

Implementing a Digital Profiling System for Enhanced Support and Integration of Muslim Converts in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article explores the strategic implementation of a digital profiling system to enhance the support and integration of Muslim converts in Malaysia. Utilizing qualitative research methods and an extensive literature review, the study emphasizes the transformative potential of the e-profiling system in optimizing data management for this specific demographic. Highlighting its significance in the Malaysian context, the research advocates for the adoption of e-profiling systems to offer tailored guidance and support, fostering increased resilience, stronger faith, a deeper understanding of Islam, and steadfast adherence to Islamic values. Exclusively focused on Malaysia, this study serves as a comprehensive guideline for improving the overall management of Muslim converts. The article underscores the importance of utilizing an e-profiling system to systematically store essential data about new converts, facilitating organized support from religious bodies. The innovative approach introduced in this research addresses critical aspects, including the formal procedure, religious education, community support, continuous monitoring, and social integration. In conclusion, this article contributes to the discourse on improving the support and integration of Muslim converts in Malaysia through the strategic implementation of an advanced technological solution – the e-profiling system.

Keywords: Muslim Converts, Malaysia, Support, Digital, e-Profiling

INTRODUCTION

Conversion has been widely debated in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and theology for decades. The focus of this phenomenon's research is frequently on religious experience. Etymologically, the term 'conversion' is derived from the Latin word 'conversio,' which means regret, movement, and change. The term conversion, in English, refers to a transition from one state or religion to another. Jalaluddin (2000) defines conversion as regret, a change of religion, a shift in attitude towards religious teachings, or the adoption of a new religious perspective. Harun et al. (2012) describe conversion as a profound quest for the meaning of life, compelling people to identify what holds significance and value in their existence. From a philosophical point of view, conversion can be defined as the process of becoming aware of one's beliefs, which leads to the acceptance of a religious attitude within an individual's personality (Dister, 1983). Hence, conversion involves adopting a new religious identity, embracing different beliefs and practices, and acquiring a lifestyle to gain acceptance and gradually becoming accepted by others.

The geographic distribution of religious groups varies considerably. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the world's population resides in countries where their religious group constitutes the majority, while approximately a quarter (27%) live as religious minorities. Hindus and Christians overwhelmingly tend to inhabit countries where they are in the majority. Specifically, 97% of all Hindus reside in the three Hindu-majority countries (India, Mauritius, and Nepal), and nearly nine in ten Christians (87%) are found in the 157 Christian-majority countries worldwide. In contrast, most members of other major religious groups live in countries where they are in the minority. For instance, seven in ten Buddhists (72%) live as religious minorities, with only three-in-ten (28%) residing in the seven countries where Buddhists are the majority (Bhutan, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) (Pew Research Centre, 2023). This manifestly plural and complex religious

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landscape naturally generates a growing number of diverse religious identities (Camara & Bodian, 2016). While religious conversion is certainly related to religion, a fundamental question arises: what is religion?

From a divine perspective, the term 'religion' is often associated with an intuitive understanding of the pursuit of perfection and the creation of a relationship between humans and God (Wagner, 2001). Fakhruroji (2019) asserts that religion is commonly interpreted as a collection of principles and standards designed to regulate human conduct. Meanwhile, in the context of religious transformation, the phenomenon of religious conversion is often linked to a spiritual metamorphosis, underscoring a psychological aspect. While these terms share a close affinity in meaning, it is crucial to discern their subtle distinctions.

The United States exemplifies a notable surge in conversion trends, revealing that approximately 22% of the population has opted for a transformative journey towards adopting Islam (Casey, 2019). Similarly, Switzerland has witnessed an increase in its Muslim population, accounting for 5.5% of the total populace, or approximately 391,700 people, in 2019 (Nollert & Sheikhzadegan, 2022). This growth signifies the expanding presence of individuals born into Muslim families alongside those consciously embracing Islam, transcending ethnic, historical, and cultural boundaries. The rise in converts in both the United States and Switzerland illustrates Islam's dynamic nature, continuously attracting non-Muslims to explore its teachings and, ultimately, embrace the faith.

Islam is a religion with a dynamic nature that continues to attract a significant number of non-Muslims, enticing them to explore its teachings and ultimately embrace it as a faith intended to guide them towards righteousness. This global spread and acceptance of Islam is evident in the rising number of converts in the United States and Switzerland, transcending ethnic, historical, and cultural boundaries. Although by smaller margins, the majority of Muslims (73%) and religiously unaffiliated people (71%) also live in countries where they constitute the predominant religious group. Islam constitutes a majority in 49 countries, including 19 of the 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The religiously unaffiliated make up most of the population in six countries, with China being by far the largest. (The others are the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hong Kong, Japan, and North Korea) (Pew Research Centre, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the beginning of the new millennium, an unanticipated trend has captured the attention of scholars and learners in diverse fields. According to conversion studies scholars, Paloutzian et al. (1999) characterize conversion as a transformative journey that unfolds within a dynamic interplay of personal experiences, events, ideologies, expectations, and encounters with various influences. The multifaceted nature of conversion is further clarified by Lofland and Skonovd (1981), who propose various pathways to conversion, including intellectual exploration (conversion through reading and investigating alternative beliefs), personal revelation (conversion through unexplained personal spiritual experiences), experiential transformation (conversion through active participation and subsequent faith adoption), emotional attachment (conversion through a deep personal connection), and revivalist inspiration (conversion through joyous communal experiences) (Lakhdar et al., 2007; Nollert & Sheikhzadegan, 2022). Meadow & Kahoe (1984) state that people who convert will experience positive feelings such as happiness and peace and undergo changes in mental health (increased confidence, freedom from anxiety, and depression).

In Islam, there is a fundamental principle of 'no compulsion in religion,' meaning that no one is forced to become a Muslim. This principle is supported by verses in the Quran (2:256), which mean, "*There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become distinct from the wrong. So, whoever disbelieves in taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is the Most Hearing and Most Knowing*".

In the contemporary context, converts may face a variety of problems or issues throughout their lives. The study carried out by Kose proved that converts have undergone cognitive restructuring, concluding that Islam fulfills their desire for a meeting between religious principles and practice. Kose's explanation evokes the socio-psychological theory of conversion, stating that individuals need direction in their lives through the structure and meaning system provided by religion (Jung, 2001; Luckmann, 1967; Spilka et al., 2003).

Martonot and Ozalp (2020) argued that the conversion to Islam should be seen as an incremental journey, where individuals who convert do not completely replace their pre-existing identities with Islamic ones. Therefore, these converts often experience alienation from their friends and family, resulting in profound feelings of loneliness and isolation. Furthermore, they tend to feel excluded from meaningful roles within the Muslim community. Particularly in Western countries, converts to Islam frequently encounter subtle forms of Islamophobia (Shah, 2017; Khosrojerdi, 2015).

Hence, as new Muslim converts, they often undergo a period of inner turmoil as they grapple with their newfound faith, searching for answers to profound questions about the purpose and meaning of life (Kassim et al., 2013). This urgency leads them to seek guidance from the religious community, embarking on a journey of gradual self-transformation rooted in rational considerations. Ultimately, this process results in a deeper understanding of their faith and pursuit of a better life aligned with their newfound beliefs.

Next, dedicated converts express that being a Muslim goes beyond merely engaging in prayers, wearing suitable attire, observing fasting, and reading the Quran. Instead, they perceive themselves as embarking on a journey toward becoming a Muslim, marked by the gradual internalization of beliefs and practices, and by the recognition of others. However, it is crucial to note that the conversion process is best seen as a journey rather than a single event.

In navigating this situation, guidance and direction are crucial. Identifying the primary party responsible for implementation and determining the appropriate development pattern necessitates a comprehensive investigation. To arrive at an accurate and representative answer, a thorough examination of the circumstances is imperative. Consequently, in this study, the research objective is to present a comprehensive investigation into the development and implementation of an e-profiling system designed to enhance the support and integration processes for Muslim converts in Malaysia.

The primary focus is to assess the effectiveness of the e-profiling system in facilitating a more streamlined and personalized approach to managing the needs and experiences of Muslim converts. Through a detailed examination of the system's features, usability, and impact, this research aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform strategies for improving support mechanisms and promoting a sense of belonging among Muslim converts in the Malaysian context. By addressing the specific challenges faced by this demographic, the study endeavors to offer practical recommendations for the successful implementation of technology-driven solutions to enhance the overall experience of Muslim converts and foster their seamless integration into the broader community.

Conceptualising Converts

In the context of the accepted humanistic tradition, the conversion process is viewed as a spiritual transformation that encompasses positive changes in a person's worldview, values, purpose, self-definition, and the meaning of life. Generally, from the hierarchical perspective of Maslow's Model, religion and spirituality are not only related to immediate needs (lack of needs) but also to self-actualization needs (Rojas, Mendez & Watkins-Fassler, 2023). Buxant, Saroglou, & Scheuer (2009) argued that some factors motivating someone to engage in penance are as follows: First, appreciation for beauty and greatness (appreciation of beauty and excellence). This refers to the ability to find, recognize, and enjoy goodness in the physical and social world. It also includes openness to aesthetics, including religious experience, ritual, and mysticism. Second, an open mind towards future generations and the world in general is expressed in various ways, such as through education, social responsibility, and concern for people and the environment. Third, realizing full potential involves moving towards a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting; creating new challenges and striving to realize them (Rojas, Mendez & Watkins-Fassler, 2023). Existential well-being can also be the driving force behind the conversion process for events that are significant in their lives. Fourth, people who convert are motivated by the need for understanding (need for cognition). Therefore, they grapple with various questions about moral and existential issues (Rojas, Mendez & Watkins-Fassler, 2023).

There are seven major steps in the conversion model developed by Lofland and Stark (1981) for converters such as (1) experiencing acute and prolonged stress (tension), (2) the problem-solving perspective of religious

meaning: prospective converts seek solutions to religious problems they face, aiming for satisfaction with the religious meaning system, (3) generating self-referral as a religious seeker (seekers) emotional and interpersonal, (4) weak additional cult attachment, (5) those who openly convert to more intensive interactions.

Next, the three-level personality model by McAdams (1994) presents three main characteristics related to personality change following religious conversion: Level one consists of basic characteristics and behaviors that operate regardless of the specific context. The second level is the adaptation of characteristics - personal goals, values, and self-definition that operate in a specific contextual situation. Finally, level three encompasses personal identity, narrative, meaning, and global self-definition. This conceptualization of conversion confirms that converts feel there is a change in value, resulting in an increased self-confidence in the level of meaning in life.

Clark explains that individuals go through several important stages during the process of religious conversion: the period of agitation, the period of conversion, and the final period. During the period of turmoil, the individual is filled with guilt and desires to make amends (Harun et al., 2012). In this stage, the person experiences feelings of unworthiness, depression, and a sense that life has no meaning. In the period of conversion, the individual suddenly feels that the problems faced can be overcome and solved. Doubts that once haunted them can now be traversed and erased. This phase is also known as relaxation or surrender. The final stage marks the conclusion of the conversion process. This time is characterized by a sense of calm, freedom, and deep obedience. There is also a sense that God is with them, sins and wrongs have been forgiven, problems around them can be addressed and resolved, and unhappy feelings can be eliminated (Harun et al., 2012).

Muslim Converts in Malaysia

Shifting our focus to Southeast Asia, Malaysia stands as a country marked by rich diversity, various religions, and a distinct culture. With ethnic groups ranging from the majority Malays to smaller minorities of Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities, Malaysia encapsulates a harmonious blend of traditions. Islam takes precedence as the predominant religion, encompassing 61.3% of the population.

In Malaysia, individuals who undergo a recent conversion to Islam are commonly referred to as 'Muslim converts' or 'new brothers' (known as '*mualaf*' in Malay, derived from Arabic). According to Kamus Dewan, a 'convert' is defined as someone who has recently embraced Islam and may alternatively be referred to as a 'new brother' (Kamus Dewan, 2010: 1046). The term 'new brother' (referred to as 'saudara baru' in Malay) serves to distinguish between members of the Muslim Malay community and individuals from other ethnic backgrounds who have recently embraced Islam (Tibek et al., 2014). This highlights the universal nature of religious transformation, observed both globally and within the distinctive cultural tapestry of Malaysia.

In contemporary Malaysia, various inclusive terms are used to refer to this group, including 'Muslim brother,' 'new brother,' 'our brother,' and 'Muslim brothers,' among others. These terminologies, as highlighted by Mohd Subri et al. (2015), essentially convey the same meaning, differing only in the specific nomenclature used. The interpretation of the term 'convert' remains generally consistent across most states in Malaysia, as defined by the Enactment of the Administration of Islamic Religion. However, exceptions exist in Perlis, the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak, where these enactments and acts do not explicitly define the term 'convert' (Mohd Subri et al., 2015).

In line with contemporary legal definitions, the Enactment Islamic Religious Administration (Penang State) 2004, Section 2(1), defines a '*mualaf*' as someone who has recently converted to Islam under Section 107(1). The conversion process involves reciting the *Shahadah* in Arabic, understanding its significance, and making the declaration of faith willingly and of one's own free will. This definition is consistent with those in several other states, including Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor, Terengganu, and Pahang (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018, p. 26-31).

During a period of personal and social transformation, the number of converts in Malaysia has been steadily increasing. In Selangor, for example, by 2020, approximately 1,400 individuals from diverse racial and religious backgrounds had embraced Islam (Che Noh, 2021). Statistics from 1990-2004 reported by JAKIM estimated

that 82,530 people of various ethnicities, races, cultures, and lineages had converted to Islam in Malaysia (<http://www.islam.gov.my>, 2004; Zin & Abdullah, 2018).

According to the Islamic Welfare Malaysia (PERKIM) Kedah state division's report as of May 7, 2018, the number of registered converts exceeded a thousand. The state of Kedah has also witnessed a steady increase in converts, with an estimated annual growth of five (5) to fifteen (15) individuals (Ahmad-Zaluki & Rahman, 2019). JAKIM's Dakwah Division reports that there are approximately 10,000 new converts in Malaysia every year (Ahmad, 2021).

Given this upward trend, managing converts is crucial. At the state level, the State Department of Islamic Religion oversees the management of new Muslim converts. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in assisting and supporting new adherents of Islam in contemporary Malaysia.

Issues Faced by Muslim Converts

According to the 108th Fatwa Committee Muzakarah of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia, convened on 2-3 November 2015, a decision was made regarding the maximum period for the usage of the term '*mualaf*' for the new Muslim convert. It was determined that the maximum period for someone who embraces Islam and is called a '*mualaf*' (new convert) is 5 years. However, it should be noted that some states in Malaysia do not have a specific time limit for the new convert's status, namely Perlis and Kedah. On the other hand, the state of Pahang has a time limit of 6 years, while the states of Penang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, and Sabah have a time limit of 5 years. The state of Perak has a time limit of 3 years, while the states of Kelantan, the Federal Territories, and Johor do not have any time limits for new converts (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) Website, 2020).

Muslim converts normally experience three phases in the process of embracing Islam, namely the pre-conversion, conversion, and post-conversion periods. Throughout these periods, they have gone through various challenging processes that make them feel stressed and hopeless (Dali, et al., 2016). This may be due to factors such as opposition from family or spouse, fear of getting fired from their job, the need to keep their embrace of Islam a secret, experiencing social exclusion, living in isolation, feeling lonely, encountering a cold reception, and more (Kassim, 2013).

The most challenging phase is the post-conversion, where Muslim converts need to learn and understand Islam as a religion, adjust their life according to the teachings of Islam, and practice Islamic rituals. Being a new Muslim is not easy; after the fuss and celebration of accepting Islam fade, all the challenges begin. As new converts, they need to adjust their daily routines according to Islamic teachings. The transition period experienced by the converts shows that some of them strive to adapt to the new way of life (Kassim, 2013). Converts face various challenges in their journey to Islam, and some of them lose their jobs, lose contact with their families, and are expelled by their communities. Hence, in Malaysia, there is the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) and the State Department of Islamic Religion, which are responsible for assisting new converts.

Muslim converts in Malaysia often face various challenges and obstacles in their journey of reverting to Islam. These issues can be numerous and complex, encompassing social, cultural, and religious dimensions. One key aspect of the converts' experience is the personal nature of their reversion, which often leads them to feel uncomfortable sharing their journey with their relatives, friends, or even with the relevant authorities who oversee religious affairs.

The decision to convert to Islam is deeply personal and can often be met with scepticism, misunderstanding, or even opposition from one's social circle or family members. This can create a sense of isolation and make it difficult for the new converts to openly discuss their experiences or seek guidance and support. Some converts may fear strained relationships or rejection from their loved ones, further complicating their situation. As indicated by al-Qudsy and Hamidi (2020) and Samuri and Khan (2020), some individuals who convert to Islam prefer to keep their conversion confidential until they feel mentally, financially, physically, and emotionally prepared to confront the anticipated challenges and social repercussions associated with their decision.

One of the fundamental challenges faced by new converts is learning and understanding the religious practices and obligations in Islam. Among these obligations, the five daily prayers (*salah*) hold significant importance. Learning the proper way to perform the prayers, including the physical movements, recitations, and supplications, can be overwhelming for someone new to Islam. The complexity of the Arabic language, which is used in the Quran and during prayers, can add a layer of difficulty for those who do not have prior exposure to it.

In a study related to faith instruction for the Muslim converts community at the Institute of Islamic Preaching under PERKIM by Kasim et al. (2017), it was concluded that faith education should be delivered and managed as effectively as possible to guide converts in developing a firm Islamic faith. The authors also advocate for continued support from the general public and converts, including guidance, advisory services, welfare, and counselling to the Muslim converts community.

A study by Shaharuddin et al. (2018) revealed that the religious education and level of understanding of the faith of Muslim converts remains inadequate. The results of the study indicate that the Muslim convert community still lacks a comprehensive grasp of the doctrines they have learned, even after embracing Islam for over a year. This is noteworthy because a thorough understanding of the faith can deter converts from engaging in activities contrary to Islamic teachings (Shaharuddin et al., 2018).

Hassan et al. (2021) have identified factors related to the Islamization of converts, post-conversion challenges, and methods of religious education and Quranic learning. Their study suggests that appropriate measures should be taken to enhance the acquisition of knowledge regarding Islam and the Quran for Chinese converts, enabling them to apply this knowledge in their daily lives (Hassan et al., 2021).

A study on the conversion courses conducted by the Selangor Islamic Religious Council, as reported by Abdullah et al. (2017), identified challenges faced by the management, particularly concerning course modules and duration, to enhance the effectiveness of managing converts from the pre-, during, and post-conversion phases (Abdullah et al., 2017). Moreover, Long et al. (2019), in their research on Quranic learning resources in the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia, recommended that various missionary institutions should intensify their efforts to ensure more effective Quranic education for converts through various technologically relevant delivery methods. This need can be addressed through the implementation of an e-profiling system, enabling the monitoring of converts by relevant parties.

The Muslim community's support is pivotal for new converts, and Malaysia boasts a network of Muslim convert support groups and organizations. These entities foster a sense of belonging, offering not only camaraderie but also practical assistance. Through organizing events, gatherings, and workshops, they promote social bonds among converts, offer mutual aid, and address the unique challenges confronting new Muslims. In this inclusive environment, converts can openly share their experiences, seek guidance, and cultivate lasting friendships with fellow believers.

Dali et al. (2016) identified a highly effective method for conveying the message to newly converted Muslims: personal visits to their homes, engaging in meaningful conversations, and identifying their specific challenges. Subsequently, tailored assistance can be provided to alleviate the difficulties they face. A compassionate and considerate approach is essential to ensure converts do not feel pressured or isolated during their post-conversion journey. Furthermore, implementing an e-profiling system can prove invaluable for monitoring, visiting, and offering support to new converts.

The new Muslim converts also face some social integration issues. Facilitating integration into the broader Muslim community and Malaysian society is a critical aspect of supporting Muslim converts in Malaysia. Various initiatives ensure the inclusion and acceptance of new converts within their communities. These measures can include mentorship programs, where experienced Muslims provide guidance and support, aiding new converts in navigating both the religious and social aspects of their new lives. Mosques and Islamic centres play an active role in fostering integration, offering spaces for worship, educational activities, and community engagement.

In the realm of awareness and education, the Malaysian government and Islamic authorities diligently work to enhance awareness of the rights and responsibilities of new converts. This effort includes promoting

understanding and tolerance among the broader society, and dispelling misconceptions about Islam and converts. Public campaigns, educational materials, and outreach programs are utilized to create a more inclusive and informed society that respects the rights of Muslim converts. The strategic use of media in Islamic propagation and monitoring converts can be highly effective in disseminating knowledge related to Islam (Salim, 2020; Stoica, 2011). It is worth noting that while the management of Muslim converts in Malaysia encompasses these general aspects, specific approaches and practices may vary among different states and regions within the country. Consequently, while numerous studies have explored issues related to Muslim converts, there remains a dearth of research on the new approach to managing Muslim converts, especially concerning long-term monitoring and support.

There is a pressing need for continuous guidance and education, particularly concerning Islamic teachings and understanding the Quran. As such, the approach to propagating the faith to them should be attuned to the current context and environment. Research has revealed that a pivotal factor in new converts embracing Islam is their interactions with friends and family members who have converted. Additionally, some conversions are motivated by marriage. In this context, studies have found that most Muslim converts embark on their Quranic journey through religious classes organized by missionary institutions, commencing with the book '*Iqra*'. They endeavour to comprehend Quranic verses using exegesis (*tafsir*) texts.

Furthermore, accessing reliable sources of Islamic knowledge and guidance can be a challenge for new converts. While Malaysia has Islamic institutions and organizations that provide support to Muslims (Majid, Kawangit & Guleng, 2015), these resources may not always be easily accessible or well-equipped to cater specifically to the needs of converts. Language barriers, limited availability of guidance materials in local languages, or lack of targeted programs for converts can hinder their progress in learning and practising their newfound faith.

In recent years, efforts have been made by various organizations and religious authorities in Malaysia to address these challenges and provide support to new converts. These initiatives include programs and classes specifically tailored for converts, mentorship opportunities, counselling services, and the development of resources in local languages. These endeavours aim to ensure that new converts have access to proper education, guidance, and emotional support, helping them navigate their journey and integrate into the Muslim community more effectively.

Overall, the issues faced by Muslim converts in Malaysia are multifaceted and require a comprehensive approach to address the various challenges they encounter. By promoting awareness, providing support networks, and developing accessible educational resources, efforts can be made to alleviate the concerns of new converts and facilitate their integration into the wider Muslim community.

Problems and Issues in the Management of Muslim Converts

The challenges faced by converts, such as the loss of social networks, familial disconnection, job insecurity, and other difficulties, are not unique to Malaysia. They also affect converts in Europe, as highlighted by Younis and Hassan (2017) and Moosavi (2015). Therefore, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive support system for converts, encompassing various dimensions, including religious knowledge, financial assistance, social relationships, protection, moral support, and motivation to navigate dilemmas and cope with mental health issues, life pressures, and the substantial changes they encounter upon embracing Islam, as noted by al-Qudsy and Hamidi (2020) and Suleiman (2013, 2016).

Continual support is essential to help converts rebuild their lives and foster a deeper understanding and consistent practice of Islamic teachings. Research by Abu Bakar and Ismail (2018) reveals the formation of collaborative networks among various agencies, encompassing aspects such as conversion and registration, education, joint programs, pilgrimage, charity, funds, and meetings. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are instances where converts are left without the necessary support and monitoring actions they require. Moreover, collaborative efforts between government and non-government agencies in managing converts in Malaysia take various forms and are contingent on the state. To address these challenges, the study recommends emphasizing the systematic and efficient implementation of *da'wah* management for new converts to ensure the widespread and steady dissemination of desired religious teachings.

Additionally, the study underscores the necessity of drafting laws and policies for converts in Malaysia and advocates for the establishment of a planned and comprehensive cooperation network to manage the affairs of converts in each state (Abu Bakar & Ismail, 2018). As new converts to Islam, individuals often require ongoing support, assistance, and consistent guidance as they strive to deepen their understanding of the faith. According to Zin & Abdullah (2018), Lahmar (2018) also emphasizes the need to enhance the support system, making it more efficient for those who have recently embraced Islam. This is crucial because new converts often face significant changes, pressures, and challenges as they adapt to a Muslim way of life.

The responsibility for providing this support typically falls on the Department of Islamic Religion in each state, which stores essential data and offers guidance to converts during their initial phases of embracing Islam. This proximity allows for a more direct connection between the department and new converts.

However, effectively monitoring the needs of these converts can be challenging due to the absence of a comprehensive data system that can track individuals scattered across various regions of the state. Despite efforts by JAKIM to establish the e-Muallaf 1.0 and 2.0 systems, the focus seems to be on central authority initiatives. While these websites play a significant role in disseminating information and facilitating conversions to Islam, it is also essential for the Department of Religion in each state to have its website. This website could include a detailed e-profiling system, which provides comprehensive and integrated data based on expert and stakeholder input, particularly from the Department of Islamic Religion in each state.

The absence of a systematic plan to monitor and track the development of understanding of Islam by the relevant authorities has given rise to various issues. Among these issues are the challenges faced by Muslim converts who wish to return to their original religion or convert to another faith. Studies indicate that some of the problems encountered by the new Muslim convert community include a lack of Islamic guidance, unfamiliarity with prayer (*solah*), inability to read the Quran, apostasy, poverty, unemployment, workplace issues, family rejection, housing problems, difficulty assimilating into the Muslim community, and more (Don et al, 2017).

Furthermore, there are cases where individuals formally register as Muslims but do not practice Islamic teachings. This phenomenon occurs because many Muslim converts feel abandoned without monitoring, support, and assistance from relevant authorities after their conversion. Based on observations and interactions with researchers and officials responsible for Muslim converts affairs at Kompleks Darul Hidayah in Permatang Tok Gelam, Pulau Pinang, more serious cases arise when some new Muslim converts apply to renounce Islam, citing that their conversion was involuntary, and they never truly practised Islamic teachings after declaring the *shahadah*. However, their arguments cannot be countered in court by representatives from the State Department of Islamic Religion due to the lack of supporting data to prove that they genuinely embraced Islam willingly and attended Islamic education classes while practising Islamic teachings.

This situation is exacerbated by the absence of an e-profiling system, preventing efficient access to up-to-date data on demographics, issues, and understanding of Islam, and religious practices. This hinders efforts to carry out effective religious outreach (*da'wah*) and achieve the desired objectives. More dishearteningly, due to the lack of monitoring, support, and guidance, a significant number of new converts are determined to leave Islam (Rusli & Kadir, 2022). For instance, according to Muhammad et al (2018), from 2011 to 2015, there were a total of 81 apostasy applications, with the majority coming from the Indian community (63 cases), followed by 16 cases from the Chinese community, and a few cases from the Punjabi and Filipino communities. According to Arif (2014), when divorce occurs among Muslim converts, they typically return to their original faith, claiming that they never truly practised Islam in their daily lives.

In this regard, the primary issue to be investigated pertains to the need for establishing an online system that can facilitate the management of new Muslim convert's affairs by the State Islamic Religious Departments and indirectly provide support to Muslim converts in addressing the challenges of post-conversion life. In alignment with this aspiration, this study proposes the creation of a framework for an online e-profiling system for Muslim converts, which can provide detailed data accessible online.

Due to cases where Muslim converts provide false addresses, using the addresses of others to conceal their conversion from their families and for security reasons, location mapping of Muslim converts can help identify the actual residences of Muslim converts so that comprehensive information can be recorded, and monitoring can be carried out more effectively. This is where the framework of this system can provide a platform using internet technology and the Geographical Information System (GIS) that contains data on Muslim converts, which can be utilized by the State Department of Islamic Religion to execute Muslim converts affairs management services more systematically and efficiently. GIS connects data to a map by combining location data with other forms of descriptive information, providing a basis for mapping and analysis that is used by practically every government organisation.

A study focusing on the development of the 'framework' for the e-profiling system for Muslim converts will include a 'space' that can be filled with essential data required by the authorities responsible for managing converts, particularly the State Department of Islamic Religion in the respective states. This data will pertain to the individual profiles, classes attended, understanding of Islam, practice of Islamic teachings, challenges faced, needed assistance, and more.

The items integrated into the framework of the e-profiling system for converts will be designed based on the needs identified through expert interviews and discussions with officers from the State Department of Islamic Religion. Therefore, the effort to establish an e-profiling system framework for converts is highly significant in the current scenario. It aims to improve the management of new Muslim brothers and sisters by utilizing the latest technology applications.

The e-profiling system framework can be employed by the State Department of Islamic Religion to establish a comprehensive database of converts within their respective departments, integrating data from new converts in their regions. As a result, this data will be readily accessible to all relevant stakeholders, facilitating coordinated management of converts. This collaborative effort extends beyond the State Department of Islamic Religion and encompasses federal administrative bodies like JAKIM, as well as non-governmental organizations such as the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization (PERKIM), Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF), and others.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a primarily qualitative methodology, integrating descriptive and interpretive approaches. The qualitative dimension focuses on delving into the nuanced experiences of individuals who have converted to Islam. Textual information from academic journals and research forms the basis of this exploration, providing a rich source for in-depth insights (Elliot & Timulak, 2021). Concurrently, the descriptive component involves a meticulous exploration of the multifaceted challenges encountered by Muslim converts. Through a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, researchers aim to identify patterns, themes, and recurring ideas in order to offer a holistic understanding.

The interpretative methods employed in this study serve to analyze and extract meaningful insights from data collected across various sources. By engaging in content analysis and interpretative inquiry, the research aims to uncover both subjective understanding and objective exploration present in the literature (Lichtman, 2014; Elliot & Timulak, 2021). Academic journals and research are meticulously consulted to enrich the analysis and ensure a thorough exploration of experiences and challenges faced by Muslim converts.

Drawing upon the insights gleaned from these sources, this study proposes the implementation of an e-profiling system as a strategic approach to address the identified issues and challenges. This suggested e-profiling system aims to offer tailored solutions and support for the specific needs of Muslim converts. Grounded in the nuanced perspectives derived from the gathered data, the proposed system seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals who have embraced Islam.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Imperative for a Digital Profiling System in Managing Muslim Converts

The management of Muslim converts in Malaysia involves a comprehensive approach, encompassing various aspects such as legal procedures, religious education, community support, social integration, and continuous monitoring. Central to this process is the active involvement of the Malaysian government and Islamic authorities, who play a crucial role in overseeing and facilitating the conversion to Islam while also providing support to new converts. This study proposes specific criteria for an e-profiling system designed to streamline the management of new Muslim converts, as outlined in the following chart:

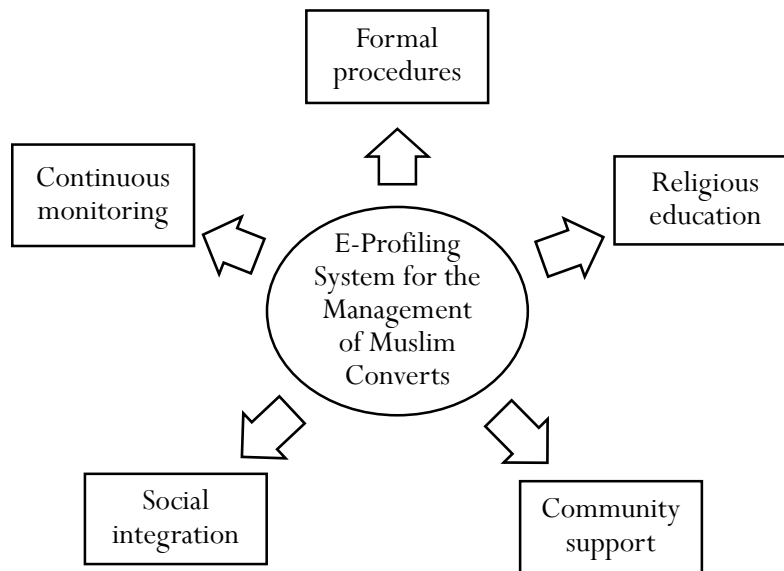


Diagram 1: The Proposed E-Profiling System for Managing Muslim Converts in Malaysia

Formal Procedures

The legal framework governing religious freedom in Malaysia, as outlined in the Federal Constitution, plays a pivotal role in the conversion process to Islam. The study by Samuri and Khan (2021) emphasizes the formalities at the State Department of Islamic Religion or the Shariah Court, highlighting the steps involved, such as faith declaration, counselling sessions, and the acquisition of fundamental Islamic knowledge leading to the issuance of a conversion certificate.

The integration of a digital profiling framework into these formal procedures aligns with Malaysia Madani policy, underscoring the nation's commitment to leveraging digital technology in the service industry for increased efficiency. This technological intervention can systematically track the progress of converts through their legal journey, ensuring adherence to required steps and timely issuance of conversion certificates, thereby aligning with the overarching goals of the Malaysia Madani policy.

Religious Education

Despite the availability of educational programs for new converts in various Islamic institutions, the study reveals persistent inadequacies in their understanding of Islam post-conversion (Kasim et al., 2017; Shaharuddin et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2021). The proposed e-profiling system emerges as a strategic tool for monitoring and enhancing religious education. By tracking participation in classes and courses, the system aims to provide valuable data to ensure a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings, ultimately mitigating challenges associated with insufficient comprehension.

Furthermore, the study suggests a modernized approach to religious education, extending beyond traditional classrooms to include contemporary communication technologies. Utilizing platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter, Telegram, and other relevant mediums holds the potential to transcend geographical limitations (Stoica, 2011). This facilitates the widespread propagation of Islamic teachings to Muslim converts irrespective of their location, and concurrently reaches a global audience.

Community Support

The study underscores the significance of community support for new converts in Malaysia. Support groups and organizations within the Muslim community offer essential assistance, fostering a sense of belonging, as suggested by al-Qudsy and Hamidi (2020), Suleiman (2013, 2016), Zin & Abdullah (2018), and Lahmar (2018). The integration of an e-profiling system into this context seeks to facilitate the coordination of community support efforts. By tracking the involvement of new converts in events, gatherings, and workshops, the system aims to ensure they receive the necessary support, promoting a seamless integration into the Muslim community.

Social Integration

The findings acknowledge the crucial efforts to integrate new converts into the broader Muslim community and Malaysian society, as proposed by Dali et al. (2016). The e-profiling system is suggested as a tool to monitor and enhance social integration. By tracking involvement in mentorship programs, mosque activities, and community engagement, the system seeks to ensure active participation in initiatives that support both the religious and social aspects of the converts' new lives.

Continuous Monitoring

The discussion underscores the multifaceted role of an e-profiling system in continuous monitoring. This system efficiently collects and stores vital information about new Muslim converts, including personal details, educational backgrounds, and conversion records. Such a comprehensive approach enables tailored support and educational programs, as suggested by Salim (2020).

Furthermore, the e-profiling system facilitates continuous tracking of progress through learning modules, attendance records, and legal documentation, as pointed out by Abdullah et al. (2017) and Long et al. (2019). The integration of communication features, alerts, and privacy measures emphasizes the system's potential to foster effective ongoing support and engagement with new converts.

In summary, the incorporation of an e-profiling system emerges as a comprehensive solution to streamline and enhance the continuous monitoring process of new Muslim converts in Malaysia. By amalgamating data collection, progress tracking, legal documentation, communication, and support into a centralized platform, the proposed system aligns with the objectives of the religious department, contributing to a more efficient and effective management system.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the urgent need for a digital profiling system to manage Muslim converts in Malaysia is emphasized by comprehensive research findings and existing gaps in the management of conversion affairs. This necessity stems from the escalating number of converts and the inherent challenges faced by the State Department of Islamic Religion in effectively monitoring and supporting them.

Previous studies have highlighted a significant gap: the absence of a dedicated and comprehensive conversion database system, particularly at the State Department of Islamic Religion level. While initiatives such as the e-Muallaf 1.0 and 2.0 systems by JAKIM aim to streamline the conversion process, they may not fully encompass the broader requirements of managing converts. To address these evolving needs, it is recommended that the State Department of Islamic Religion establishes dedicated e-profile systems.

Acknowledging the crucial responsibility of the State Department of Islamic Religion in overseeing conversion affairs for a five-year period post-conversion, the creation of a customized e-profile system is not only of great

importance but also aligns with the present requirements of Malaysia. This system has the potential to bring about a transformation in the management of conversion affairs by facilitating the collection, organization, and convenient access to detailed data on converts.

Moreover, the proposed e-profile system can seamlessly integrate with a central administrative website, fostering procedural standardization, enhancing monitoring capabilities, and facilitating inter-agency cooperation. This integration will bridge existing gaps in Muslim converts management, ensuring that detailed data is readily available, organized, and accessible to the State Department of Islamic Religion and other relevant authorities.

In summary, the implementation of a digital profiling system transcends a mere technological upgrade; it represents a pivotal stride towards enhancing the support and oversight of Muslim converts in Malaysia. This innovative system holds the potential to create a more efficient and responsive infrastructure, aligning with the evolving needs of a dynamic society and contributing to the overall well-being of new converts. As the number of converts continues to rise, this technological innovation is paramount for the sustained success of conversion affairs management in Malaysia.

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