

The Impact of Cross-Cultural Learning on Islamic Religious Identity among Muslim Students Abroad

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 29, 2025

Revised Aug 25, 2025

Accepted Sep 27, 2025

Online First Sep 29, 2025

Keywords:

Cross-Cultural Learning

Global Muslim Identity

Islamic Religious Identity

Reflective Religiosity

Spiritual Resilience

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to analyze the impact of cross-cultural learning experiences on the formation and transformation of Islamic religious identity among Muslim students studying abroad. It explores how exposure to multicultural educational settings influences their faith, behavior, and understanding of Islam.

Methodology: This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of 15 Muslim students from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan studying in Turkey and Malaysia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and reflective journals, and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework.

Main Findings: The results show that cross-cultural learning strengthens students' religious identity through five main processes: reflective faith development, adaptive worship practices, intercultural dialogue, community-based support, and the emergence of a global Muslim identity. Students demonstrated spiritual resilience, deeper religious understanding, and intercultural competence while maintaining Islamic values in pluralistic environments.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study introduces a holistic framework linking cross-cultural learning with Islamic religious identity formation. It highlights the role of intercultural engagement as a form of *reflective religiosity* that strengthens faith through dialogue and adaptation. The findings advance the field of Islamic education by positioning cross-cultural experience as a pedagogical model for fostering *wasatiyyah*, resilience, and global Muslim consciousness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, international mobility in education has become increasingly common among students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds [1], [2]. Muslim students, in particular, are now pursuing their studies abroad in countries with different cultural, social, and religious contexts [3], [4]. This global learning experience provides opportunities for intellectual and personal growth while also posing challenges to the preservation of Islamic religious identity. The encounter with pluralistic societies encourages Muslim students to negotiate between maintaining their faith and adapting to new cultural norms [5]-[7].

Journal homepage: <http://cahaya-ic.com/index.php/JPAAI>

Therefore, understanding how cross-cultural learning shapes their religious identity has become a significant issue in contemporary Islamic education studies.

Islamic education is not only concerned with religious knowledge but also with the cultivation of faith, ethics, and spiritual awareness in daily life [8], [9]. When Muslim students are exposed to multicultural environments, their understanding and expression of Islam often undergo transformation. The interaction with different worldviews and moral systems compels them to reinterpret their beliefs within a broader humanistic framework. Such encounters can either strengthen their faith through reflection or weaken it due to cultural assimilation pressures. Hence, the dynamics of Islamic identity formation in cross-cultural settings deserve deeper exploration within the framework of global education [10], [11].

The process of maintaining Islamic identity abroad can be understood through the lens of cross-cultural adaptation theory, which explains how individuals adjust to new cultural systems while preserving their core values [12], [13]. In this context, religious identity acts as a stabilizing factor that provides a sense of continuity and belonging. However, exposure to secular educational systems and diverse belief structures may lead to cognitive dissonance or moral negotiation [14], [15]. These complex interactions between cultural adaptation and spiritual resilience remain underexplored in existing Islamic education literature [10], [16], [17]. Thus, it is essential to examine how such experiences influence Muslim students' religious self-concept and behavioral expressions.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the challenges faced by Muslim minorities in Western countries, emphasizing issues of discrimination, integration, and cultural adjustment [18], [19]. However, very few have investigated how the *learning process itself*—as a form of cross-cultural engagement—affects students' internalization of Islamic values. Most existing works treat identity as a static construct rather than a dynamic outcome of intercultural interaction and educational experience. This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing the transformative nature of religious identity shaped through academic and social encounters abroad. The study positions learning not merely as knowledge acquisition but as a cultural negotiation process influencing one's spiritual and moral consciousness.

The novelty of this study lies in its holistic examination of how cross-cultural learning environments contribute to both the reinforcement and reconstruction of Islamic identity among Muslim students. Unlike prior research that isolates religious identity from educational experience, this study integrates both dimensions under a unified analytical framework. It explores identity transformation through academic engagement, social participation, and intercultural communication [20], [21]. Furthermore, it considers the agency of students in redefining their faith within inclusive and pluralistic educational spaces. By doing so, the research offers new insights into how Islamic education can respond to globalization without losing its spiritual authenticity.

This research has strong significance for Islamic education institutions, policymakers, and educators seeking to internationalize Islamic learning in a culturally sensitive manner. Understanding how Muslim students navigate identity challenges abroad can inform the design of curricula that balance religious fidelity and intercultural openness. It also contributes to the discourse on religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) by showing how exposure to diversity can foster empathy and tolerance among Muslim learners. In addition, the study highlights the importance of developing global Muslim citizenship grounded in Islamic ethics. Such understanding is crucial in shaping future Muslim professionals who are both faithful and adaptive in a globalized world. The main objective of this study is to analyze the impact of cross-cultural learning experiences on the formation and transformation of Islamic religious identity among Muslim students studying abroad.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Type of Research

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological orientation to understand the lived experiences of Muslim students studying abroad [22], [23]. The phenomenological design was chosen to explore how participants interpret and internalize their Islamic religious identity within cross-cultural educational contexts. This approach allows the researcher to capture the depth of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual transformations experienced by the participants [7], [24]. The study does not attempt to generalize findings but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of identity negotiation processes. Through rich narrative data, this research seeks to uncover how cross-cultural encounters contribute to both the challenges and reinforcement of Islamic values.

2.2. Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were Muslim students from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan who are currently pursuing their higher education in developing countries such as Turkey and Malaysia, where Islamic and secular values coexist in multicultural academic settings. A total of 15 participants were purposively selected based on their active engagement in academic and religious communities. The participants represented diverse disciplines, including education, social sciences, and engineering, to ensure a variety of perspectives. This selection allowed the researcher to capture both gender and disciplinary diversity in understanding religious

identity formation. The study location was chosen due to its relevance as a dynamic learning environment where Islamic values interact with global academic culture.

2.3. Research Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

The primary research instrument was the semi-structured interview guide supported by observation and reflective journal analysis [25], [26]. The instrument was designed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on their Islamic identity throughout their cross-cultural learning journey. Interviews were conducted both online and offline, lasting between 45–60 minutes per session, while observations focused on participants' engagement in campus and community activities. Data collection also included participants' reflective journals that describe their spiritual and social adaptation processes. To ensure credibility, data triangulation was applied through multiple sources of information and cross-verification among participants [27], [28].

Table 1. Interview Instrument Grid

Aspect	Indicators	Sample Questions
Religious Identity Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of Islamic teachings • Consistency in worship and practice 	"How has your understanding of Islam evolved since studying abroad?"
Cross-Cultural Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience in adapting to new cultures • Managing cultural and religious differences 	"What challenges do you face in maintaining your religious practices in a multicultural environment?"
Interpersonal and Interfaith Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction with peers from other religions • Response to religious diversity 	"How do your interactions with non-Muslim friends influence your view of Islam?"
Spiritual Resilience and Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coping with spiritual dilemmas • Self-reflection and identity growth 	"What experiences have strengthened or tested your faith during your studies abroad?"
Institutional and Environmental Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of campus or community organizations • Access to Islamic facilities or mentors 	"How does your institution support the maintenance of your religious identity?"

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting [29], [30]. The researcher first transcribed all interviews and organized data from journals and observations into analytical units. Codes were then developed to identify recurring patterns related to cross-cultural adaptation, religious negotiation, and identity transformation [13], [31]. Emerging themes were categorized into major constructs reflecting the study's objectives. Data validation was carried out through peer debriefing and member checking to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

2.5. Research Procedure

The research was conducted through five main stages: (1) preparation, involving literature review and instrument development; (2) participant recruitment, by contacting Muslim students studying in selected countries; (3) data collection, through interviews, observations, and documentation; (4) data analysis, using thematic interpretation; and (5) report writing, presenting the findings and implications for Islamic education. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring participants' confidentiality and voluntary participation. During data collection, rapport was built through informal communication to gain participants' trust. The process lasted approximately three months, combining virtual and face-to-face interactions. The research procedure ensured systematic, ethical, and contextually grounded exploration of the participants' religious identity experiences. The research procedure can be seen in the following image:



Picture 1. Research Procedure

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 15 Muslim students (8 male, 7 female) from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan who were pursuing higher education in Turkey and Malaysia, both of which represent developing countries with diverse cultural and educational systems. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis, resulting in five dominant themes that illustrate the process of identity transformation through cross-cultural learning: (1) strengthening of faith, (2) adaptive strategies for religious practice, (3) identity negotiation, (4) institutional and community support, and (5) emergence of a global Muslim identity. Each theme below is presented with representative interview excerpts, narrative synthesis, and analytical interpretation.

3.1. Strengthening of Faith Through Cross-Cultural Reflection

Based on the results of the interviews that have been conducted, the results obtained are:

"When my non-Muslim classmates asked why I pray five times a day, I realized I didn't know how to explain it deeply. That question pushed me to study the meaning of prayer, not just do it by habit." (Participant 4, Turkey)

"Living here made me see Islam not as something my parents taught me, but as something I personally choose every day." (Participant 7, Malaysia)

Nearly all participants described that studying abroad strengthened their faith and deepened their understanding of Islam. Through encounters with people of different beliefs, they were compelled to reflect critically on the meaning and purpose of their own religious practices. Twelve participants mentioned that the experience of being questioned about Islamic values led them to study the Qur'an, Hadith, and contemporary Islamic thought more intentionally. This intellectual engagement made their faith more reasoned and reflective. For many, Islam became less of a cultural identity and more of a conscious moral commitment.

This finding demonstrates that exposure to religious diversity can serve as a trigger for self-religious awareness. Instead of diminishing their faith, the multicultural setting motivated students to internalize Islamic values more meaningfully [32], [33]. This aligns with the idea that religious identity matures when tested through dialogue and diversity. Participants consistently expressed that their understanding of Islam became more intellectual, personal, and resilient after experiencing life abroad.

3.2. Adaptive Strategies for Maintaining Religious Practice

Based on the results of the interviews that have been conducted, the results obtained are:

"At first, I found it hard to pray on time because classes were back-to-back. Later, I learned to plan my schedule better and used a prayer reminder app." (Participant 2, Malaysia)

"Since there's no mosque near my dorm, my friends and I turned a small room into a mushalla. It became our spiritual space." (Participant 11, Turkey)

Participants encountered several challenges in maintaining their daily worship practices, such as limited access to halal food, prayer facilities, and religious holidays. However, these difficulties did not lead to religious decline; rather, they inspired creative adaptation. Nine students described forming small prayer circles, creating shared reminders for worship times, or establishing online groups to share Islamic reflections. These practices reveal how students converted structural limitations into opportunities for spiritual discipline and community bonding.

The ability to sustain religious routines despite external constraints reflects spiritual resilience—a key dimension of lived faith [34], [35]. Through proactive adjustments, students demonstrated self-regulation and prioritization of religious duties. Such experiences fostered autonomy and responsibility in their spiritual life, strengthening their sense of agency as Muslims in multicultural contexts. Adaptation, therefore, became not only a survival mechanism but a path to deeper faith engagement.

3.3. Negotiating Identity in Multicultural Interactions

"I used to feel nervous when someone asked about Islam, especially about women's rights. But now I see it as a chance to explain Islam properly." (Participant 6, Turkey)

"One of my Christian classmates said she was surprised that Islam also promotes peace and kindness. That conversation changed how she saw Muslims—and how I saw myself." (Participant 10, Malaysia)

Students' daily interactions in classrooms, dormitories, and social activities became dynamic spaces for identity negotiation. Thirteen participants mentioned that they often engaged in conversations about religion,

ethics, and social issues with non-Muslim peers. Initially, these dialogues were uncomfortable, but over time they evolved into platforms for sharing and mutual learning. Students reported feeling more confident in articulating Islamic perspectives with humility and respect.

The process of negotiating identity in a pluralistic setting fostered empathy, openness, and communication skills grounded in Islamic ethics [36], [37]. Students learned to balance their commitment to Islamic principles with respect for differing worldviews—a hallmark of *wasatiyyah* (moderation). Through these interactions, participants embodied Islam as a religion of dialogue and compassion, rather than isolation or defensiveness. The experience thus served as an informal yet powerful form of *da'wah* through example and conversation.

3.4. Institutional and Community Support as Protective Factors

“Our university mosque is small but very active. Every Friday, Muslim students from different countries gather—it feels like home.” (Participant 3, Malaysia)

“When I felt homesick, joining an online Qur'an study group helped me stay connected to my faith.” (Participant 14, Turkey)

Institutional and social environments played a vital role in sustaining students' Islamic identity [38], [39]. Participants emphasized that campus facilities, such as prayer rooms or Muslim student associations, provided psychological comfort and moral reinforcement. Eleven students mentioned participating in weekly halaqah, student-led religious discussions, or virtual Islamic learning sessions. These spaces allowed them to express spirituality collectively and find solidarity amidst cultural differences.

Conversely, participants in less supportive academic environments relied heavily on digital platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram groups for faith-based connection. The findings highlight that social belonging—whether physical or virtual—acts as a protective layer for religious identity. Such communal engagement prevented isolation and strengthened the sense of the global ummah. This underscores the importance of institutional awareness and inclusive policies for supporting Muslim students abroad.

3.5. Emergence of Global Islamic Consciousness

“Meeting Muslims from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East made me realize how diverse Islam is—and how it unites us.” (Participant 9, Turkey)

“Before studying here, I only saw Islam from my local perspective. Now I understand it as a universal way of life that connects people beyond culture.” (Participant 13, Malaysia)

The culmination of participants' cross-cultural experiences was the formation of a global Islamic consciousness—a more expansive and inclusive sense of being Muslim. Ten participants described feeling spiritually enriched by meeting Muslims from various traditions and ethnicities. This exposure fostered humility, global awareness, and an appreciation for Islam's universality. Participants articulated a growing sense of responsibility to represent Islam positively in academic and social contexts.

This global perspective marks a transition from a localized to a transnational religious identity. Students began viewing themselves not only as members of their national community but as active contributors to the worldwide ummah. This integrative awareness also enhanced their intercultural competence and sense of ethical citizenship. Ultimately, cross-cultural learning transformed participants into reflective Muslims who embody Islam's core values of mercy (*rahmah*), justice (*adl*), and wisdom (*hikmah*) within the framework of global engagement. The summary of the thematic analysis in this study can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Focus of Meaning	Supporting Participants (n=15)	Representative Quote
Strengthening of Faith	Deepened and reflective understanding of Islam	12	“I realized I pray not out of habit but conviction.”
Adaptive Practice	Creative strategies for sustaining worship	9	“We turned a dorm room into a mushalla.”
Identity	Dialogue and tolerance in multicultural settings	13	“I see questions about Islam as a chance to explain it properly.”
Negotiation	Role of communities and facilities	11	“Joining halaqah here feels like finding home.”
Institutional Support	Integration of faith and intercultural awareness	10	“Islam now feels universal, not just local.”
Global Muslim Identity			

The findings of this study reveal that cross-cultural learning functions not merely as an academic process, but as a transformative medium for spiritual growth and identity reconstruction among Muslim students abroad. The experience of living and learning in multicultural contexts encouraged participants to reinterpret their faith through reflection and dialogue. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of reflective religiosity where faith evolves from a state of conformity into one of conscious conviction through encounters with diversity. The intellectual and emotional engagement with different worldviews fosters a more reasoned understanding of Islam, thereby bridging religious belief with global awareness [40], [41]. In this context, education abroad becomes both an intellectual journey and a spiritual reawakening.

The adaptive strategies developed by students illustrate what may be termed spiritual resilience, a form of faith-based coping that transforms adversity into moral strength. As observed in the participants' creative efforts to maintain prayer, dietary laws, and religious rituals, adaptation is not merely behavioral but existential—it reflects *iman-driven agency*. Muslim learners abroad often cultivate independent religiosity grounded in self-discipline and personal responsibility. Rather than viewing globalization as a threat, these students embrace it as a field for cultivating steadfastness (*istiqamah*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*). Such findings expand the discourse of Islamic education by demonstrating how resilience is learned through lived experience, not solely through institutional instruction.

The theme of identity negotiation underscores the dynamic nature of Islamic identity in pluralistic environments. The participants' willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue and clarify misconceptions about Islam embodies the Qur'anic principle of *ta'aruf* (knowing one another) as articulated in Surah Al-Hujurat [49:13]. Dialogical Islam a model of religiosity that thrives through engagement rather than isolation. It demonstrates how Muslim students enact *da'wah bil hal* (preaching through character) by practicing empathy and respect in intercultural communication [42], [43]. In essence, the multicultural learning environment becomes an informal pedagogical space where Islamic ethics of tolerance (*tasamuh*) and justice (*'adl*) are performed in real life, advancing the aims of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) in global Islamic education [44], [45].

The influence of institutional and community support in sustaining religious identity highlights the social dimension of faith formation. Religious identity is reinforced through shared practices, communal reflection, and collective learning [46], [47]. Muslim student associations, halaqah groups, and online religious networks provide emotional stability and moral reinforcement, functioning as informal educational systems that complement formal instruction. These communities act as "faith scaffolds," allowing students to practice Islam within diverse institutional cultures without feeling alienated. For Islamic educators, this suggests that fostering faith resilience requires not only curricular content but also the creation of supportive ecosystems that nurture belonging and collaboration [48], [49].

Perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the emergence of a global Muslim identity, an integrative consciousness that harmonizes faithfulness to Islam with intercultural openness. This construct transcends the dichotomy between traditionalism and modernity by positioning Islam as both a spiritual foundation and a global ethical framework. The universal dimension of Islam," where believers live faithfully without withdrawing from modern society. Participants' global outlook signifies the maturation of their religious identity: Islam is understood not as an inherited culture but as a universal moral compass guiding life in plural contexts. This redefinition of faith within the global arena demonstrates the adaptability of Islamic education to multicultural realities while retaining its spiritual core.

In light of these findings, this study offers a new perspective for Islamic education in the era of globalization. It suggests that cross-cultural learning can serve as a pedagogical model for cultivating reflective, resilient, and dialogical Muslims who embody the values of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all creation) [50], [51]. Instead of perceiving exposure to cultural diversity as a risk, Islamic educators and institutions should treat it as a formative process for character and identity development. Integrating intercultural dialogue, experiential learning, and faith reflection into curricula can bridge the gap between religious orthodoxy and global citizenship [52], [53]. In doing so, Islamic education can evolve into a dynamic field that not only preserves faith but also empowers Muslims to contribute meaningfully to a plural and interconnected world.

This research makes an important contribution to the development of Islamic education in the global era by demonstrating that cross-cultural learning experiences can be a vehicle for the formation of a reflective, resilient, and moderate religious identity. Its impact is evident in two main aspects: theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the research findings broaden understanding of the concept of Islamic religious identity as a dynamic process formed through social interaction and spiritual reflection. Practically, these findings provide a basis for Islamic educational institutions to design curricula and learning programs that are more responsive to the needs of Muslim students in multicultural environments. This research also emphasizes the important role of institutions and campus communities in building a spiritual ecosystem that supports the strengthening of faith and the adaptability of students abroad.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the relatively small number of participants, limited to students from three developing countries, makes the results infeasible for generalization to the entire population

of Muslim students abroad. Second, the phenomenological approach employed emphasizes subjective experiences, thus relying heavily on individual narratives and interpretations. Furthermore, this study does not in-depth explore the role of external factors such as university policies, government support, or media influence on the formation of students' religious identities. Therefore, further research with a comparative approach, involving more cultural contexts and types of institutions, is needed to enrich the understanding of the relationship between cross-cultural experiences and the formation of global Islamic identity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cross-cultural learning has a transformative impact on the Islamic religious identity of Muslim students studying abroad. The findings reveal that exposure to multicultural environments fosters deeper self-reflection, critical understanding, and conscious commitment to Islamic values. Rather than diluting faith, the process of intercultural engagement strengthens personal spirituality through active adaptation and reflective religiosity. Students develop a mature form of faith—intellectual, empathetic, and resilient—characterized by their ability to live Islam authentically in diverse cultural contexts.

The research also demonstrates that maintaining religious identity in non-Muslim or mixed environments requires spiritual resilience supported by community networks and institutional inclusivity. Through creative adaptation—such as forming prayer circles, joining online Qur'anic study groups, and practicing intercultural dialogue—students transform challenges into opportunities for spiritual growth. Moreover, the emergence of a global Muslim identity indicates a shift from localized religiosity to an inclusive consciousness that integrates Islamic ethics with global citizenship. Thus, cross-cultural education not only strengthens faith but also cultivates Muslims who embody moderation (*wasatiyyah*), compassion (*rahmah*), and justice (*'adl*) in a pluralistic world.

Overall, this study contributes to the field of Islamic education by framing cross-cultural learning as a pedagogical space for faith development and identity negotiation. It underscores that the interaction between Islam and global culture does not signify conflict but potential synergy. In essence, the experiences of Muslim students abroad affirm that the essence of Islamic education—seeking knowledge (*talabul 'ilm*)—is inherently compatible with intercultural engagement and lifelong spiritual formation. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of participants by involving Muslim students from various countries and educational backgrounds, including those from developed countries and Muslim minorities. A mixed-methods approach can also be used to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative analysis to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of religious identity in a global environment. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to track changes in students' religious identity throughout their studies and after returning to their home countries. Research that highlights the role of higher education policy, support from Muslim diaspora communities, and the influence of digital media on the formation of cross-cultural religious identity also has the potential to enrich the discourse on Islamic education in the era of globalization.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all parties involved in this research.

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