

UNDERSTANDING THE IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF MUSLIM STUDENTS WITH HIJAB IN SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

Muslim hijabi students in South Korea face unique challenges as visible minorities in a culturally homogenous academic setting. The hijab symbolizes “foreignness,” triggering stereotypes, microaggressions, social exclusion, and tokenism. Campus traditions, such as membership training involving alcohol, further complicate these challenges. This study aims to understand how Muslim hijabi students negotiate their identity and adapt to South Korean culture. By using Identity Negotiation Theory, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research examines the experiences of 7 students who have studied in South Korea for minimum one semester. Findings reveal that identity negotiation and adaptation are dynamic processes involving challenges, strategy application, cultural responses, and outcomes. Strategies include modifying hijab styles, selective social circle, and educating others. Adaptation occurs through assimilation, accommodation, and separation. These efforts result in both positive (acceptance and respect) and negative (exclusion and isolation) social responses. The study highlights the importance of intercultural communication competence, such as cultural awareness, communication skills, self-acceptance, and pre-departure preparation, in helping Muslim hijabi students.

Keywords: Identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, Muslim students, hijab

Abstrak

Mahasiswa Muslim berhijab di Korea Selatan menghadapi tantangan unik sebagai minoritas yang terlihat secara fisik dalam lingkungan akademik yang homogen secara budaya. Hijab sering kali melambangkan “keasingan” yang memicu stereotipe, mikroagresi, eksklusi sosial, dan tokenisme. Tradisi kampus, seperti kegiatan membership training yang melibatkan konsumsi alkohol, semakin memperumit tantangan tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana mahasiswa Muslim berhijab menegosiasikan identitas mereka dan beradaptasi dengan budaya Korea Selatan. Dengan menggunakan *Identity Negotiation Theory*, *Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory*, dan metode *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)*, penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman tujuh mahasiswa yang telah menempuh studi di Korea Selatan selama minimal satu semester. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa proses negosiasi identitas dan adaptasi bersifat dinamis, mencakup tantangan, penerapan strategi, respons budaya, dan hasil akhir. Strategi yang digunakan meliputi modifikasi gaya berhijab, pemilihan lingkaran sosial secara selektif, serta edukasi kepada orang lain. Proses adaptasi dilakukan melalui pendekatan asimilasi, akomodasi, dan separasi. Upaya-upaya ini

menghasilkan respons sosial yang beragam, baik positif (penerimaan dan penghormatan) maupun negatif (penolakan dan keterasingan). Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya kompetensi komunikasi antarbudaya, seperti kesadaran budaya, keterampilan komunikasi, penerimaan diri, dan persiapan sebelum keberangkatan, dalam mendukung mahasiswa Muslim berhijab menjalani kehidupan di lingkungan budaya yang berbeda.

Kata kunci: negosiasi identitas, adaptasi budaya, komunikasi antarbudaya, mahasiswa Muslim, hijab

INTRODUCTION

Muslim students wearing the hijab in South Korea have particular difficulties navigating their life in academic environments as visible minority. As a kind of mode or fashion, the hijab conveys an identity that is inseparable with the wearer. The hijab represents various aspects of identity for Muslim women, including religious devotion, cultural expression, modesty, and empowerment, reflecting its complex role in shaping both personal and social identities (Kadir, 2024). By being noticeable minorities through their inseparable identity in academic contexts, they run against opposing views from their surrounds about Muslims who wear the hijab. Standing out among the majority within the academic community, Muslim students wearing the hijab often face social isolation, as their visible identity creates a boundary that leads others to distance themselves, reinforcing their sense of not belonging (Karaman & Christian, 2020). In other words, due to its religious identification, the hijab

sets off prejudices and discrimination that compromise a Muslim student's interactions in social and academic spheres. Particularly when Muslim students adjust to new standards without sacrificing the core of their beliefs, this difficult situation unavoidably forces Muslim students wearing a hijab to find common ground with their identities.

Unfortunately, in a culturally contrasting contexts, the hijab as a cultural symbol frequently becomes the object of bias and unfavorable generalizations. In this case, effective intercultural communication becomes difficult as a result of these glaring cultural differences. Especially among South Korean students, the hijab is perceived as a form of gender inequality and oppression. They underline how the Islamic custom, which advocates for women to protect themselves by wearing a hijab, is viewed as an antiquated style, reminiscent of the Confucian patriarchy of the Chosun dynasty, when women were compelled to wear scarves or headdresses as a form of self-defense (Kim & Kang, 2022). This showcase one of the

factors why women in hijab are considered prone to racialization due to that kind of outgoing understanding in South Korea, especially on the students point of view. Since the hijab is commonly linked to particular opinions about Muslims, both individually and collectively, the looks, questions, and stereotypes aimed at hijabi Muslims are a reflection of ongoing cultural tensions.

In the context of studying or staying abroad, particularly within diverse cultural environments, this conflicting situation creates a sense of "in-betweenness," where hijabi Muslim students must navigate between two extremes: full acceptance and total rejection. Muslim women who wear the hijab frequently express a stronger sense of religious centrality, which may worsen their sense of isolation in environments where their identity is not widely understood or accepted (Hashem & Awad, 2024). This feeling is doubled and even more intense for a Muslim woman wearing the hijab. It can be seen that the hijab has political and social implications in addition to religious ones, and its visual requirement serves as a barrier that tells students that women wearing the hijab are the most misunderstood, uncomfortable, and feared individuals (Karaman & Christian, 2020). The existence of differences that are

clearly visible actually makes women who wear the hijab become isolated figures from the social circle.

In conclusion, overcoming intercultural communication barriers demands a thorough comprehension of communication tactics that promote minority communities' acceptance in dominant societies, such as Muslim hijabis who are easily identifiable. Identity negotiation theory states that during interactions, people try to preserve a positive sense of both their personal and collective identities (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Through this process of overcoming cultural differences, people can communicate more meaningfully and cooperatively. Building positive intergroup relationships is especially facilitated by strategies like empathetic inclusion, open communication, and active listening (Littlejohn et al., 2016). In order to navigate cultural norms, gain social acceptance, and uphold their Islamic values, Muslim students in South Korea must negotiate their identity. These students use varied strategies to prevent discrimination and promote mutual understanding. Therefore, this research aims to understand the identity negotiation and cultural adaptation of Muslim students with hijab who pursue their study in South Korea.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpretive Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm is significant in understanding how Muslim students who use the hijab negotiate their identities and adapt to being a Muslim minority in South Korean university, a condition where Muslims do not make up the majority of the population. Greater emphasis is placed on the broad spectrum of concepts associated with context in interpretivism. As a result, new social realities emerge as a result of the interpretive paradigm's ability to provide a more nuanced understanding of culture, context, and time (Lim, 2024). This can certainly be of assistance in taking into consideration a variety of factors. By that, this includes behavioural aspects that are based on the experiences of the participants, assisting in the description of reality based on assumptions and beliefs, and enabling the research context and its situation to be treated as unique by taking into consideration the related circumstances and participants involved (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019).

Identity Negotiation Theory

The main theory that will be conducted for this research will be focusing on Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) developed by Stella Ting Toomey. The

primary concept of this theory of identity negotiation within the intercultural communication setting is the idea that each person must negotiate their own desired identity through their interactions with different cultures (Martin & Nakayama, 2017).

Stella Ting Toomey highlights that individuals manage the tension between personal and cultural identities by balancing self-perception with respect for others. In this theory, value content, or cultural values that dictate our priorities, and salience, or the strength of our identification with a group in a given situation, are the two components of identity negotiation (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Also, this process involves establishing intercultural competence through knowledge of identity, awareness, and negotiation skills to foster mutual understanding and respect in diverse cultural contexts, ultimately aiming for functional biculturalism (Littlejohn et al., 2016).

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

In social cultural life, when someone from one culture enters a different culture, a process of adaptation to the new culture is necessary. Young Yun Kim explains that cultural adaptation is a long-term process of adjustment that ultimately leads to feeling

comfortable in a new environment (Martin & Nakayama, 2017). This is particularly relevant to the context of hijab-wearing Muslim students who adhere to Islamic culture when they enter a culture where the majority do not follow Muslim practices, or where Muslims are a small minority.

The theory emphasizes the dynamic process through communication, where individuals learn and re-examine cultural patterns when interacting with foreign cultures through the dynamics of stress, adaptation, and growth (Bennett, 2015). The process is relevant to the context of interpersonal communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Through the cultural adaptation process, individuals inevitably undergo personal changes as a result of adjusting to conditions in the new culture. In Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory, there are three fundamental elements that underlie intercultural transformation within the adaptation process: functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity (Bennett, 2015).

The Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

The ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries creates a connection

between human intercommunication and the cultural features of everyday life. Culture affects all facets of life, including our attire, food preferences, perceptions of the real world, and approaches for disagreement resolution. Guo-Ming Chen defines intercultural communication competence as the ability to achieve desired outcomes in intercultural settings (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Chen declares four main dimension within the elements of intercultural communication competence which include personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adaptation, and cultural awareness.

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to conduct this research, a qualitative method is used. Qualitative method is interpretive in nature, emphasizing the researchers' continuous and immersive interactions with participants where it presents strategic, ethical, and personal considerations within the qualitative research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The method aligns with this research to understand and explore within the experience of how Muslim students with hijab who study in South Korea negotiate their visible identity and adapt within different cultural circumstances.

In conducting data collection, this research will use in-depth interviews with 7 Muslim hijabi students who are currently studying or have studied in South Korea as a student for minimum one semester. Therefore, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method used to explore and understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2021). By carefully examining participants' experiences from their own points of view, IPA seeks to gather rich, in-depth descriptions that represent the feelings, ideas, and meanings individuals attach to these experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Identity Negotiation Process of Muslim Hijabi Students in South Korea

Identity negotiation serves as a mechanism for these students to express their unique identities, aiming for acknowledgment, understanding, and respect from their surroundings within both academic and social environments. Upon analyzing the identity negotiation process of Muslim hijabi students in higher education within South Korea, a sequential pattern became evident. This pattern includes several important stages:

(1) The initial challenges related to identity faced by visibly Muslim individuals; (2) The choice of particular strategies for negotiating their identity; (3) The reactions from the surrounding cultural context; and (4) The final outcomes that illustrate the results of their negotiation process. The ideal outcome of identity negotiation is to achieve respect and acceptance within the host environment; however, the findings indicate that there are cases where these negotiation efforts lead to rejection or a lack of recognition. This underscores the constantly shifting and multifaceted process of identity negotiation.

a. Main Identity Negotiation Struggle

The challenges are caused by existing stigma, preconceptions, and unfavourable opinions that arise from the general public's and South Korean students' limited exposure to cultural and religious diversity. In this situation, the hijab transcends its function as a religious symbol and takes on the appearance of a "foreignness" signifying an identity that deviates from the prevailing cultural standards. Subtle but

persistent forms of microaggressions, such as stares, mindless questions like *"Do you shower with your hijab?"* and intentional tokenism (where hijabi students are automatically positioned as the only representatives of Islam in academic discussions or classroom settings) are frequently triggered by this feeling of foreignness. These interactions show how the hijab, as a visible identity, reinforces the feeling of social isolation and otherness in the academic setting by erecting symbolic and communicative walls that prevent full inclusion.

b. Identity Negotiation Strategy

The identity negotiation strategies utilised by Muslim hijabi students included enhancing communication skills, promoting psychological adaptation, and increasing intercultural awareness. Each strategy demonstrates a deliberate attempt to reconcile cultural differences and reduce the conflict between personal identity and societal expectations. A key

strategy involved negotiating visible identity through the adjustment of hijab. Certain informants re-contextualised their hijab by adopting less conservative styles, including turbans or hoodies, which facilitated their navigation of public and academic spaces with diminished social friction. This adjustment was not solely aesthetic but signified a strategic compromise to reconcile their religious practice with the sociocultural realities of residing in a predominantly non-Muslim environment.

Moreover, the respondents exhibited a flexible approach to religious practices, particularly in their adaptation of daily routines; for instance, they identified alternative prayer spaces in stairwells, vacant classrooms, or mall fitting rooms. Social engagement was addressed in a strategic manner. Informants demonstrated selectivity in the formation of social circles, deliberately opting for environments and friendships that

embraced their Muslim identity while minimising dependence on exclusionary norms, such as drinking culture. The students employed various strategies to negotiate their identities, enabling them to maintain authenticity to their beliefs while effectively integrating into the academic and social environment of South Korean university life.

c. Cultural Response and Outcomes in Identity Negotiation

Muslim hijabi students in South Korea make use of various identity negotiation strategies, resulting in a range of responses from their environment affecting their social interactions and identity development. Positive responses, including mindful dialogue, open communication, and inclusive facilities, facilitate more effective negotiation. This environment allows students to feel respected, accepted, and empowered to express their identities with increased confidence. Supportive environments promote mutual

understanding and facilitate the successful integration of Muslim hijabi students while allowing them to remain true to their beliefs.

Nonetheless, not all experiences are approached with openness. Negative responses, such as one-sided listening, ignorance, subtle exclusion, or social distancing, frequently interfere with the identity negotiation process. These reactions may exacerbate feelings of marginalisation, instigate internal identity conflict, and lead students to withdraw from the host culture. In such instances, identity negotiation is challenged, and attempts to reconcile cultural differences encounter opposition, resulting in separation instead of integration.

2. Cultural Adaptation Process of Muslim Hijabi Students in South Korea

The cultural adaptation of Muslim hijabi students in South Korea involves considerable stress, arising from conflicts between their home culture and the norms of the host society. Students face numerous challenges that jeopardise their cultural and religious continuity: the

prevalence of drinking culture frequently marginalises them from campus social activities; language barriers impede effective communication; their unique appearance attracts unwarranted attention; access to prayer facilities is restricted; halal food options are limited; and stereotypes related to hijab endure. The accumulated stressors lead to marginalisation and initiate a cultural identity crisis, wherein students face challenges in reconciling religious integrity with social adaptation pressures.

Muslim hijabi students utilise various adaptation strategies to navigate these tensions, which can be analysed through the frameworks of assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation entails modifications such as altering hijab styles to conform to local fashion trends, thereby diminishing their prominence. Accommodation is demonstrated when students actively inform peers or faculty about their religious practices, such as designated prayer times, or pursue practical alternatives, such as utilising stairwells or classrooms as temporary prayer spaces. Separation denotes a deliberate disengagement from local social networks, supplanted by the

establishment of Muslim peer groups that offer cultural and emotional assistance.

Students who establish a sustainable routine by engaging in group projects, navigating social expectations, and addressing dietary and religious needs typically develop functional fitness within the host environment over time. The students demonstrate enhanced psychological well-being, evidenced by their emotional resilience, confidence in addressing cultural misunderstandings, and a cultivated inner peace through the establishment of safe spaces. For some individuals, cultural adaptation may entail avoidance behaviours, such as restricting interactions with local peers or refraining from engaging in intercultural friendships. This form of separation may protect emotional boundaries; however, it also indicates a withdrawal into familiar areas, thereby limiting opportunities for deeper intercultural engagement and the formation of a more integrated bicultural identity.

3. The Role of Intercultural Communication Competence in Identity and Adaptation

Intercultural communication competence, which includes personal attributes, communication skills,

psychological adaptation, and cultural awareness, is essential for Muslim hijabi students as they navigate life in South Korea. Muslim hijabi students develop significant personal attributes through self-awareness and emotional regulation, as evidenced by their preparation prior to departure and their capacity to maintain composure in response to microaggressions. Their communication skills are demonstrated through their respectful education of peers regarding their religious identity, negotiation of needs (such as prayer spaces or halal food), and adaptation of communication styles to Korean norms, all while exhibiting active listening and empathy. These behaviours demonstrate deliberate identity negotiation and promote mutual understanding within an unfamiliar cultural context.

Moreover, psychological adaptation and cultural awareness are critical for fostering students' resilience and integration. Students, despite experiencing emotional distress due to exclusionary practices, drinking culture, and insufficient religious accommodations, depend on faith, self-acceptance, and academic commitment to sustain their well-being and sense of

purpose. Their cultural awareness is evident in their proactive engagement with Korean norms, adaptation of external appearances in accordance with religious constraints, and reframing of cultural misunderstandings without internalising feelings of rejection. The intercultural communication competence enables Muslim hijabi students to maintain their identity while fostering significant cross-cultural relationships in a society that frequently encounters them with unfamiliarity.

CONCLUSION

The present research shows that Muslim hijabi students in South Korean universities engage in intricate identity negotiation and cross-cultural adaptation processes influenced by their visible religious identity within a culturally homogeneous environment. Students encounter challenges such as microaggressions, stereotyping, and exclusion, which often worsen by differing norms, such as the drinking culture. In response, they apply strategies including hijab adjustment, selective social participation, and educational dialogue to assert their identity while navigating their environment. These strategies correspond with the dimensions of intercultural

communication competence and illustrate the concepts of assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Thus, successful outcomes is based by the presence of supportive or unsupportive responses from the host environment. This underscores the critical role of intercultural communication competence in facilitating identity negotiation, resilience, and meaningful integration within a predominantly non-Muslim academic context.

RECOMMENDATION

The research suggests that future research should investigate the experiences of Muslim hijabi students in additional non-Muslim majority countries and incorporate a wider range of participant profiles to yield more comprehensive comparative insights. Broadening the scope across regions and employing longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches can enhance comprehension of how intersecting factors such as nationality, language, and personal background affect identity negotiation and cultural adaptation over time.

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