualaf di Malaysia dan cadangan penyelesaian. *Jurnal Pengajian Islam*, 17(1), 121–132.
4. Azarudin, A. & Azman C. M. (2024). The role of the Islamic Guidance Center as an information and integration site for Mualafs. *AFKAR*, 26(1), 307–342.
5. Azarudin, A. & Azman C. M. & Ruhaizah A.G. (2022). Challenges of Muallaf in Building Muslim's Identity in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(8), 1182–1193.
6. Azarudin, A., & Khadijah, K. (2015). Faktor pemelukan agama Islam: Kajian terhadap komuniti saudara Muslim Cina di Negeri Terengganu. *MANU*, 22(0), 21–45.
7. Azarudin, A., & Khadijah, K. (2015b). Pengaruh media dalam dialog kehidupan: Perspektif pengalaman saudara baru. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 31(2), 47–60.
8. Basir, M. Z. K., Sham, F. M., Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao, N. A. M. T., & Ismail, I. (2025). Life transformation of new Muslims (Mualaf) post-conversion in an Islamic New Village. *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah*, 15(2), 90–111.
9. Basir, M., Abdullah, N. T., Pao, T. A., Sham, F., & Ismail, I. (2024). The Narratives of Muslim Converts on Their Conversion Experiences Through the Perkampungan Baru Islam Project (PBI) in Rural Sarawak. In *Proceedings of the UPY-ICCCM International Conference on Education and Social Science (UPINCESS 2024)* (pp. 159–182). Atlantis Press.
10. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
11. Casey, P. M. (2019). Conversion to Islam: Narratives of awakening, continuity, and return. *Sociological Forum*, 34(3), 752–773.
12. Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLOS ONE*, 15(5), e0232076. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>
13. Jones, P. E. (2009). From 'external speech' to 'inner speech' in Vygotsky: A critical appraisal and fresh perspectives. *Language & Communication*, 29(2), 166–181.
14. Kamaruddin, A., & Mokhtar, A. E. (2024). A review of factors influencing conversion to Islam among Orang Asli in Malaysia. *Ulum Islamiyyah*, 36(2), 83–88.
15. Kamus Dewan. (2000). *Edisi Ketiga*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
16. Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), 120–124.
17. Loo, T. Y., Elias, N., & Abdul Ghani, M. (2019). The religious conversion process as an unusual life experience to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts in the context of adulthood self-differentiation development. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 4(32), 164–173.

18. Mohd Dali, N. R. S., Ab. Rahman, A., Mohd Subri, I., Abdul Mutalib, M., Wan Razali, W. M. F. A., Ibrahim, R. I., & Ismail, N. (2016). New Muslim Converts Experience in Embracing Islam: An Analysis of the Pre Conversion, Conversion and Post Conversion Phases. *Islamic Quarterly*, 60(4), 387–411.
19. Musal Kassim, S. B., Yeoh Abdullah, M. S., & Baba, Z. (2023). A study of Islamic conversion in Malaysia. *International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation*, 41(2), 93–105.
20. Park, C. L. (2005). Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(4), 707–729.
21. Puah Jia Min, J., Roslan, A. J., & Weng Onn, A. (2024). The inevitable journey: Understanding the conversion process of Muslim converts in Malaysia and how they overcame the challenges from interracial marriages. *Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research*, 7(2), 45–58.
22. Rambo, L. R. (1993). *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Yale University Press.
23. Rasip, Z. M., Handan, R., Mohamad, M. Z., & Hamzah, A. H. (2025). Challenges of religious integration among indigenous Muslim converts (Mualaf) in Sabah, Malaysia. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(5), 605–618.