

# **Exceptional Cases of Fusion and I-position in the Self-differentiation Framework Among the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Converts**

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## **Abstract**

Murray Bowen (1978) claimed that the self-differentiation framework is universally applicable even it was developed in the Western culture. This study explores the exceptional cases of two self-differentiation constructs (a) I-position and (b) fusion with others among the Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts from the collectivistic and religious conversion perspective. It is a qualitative phenomenology study that involves five participants. The data collection method is one-to-one in-depth interviews. The interview protocol is a series of semi-structured open-ended questionnaires modified from Lam's study (2005) to explore participants' religious conversion experience and Gomori's Guide Manual (1998) to explore participants' self-differentiation experience. The data analysis method is thematic analysis. This study has shown that the Malaysian Chinese might need pseudo-I-position because of their low self-differentiation, they need another interpretation of the I-position aligned with their cultural context, and in the Islamic perspective, Muslims would regain their functionalities after fusion with God.

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**Keywords:** I-Position, Fusion with Others, Fusion with God, Self-differentiation, Malaysian Chinese Muslim Converts

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## **Introduction**

Murray Bowen (1913) proposed the self-differentiation framework. Skowron and Friedlander (1998), Skowron and Schmitt (2003) further developed the framework into four constructs: emotional cut-off, emotional reactivity, fusion with others, and I-position. This paper explores the constructs of I-position and fusion with others from the Malaysian Chinese Muslim perspective. The I-position construct assesses individuals' sense of self, adherence to convictions, beliefs, and opinions. Better I-position individuals are capable of remaining independent and autonomous in experiencing intimacy with others. It is an indication of high self-differentiation. The fusion with others construct assesses individuals' over-involvement, over-identification, over-reliance on others, and overholding others' beliefs without self-screen. High-fusion individuals are fear abandonment in a relationship. They seek acceptance and approval from others in every aspect of their life. It is a low self-differentiation indication (Skowron et al., 2003; Skowron & Dendy, 2004).

## **Literature Review**

### **The universality of self-differentiation constructs**

Bowen (1978) claimed that the self-differentiation framework is universally applicable even it was developed in the Western individualistic culture. However, Sumari et al., (2019) and Duan (2019) suggest that the application of the Western psychological constructs to the Asian collectivist community is still highly questionable. Sipon and Hassan (2015) suggest the cross-cultural application of the Western constructs should take local culture and tradition into consideration, as Tsuda and Hwang (2016) promote cultural-inclusive and indigenous psychology. The application of the Western psychology construct to the local community needs further investigation.

Self-differentiation had been tested in various communities to prove its multicultural application. For example, it has been tested in Iranian couples (Ghanbarian et al., 2020), Spanish adults (Rodríguez-González et al., 2016, 2019), Chinese college students (Lu, 2019; Zhu, 2019), middle-eastern population (Sadeghi et al., 2020), Israeli population (Nicolai et al., 2016) and Chinese adults (Du, 2015). In addition, there were also many cross-disciplinary studies had been done on self-differentiation, such as organizational commitment (Sloan et al., 2017), religion (Frederick et al., 2016), marital conflicts counselling (Karkhaneh et al., 2016), psychological wellness (Lahav et al., 2016; Teixeira & Pereira, 2015), academic commitment (Human-Vogel & Rabe, 2015), social adaptation (Hao, 2020), psychological adjustment (Moral et al., 2021), mental health (Priest, 2017) and parenting (Ragelienė & Justickis, 2016).

Nevertheless, cross-cultural studies have shown that self-differentiation is not thoroughly multicultural applicable (Rodríguez-González et al., 2016; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000), especially to the collectivist that values group identity, interpersonal affiliation and emotional support that are different from the Western individualistic culture (Guo et al., 2017). The above phenomenon is more significant to the Chinese

community because their behavioural and psychological functionings are highly dependent on harmonious family relationships (Fan et al., 2017). For example, fulfilling filial duties would reduce Chinese work stress and turnover intention (Li et al., 2021).

### **The Malaysian Chinese Muslims' experiences**

The Chinese Muslim converts are the Chinese who have converted to Islam, but previously they were born and raised in a non-Muslim family (Shaharuddin et al., 2016). They have formed a unique community in Malaysia because they have fallen into a grey area of religion, culture, and ethnicity after their conversion (Muhamat Kawangit & Puteh, 2015). They have become the ethnic and cultural minority among the mainstream Malays Muslim community and a religious minority among the compatriot Chinese community. Conversion has placed converts into double minority status (Sintang & Hambali, 2018).

Religion is a sensitive issue in Malaysia (Siti Khatijah Yasin & Fadzli Adam, 2017). Islam has become a less favourable religion to the Chinese (Tan, 2020) and non-Muslim generally (Abdul Muthaliff et al., 2017). In the Chinese collectivistic context, conversion to Islam is a betrayal (Shaharuddin et al., 2016) and Chinese converts might be abandoned by compatriot members subsequently after conversion (Poetra Yudha & Setiyowati, 2016). They are considered becoming Malays or *masuk Melayu* (Ahmad Kumpoh, 2020) because their compatriot markers such as ancestor worship, mourning observances, correct Chinese rituals, and eating habits (Oded, 2015) would be gradually diluted after the conversion. Some people even claim the celebration of the Chinese New Year is considered *Haram* (Hew, 2018).

In the mainstream Malay Muslim community, the Chinese Muslim Converts are not necessarily welcomed. They have to deal with some challenges in the Muslim community, such as the learning of Islamic teachings (Mahmud et al., 2019), cultural identity (Yunariono & Andriati, 2020), assimilation (Muhamat Kawangit & Don, 2021), second class Muslim (Mohd Khambali et al., 2017), and syncretism (Awang & Che Mat, 2020). In Malaysia, all Malays are Muslims (Khalid Ali, 2021). Generally, people wrongly request converts to live as the Malays (Abd. Hamid et al., 2013). As many converts are converted for non-religious reasons, such as marriage and finances (Abd Majid et al., 2017), they have to invest more effort to deal with the above challenges.

The Chinese Muslims' religious sincerities, motives, and practices are suspicious by both compatriot and religious community. As Chinese Muslims, they preserve their Chinese living habits; as Muslim Chinese, they adopt Islamic teachings into their living habits. However, they are treated as *pseudo-Muslims* in the religious community because of their Chinese identity. They are also considered 'others' in the compatriot community because of their Muslim identity. This study chooses the Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts as the study subjects because they are categorised as the Asian collectivistic group. They embrace family loyalty, belonging, harmonious relationship, "we" consciousness, and "group" feeling (Gorodnichemko & Roland,

2011; Hofstede, 2011). The complex (Ozyurek, 2018) conflicted, painful (Iqbal et al., 2019), and transformation (Tumanggor, 2016) experience might show up the interpersonal and intrapersonal issues that concerned by the self-differentiation studies.

## **Methodology**

The present study is a qualitative phenomenology study that focuses on the participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). The instrument of the study was an interview protocol (Edwards & Holland, 2013) that consists of a series of semi-structured and opened ended questions. The protocol was modified from Lam's (2005) Religious Conversion Protocol to explore participants' religious conversion experience and Gomori's (1998) Guide Manual to investigate participants' family interaction experience. The data collecting method was one-to-one in-depth interviews (Merriam, 2009). The researcher had interviewed five Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts who are above 25 years old with at least ten years of conversion experience. According to the Differentiation of Self Inventory, 25 years old is an indication of reaching adulthood (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). This study also recruited experienced converts so that they could provide thick and rich conversion information. The data analysis method was thematic analysis and the analysis process was guided by the (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Model. The interview data was transformed from verbal recording format to verbatim transcript format and uploaded to the ATLAS.ti 8.2 software. The researcher used the software to search codes across the transcript. Eighteen codes were found relevant to this study. The researcher grouped the eighteen codes into three themes, which are (a) pseudo I-position, (b) Chinese I-position and (c) fusion with God. To protect the participants' privacy, the names reported in this study were not their real names.

## **Findings**

### **Pseudo I-position**

The traditional self-differentiation constructs recognise independence and self-assertive (Bartle-Haring & Gregory, 2003; Skowron et al., 2009). However, mutual interdependence, relatedness and obedience are the psychological needs among the Chinese to reach social belongingness (Li et al., 2021). Therefore they tend to satisfy others' needs with all available resources (Hwang, 2017b). Besides, they also apply superior/inferior relationships to maintain social stability (Hwang, 2017a). Their mainstream religions such as Taoism and Buddhism diverge compatibility, tolerance and inclusiveness (Clobert et al., 2017). They are trained to put one's self in the other party's shoes (Esther & Olukayode, 2018). They are trained and educated to be interdependent, accommodate to social structure, mutuality and likenesses, but not necessarily to be individualistic and competitive. Psychological interdependent is more relevant to Chinese development and functionality. Too, I-position might break their status quo relationship and further weaken their functionalities.

Azman Low's Islamic learning and *Shahadat* taking appeared to be fully independent and self-assertive. He took the initiative to learn and obtain Islamic knowledge through self-reading. He learned religious rituals such as prayer on his own. When he decided to embrace Islam, he went to a religious teacher to declare his *Shahadat*. He wrote a letter to inform his family about his conversion. He met his family and explained his conversion to them. He always said that religious choice is his own business. Nobody has the right to oppose his decision.

"Discuss? How to discuss? Discuss I was going to convert? It is my own business. Discuss religion? No discuss religion. Whatever I want to know about Islam, I can find it in books. I can find the information in books and magazines. If there is anything we do not understand, we can get advice from religious teachers. However, I did not do that....I did not refer to anybody. I did not go to any religious class. I learn Islam on my own. My Indonesian co-worker prayed in a hall. I observed them outside the hall. I observed how they conduct the prayer. I did not ask them anything. I only observed.

Before coming back to Malaysia, I wrote a letter to my family. From the letter, they could guess that I have converted to Islam. After coming back to Malaysia, I told them, religion is my own business. I will not interfere in your religion. You still can believe and practice your religion. I do not oppose your religion. I choose Islam; you have no right to oppose me.... I like Islam. It is my own business. You have no right to interfere in my religion. I also will not get involved with your religious practices."

(Azman Low)

Nurul Tan's conversion was also looked like an I-position decision. However, it appeared to be psychological independence and self-assertive on the surface. She insisted on her conversion under overwhelming objections from her surrounding people. Under such tremendous pressure, she insisted on converting even though nobody agreed with her.

"My family asked me. I replied to them. I want to convert to Islam. They disagreed. They wanted me to think about it... I told them I wanted to convert. They disagreed. I had no way as I already made my decision. I had no way to turn back. Finally, I converted to Islam."

(Nurul Tan)

Azman Low and Nurul Tan's behaviours are fulfilled the I-position construct. They made their conversion decision based on their convictions without seeking much approval or acceptance from others. Azman Low even never discuss with anybody in his Islamic learning process because he was independent in obtaining all the religious resources. Both of them bravely came out their Muslim identities to their family. They appeared to have successfully retained their autonomy and independence.

However, followed by their so-called self-autonomy behaviours, they distanced themselves from their family and compatriot community for an extended period. Azman Low was alienated in an entire Malay Muslim community for 25 years, and Nurul Tan was ten years. It is because the Chinese are educated to be interdependence and mutual likeness. They lack the capability of dealing with collective disagreement and messes. They lost their capability of connecting with others in an unsupportive atmosphere.

In traditional self-differentiation constructs, individuals' functioning is positively correlated with self-independent and self-assertive. However, in the Chinese collectivistic community, it is not always the truth. Instead of adhering to their conviction, their I-position acts might be driven by emotional needs, especially those who are lack self-differentiated. For example, Azman Low and Nurul Tan's distancing behaviour was caused by the incapability of undertaking the consequences of their I-position acts, such as family rejection and disappointment. The non-I-position acts such as distancing might react to the unbearable consequences because they were not capable of long-term I-position functioning.

"The main purpose of my conversion was to marry my husband. I only get to learn and know Islam after my conversion. God gives me *Hidayah* through marriage. It is a gift."

(Nurul Tan)

"My father did not take up his responsibility. If I follow him, my situation will be very bad. He was a loser. He was illiterate. He did not have the correct life concept because he did not have the correct religion to teach him. He prayed with three joss sticks every morning. The religion did not teach him anything. It did not teach him about God and the meaning of life. We should not follow him."

(Azman Low)

Instead of adhering to conviction, Nurul Tan's conversion was driven by her fusion with a Malay Muslim young man. She wanted to convert to Islam in a short time so that she could marry him. Rejection and aversion drove Azman Low's conversion and deviate from his compatriot religious practices. He wanted to prevent the same mistake as her father. He emotionally needs a religion that is different from his father.

## The Chinese style of I-position

Based on the traditional self-differentiation constructs, I-position is essential to individuals' functionality (Skowron & Dendy, 2004; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). However, the unique Chinese family and community structure might provide another eye to this construct. In some circumstances, the Chinese low I-position acts might have hidden meanings. The Chinese have a flexible *social self* to include others (Hwang, 1997, p. 21) because they are influenced by Confucianism which requests human relationships and social networks (Chen & Hwang, 2016). Instead of being self-differentiated, they rather work toward steady security, obedience to authority

(Du & Vantilborgh, 2020) and societal orders (Liu & Yang, 2018). Therefore, they are expected to have the same characteristics, expectations, values, and religions to achieve collective expectations and sustainability (Yeh & Yang, 1997). The above expectations are contradicted the I-position construct to be self-adherence and self-convicted.

Unlike Azman Low, Khairul Wong's conversion decision was a bit low I-position in the traditional self-differentiation context. Khairul Wong kept his Islamic learning and *Shahadat* as secrets. Even the mother suspected his conversion; he had no response to her suspicion. In front of his family members, he appeared to be a non-Muslim. He secretly went to Islamic classes, took his *Shahadat*, practised Islam rituals such as prayer and fasting. He expanded his religious network and built up a relationship with a Muslim lady. He worked to maintain the status quo relationship to continue with his religious conversion journey.

"Many people suspected I have converted to Islam, but I did not come out. I was waiting for my mother to ask me. She did not ask me... I knew she had known my conversion. I did not want to ask her. She also did not want to ask me. She saw my changes. She told my grandmother, and my grandmother told me... My family members suspected me. They saw I was very choosy in taking food. They asked why you did not take pork. Many people suspected me.

I would ask others about Islam. I asked about Quran contents. My friend was studied at UiTM. He seldom came back...I read by myself. When there was any doubt, I would take note and clarify with him when he came back.

I attended an Islamic class at my school. We non-Muslims either attend civic class or go to the canteen. It was quite bored to stay at the canteen. Never mind. I stayed in the Islamic class. I stayed and listened. After taking my *Shahadat*, I went to continue my study. I continued Islamic study in tertiary education. My mother did not know it. I did not tell her it was an Islamic study. I told her I study psychology. After seven years, she asked me, then only I told her the truth and came out.

I continued with my western life. My friends told me, within our friend, I was a bit special. Firstly, I did not smoke. I just played with it. Even free also I did not smoke. Secondly, people give me liqueur, and I did not take it. I did not drink. Thirdly, there were many girls there, but I never take advantage of them.

(Khairul Wong)

Khairul Wong's hiding behaviours seem to be low I-position because he did not disclose his Muslim identity to the public. In front of others, he hid his Islamic learning and Muslim identity. He continued with his secular Western life, which is not contradicted with Islam. In the traditional self-differentiation context, cover-up

the real identity is the signal of low I-position because the behaviour is incapable of adhering to its own belief. However, in the Chinese collectivistic context, Khairul Wong accepts his conviction deep in his heart. He would not rashly disclose his unique identity to prevent disagreement. He was capable of staying under a complicated and interdependent relationship. He maintained the status-quo relationship but revealed his unique identity step by step according to his ability to deal with the consequences of disclosing.

Another significant example is Nurul Tan. When she wanted to reconnect with her family, she surrendered to her father's harsh conditions. First, she had to remove her headscarf before entering the house. Then, after entering the house, Nurul Tan had to kneel in front of the father and serve him tea. Finally, she had to admit her fault for not listening to the father's advice.

"After entering the fence, I was requested to take off my headscarf. It was one of my father's conditions. Before going back, I had asked more knowledgeable people. They said it is ok. You can take off. My father said, if you want to come back, you cannot wear a headscarf. I kneel in front of him. I offered him a cup of tea. He said, you are disobedience. It is the result.

(Nurul Tan)

Nurul Tan was likely fused with her father and not I-position with her conviction. She took up the father's values and expectations. She likely had given up her beliefs. However, removing the headscarf does not mean she denies her Muslim identity. Kneeling to serve the tea does not mean she admits she embraced the wrong religion. She temporarily gave up a few of her surface behaviours to gain back the family acceptance and reconnection.

The Western culture praises independent decisions. From the untrained eyes, Khairul Wong's and Nurul Tan's behaviours might be recognized as high fusion and low I-position. However, from the collectivistic dimension, they had applied a typical Chinese style I-position. They had demonstrated good interpersonal skills, highly adaptable, and flexible behaviours to deal with complicated collectivistic interpersonal relationships. They sacrificed their external surface behaviours, maintained the status quo relationship but continue pursuing their major convictions and internal goals. By applying the Chinese style, I-position, they successfully gained more survival resources to continue their religious conversion process.

## **Fusion with God**

The traditional self-differentiation constructs emphasise human relationships but seldom explicitly mentioned human-God relationships. Principal self-differentiation researchers such as Kerr & Bowen (1988) and Bartle-Haring & Gregory (2003) were never particular include the human-God relationship in their literature. However, from the Islamic perspective, God owns lordship over human beings and being wholeheartedly faithful to God is the most fundamental Islamic belief (Tarsin, 2015). To Muslims, the human-God relationship is the essential relationship of all relationships.



Religious scholars have found out that human beings would benefit from relationships with God (Sumari et al., 2019). They discovered that attachment with God significantly drives positive psychological well-being (Refahi et al., 2015). They also suggest *Taqwa*, God-consciousness, and God-fearing are effective coping strategies to deal with anxiety and stress (Radzi et al., 2014) because by obeying God, human beings would gain ultimate calm and security (Salleh et al., 2015). The above arguments are consistent with the self-differentiation fundamental assumption. Human beings will be more self-differentiated and functional under a secure and calm atmosphere (Davis, 2011; Regina, 2000). By fusion with God, human beings would gain the ultimate secure base that could not experience from human relationships.

In this study, most of the participants are reported calmer and regained some of their functionalities after fusion with God. After reading the Quran verses, "Whoever follows His path, there will be no sadness and fear," Khairul Wong bravely took his Shahadat. He was ready to deal with the consequences of embracing a new religion because he could feel God stays beside him to show him the right path. Thus, he felt secure in making the conversion decision. Currently, he actively involves in Islamic welfares and missionaries in the name of God.

"Will my family accept my conversion? After converting, will they expel me from the house? How to do it? How to do with my friends? How to do with my girlfriend? I also had a girlfriend. How to deal with it? Finally, I found a surah *"Whoever follows His path, there will be no sadness and fear."* You do not need to be scared. You do not need to be sad. After reading this surah, I have confidence. It is an accessible path. You do not need to be scared. Just follow the path.

When I can feel God, I feel calm because God guides me. We do not know what we are doing now is correct or not. God shows me the path, the secure path. It is why I always say that if we believe in God, we have the path shown by God. My heart is calmer than rich people. By God's guidance, whatever we do, we will not feel fear. We already know the path from A to Z. I have confidence in the path. I will not feel fear. I will steady follow the path.

I do charity; I never think that I will get something. God asks me to help you. I never ask you to pay back to me. I do charity under the name of God. I do my best. God will help me to help you."

(Khairul Wong)

To Jamilah Ang, everything that happens is according to God's will. She prays to God. She reports her daily life to God and requests from God. As a result, she could feel God is in front of her and responds to her prayers. With those supernatural feelings, she actively leads missionary agencies, approaches people to Islam, and conducts convert charity.

"If we are sad, we can go to find a friend. They will advise us. If we talk to God, God will help us. That is why, whenever I feel disappointed, I will pray and worship God. I will tell God. God is only in front of me... somebody came to help me. My problem settled. He was sleeping. He felt that he wanted to see me. God sent him to give the alms to me so that I could pass the money to the domestic violence victim who sought my help yesterday.

I brought a lot of new converts to the convert NGOs. I help them because of God. I have a religious class. We meet up four-time per month. I bear all the expenses. My sister gives me pocket money. I invest the money in the class.

We Chinese have God of Mercy, Guan Gong. In Islam, we have Allah, but we could not see Allah; we could not touch Allah. We believe, if we have any difficulty, we talk to Allah. *Insha'Allah*, He will send an angel to help us. He sends a person; we treat him as an angel because he is sent by Allah to help us."

(Jamilah Ang)

Hafiz Lim embraces Islam because he believes God will help him to improve his family relationship. However, after embracing Islam, his family relationship becomes more conflicted. Previously they could not accept Hafiz Lim because of his destructive behaviours. After embracing Islam, they even could not accept his religion. In the conflicted situation, he is still confident they will accept him one day. He prays to God for empathy, support, guidance, and acceptance. He makes every single effort to reconnect with his family.

"Sometimes, I ask myself. I also pray. God, why do I have such an unfortunate life? I remember the Prophet's care. Care is not that easy. God ever says that once a person embraces Islam, if he wants to repent, he needs to care about the Prophet. You care about Prophet one time; God will pay you back ten times. The ten times payback, you will not see with your eyes.

Every day, I take up my palm. I talk to God. Ya Allah, You are the most gentle. You can soften their (family members) hearts. I have no way. You give me good behaviours. You show me good behaviours. You clear my slander. Slowly, thanks to God. God show me not to dispute with them.... No matter how we are brothers. To my understanding, it is like water. We cannot cut the water apart. It is a test. In the 24 years, I shed tears every day. I pray to God. I wish they will understand. Slowly, our relationship has much improved."

(Hafiz Lim)

By fusion with God, believers would perceive ultimate calm, security, acceptance, accompany, and monitoring to better functioning as God's servants. Participants were reported to gain back some of their functionalities after fusion with God. The therapeutic environment alone is capable of enhancing their self-

differentiation. With God's guidance and accompany, Khairul Wong bravely took his Shahadat, rebuilt the relationship with his mother, and finally doing missionary and charity in the name of God. The relationship also facilitates Jamilah Ang's courage and support to continue with her voluntary missionary. Hafiz Lim never gives up his effort to reconnect with his family; even his effort is not adequately rewarded.

## Discussion

Individuals who live in a collectivistic culture have to live in a cohesive interpersonal atmosphere. Their I-position behaviours, such as embracing new religion or pursuing personal goals, could be hindered by the overwhelming relationship. In the persuading process, if their self-differentiation level is not high enough to deal with the relationship, they might cut off the cohesion by using co-called I-position behaviours. Instead of self-differentiation, the I-position behaviours are driven by emotional needs to escape from the overwhelming atmosphere to continue with their pursuing process. Take Nurul Tan' as an example. She was driven by her emotional need to declare the conversion decision and cut off her significant relationship so that she could fuse with the Muslim young man.

The researchers named the above-mentioned I-position behaviours as *pseudo-I-position* phenomenon. The *pseudo-I-position* might not be long-term maintained. It will collapse after the individuals have fulfilled their emotional needs. After the so-called I-position behaviours, the individuals have to deal with the consequences that they were not self-differentiated enough to deal with, such as rejection, disagreement, and disappointment. Take Azman Low as an example. He cut off his family and compatriot relationship for 25 years because he was not self-differentiated to deal with the consequences of disclosing his Muslim identity.

The complicated interpersonal relationship in collectivistic culture would develop a pressure of undifferentiated togetherness. If the pressure goes beyond individuals' capability, they might desperately need I-position behaviours to be separated from the relationship. They would behaviourally high self-differentiated to get rid of the distressed and non-manageable relationship. In this study, the I-position behaviours might emerge to set a rigid boundary with the relationship. They block the relationship from interfering with their daily life. For example, Azman Low came out as a Muslim to get rid of the family relationship and compatriot religious practices to not interfere with his conversion process.

In the collectivistic culture, individuals adjust between the forces of connectivity and separateness to be better functional. However, low self-differentiated individuals might not be capable of balancing between the two forces. They might trap in a repressed interpersonal relationship. In this situation, they might emotionally need an illusion of I-position to prove their independence and autonomy. Therefore, they might pretend to behave high self-differentiated in dealing with their low self-differentiation. For example, to express anger and desperation toward compatriot practices, a less self-

differentiated convert might come out untimely from a closet to prove his autonomy in religious choice.

From the collectivistic perspective, individuals' self-differentiation could not be judged merely based on the Western self-differentiation context. This study has found out that the complicated interpersonal relationship has restricted the Chinese's surface behaviours. They might not publicly pursue or announce their personal goals, especially those that contradicted family values and interests. On the other hand, high self-differentiated individuals can cover their I-position behaviours and pursue their inner insistence privately and consistently. They know when, where, and how to act publicly and privately. For example, Khairul Wong was not allowed to come out with his Muslim identity publicly. He covered up his Muslim identity to continue with his conversion process privately. He was capable of disclosing his identity gradually according to his ability to undertake the consequences.

In the collectivistic culture, the complicated interdependent relationship always influences individuals in the culture. They obtain support and resources from the interdependent relationship; meanwhile, the relationship restricts their functionalities. Excessive I-position might break the status quo of the relationship and invite resources withdrawal. The researchers suggest that a flexible interpersonal skill to adapt to complicated relationships, and the capability of adhering to significant convictions should be put into a priority in measuring the collectivist self-differentiation, especially the Chinese. For example, instead of merely looking into surface behaviours such as disclosing Muslim identity, the capability of dealing with the complex relationship in proceeding with the conversion process should be emphasised.

In the theology context, self-differentiation refers to the capability of following God wish and care the earth on behalf of God (Howe, 1998). This study further explains the above statement. By fusion with God, human beings would more or less regain some of their functionalities because they act according to good deeds and kindness under God teachings. Furthermore, under the Islamic principles, human still has their autonomous and independent to fulfil their obligations to God. For example, under the missionary obligation, Muslims has their autonomy to spreading God's message by showing good behaviours, conducting reverts classes, sharing with others or taking take of converts' welfare.

Participants in this study have reported being more functional and self-differentiated after building a relationship with God. Human beings could obtain ultimate calm, support, and security by believing in God in nurturing their functionalities. The functionalities are crucial to the converts in their conversion process because they have to deal with alienation and rejection most of the time. This finding is contradicted with the traditional fusion relationship in self-differentiation constructs, which claimed fusion to be low self-differentiated and low functional.

## Conclusion

This study has preliminarily found out that fusion with God alone could restore individuals' functionalities. The researcher proposes that further study should focus on to what extent the restoration and the maximisation of self-differentiation in the context of fusion with God. It is an interesting proposal because the human-God relationship has been neglected in the traditional self-differentiation framework. Besides, when applying self-differentiation constructs to the collectivists, the cultural context should be considered because they might have a different interpretation of self-differentiation. The consideration is to prevent any misjudgement in applying the constructs, such as misjudge *pseudo-I-position* and genuine *I-position*.

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