

The Use of Language in Constructing Religious Identity Found in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the role of language in constructing religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon. It explores how Arab characters express and negotiate their identity as Muslims through linguistic choices and everyday interactions within different social and cultural environments.

Method: This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. The data were obtained from dialogues and narrative contexts presented in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon. The analysis was conducted using Thornborrow's theory of linguistic identity within the framework of sociolinguistics to investigate the relationship between language use and religious identity construction.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that religious identity is constructed through both personal and collective dimensions. At the personal level, identity is reflected in the use of Islamic names and traditional naming practices, particularly the patronymic system (nasab). At the collective level, Muslim identity is represented through the association between Arab ethnicity and Islam, the distinction between ingroups and outgroups through code-switching, and several social practices rooted in religious values. These practices include the preference for halal food, the restriction of interfaith marriage, and the maintenance of boundaries between men and women. Furthermore, code-switching serves as a strategy for preserving linguistic and religious identity in cross-cultural encounters.

Significance: This study enriches sociolinguistic discussions on the relationship between language and religious identity in digital media. It also provides a deeper understanding of how popular narratives represent Muslim communities and negotiate cultural differences in contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

Language does not merely function as a tool for exchanging information; it also serves as a means through which individuals define themselves and establish relationships with others. Within sociolinguistics, identity is understood as a social construct that emerges through interaction and is continuously shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological contexts. Haslam et al. (2021) argues that identity involves not only the recognition of personal characteristics but also an individual's affiliation with particular social groups. Likewise, Park (2023) that language contributes significantly to the construction of identity because speakers constantly negotiate their social positions through everyday communication. Through linguistic choices, people express beliefs, values, and senses of belonging that distinguish them from other communities. Consequently, the study of language offers an important perspective for understanding how identities are formed and maintained in contemporary society.

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Among the many forms of identity, religious identity occupies a distinctive place because it influences social behavior, cultural practices, and interpersonal relationships. Religious identity is often manifested through linguistic practices, including naming systems, terms of address, code-switching, and expressions associated with particular beliefs. Kircher & Zipp (2022) explain that language functions as a symbolic resource that enables individuals to demonstrate their membership in specific communities while simultaneously differentiating themselves from others. In increasingly multicultural societies, language becomes an essential instrument for maintaining religious affiliation amid interactions with people from different backgrounds (Razzaq, 2023; Syam et al., 2023). Recent studies have also shown that multilingual practices play an important role in preserving collective identities within diverse social environments. As a result, examining the connection between language and religion has become increasingly relevant in contemporary sociolinguistic research.

The development of digital technology has transformed not only patterns of communication but also the ways identities are represented and negotiated. Today, digital platforms operate as spaces where social values, cultural traditions, and religious beliefs are constructed and disseminated. One of the most influential forms of digital storytelling is the webtoon, a genre of online comics that originated in South Korea and has gained global popularity (Cho, 2021). Combining visual narratives with written language, webtoons present complex social realities that often involve encounters between people from different cultural backgrounds (Kim, 2023). Their accessibility and transnational reach have enabled them to become important sites for the circulation of cultural meanings and identity discourses. Moreover, the integration of text and imagery in webtoons provides unique opportunities to examine how linguistic practices contribute to the representation of social identities.

The intersection between language, religion, and intercultural interaction is particularly evident in *Abu Dhabi Romance*, a webtoon written by Soo-Kyoung Kim and illustrated by Wonderworks. The story revolves around the relationship between Clude, an Arab Muslim woman, and Young-One, a South Korean naval officer whose cultural and religious backgrounds differ considerably. Set in both Abu Dhabi and Seoul, the narrative depicts various aspects of Muslim life, including naming practices, dietary rules, social norms, and attitudes toward interfaith relationships. These elements are portrayed through interactions in which language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of identity and group membership (Petrova, 2021). The tension between preserving religious values and adapting to different cultural contexts makes the webtoon an interesting object of sociolinguistic inquiry. For this reason, investigating the linguistic construction of religious identity in this narrative is both academically and socially significant.

The relationship between language and identity has been widely discussed in sociolinguistic scholarship. Foundational studies by Kastoryano (2021), Solari & Martín Ortega (2022) established that identity is not an inherent attribute but a social process negotiated through discourse and interaction. Building on these perspectives, Huomo (2024), Sugiarto & Manara (2026) demonstrated that multilingual speakers actively

employ linguistic resources to navigate different social contexts and perform multiple identities. More recent research has extended these discussions to digital environments, where identity construction increasingly occurs through online communication. Boumaza & Baker (2026), for example, found that multilingual practices on digital platforms enable users to express belonging and negotiate social positions simultaneously. Collectively, these studies confirm that language plays a central role in shaping both personal and collective identities across different settings.

Within the specific context of religion, previous studies have primarily focused on multilingual communities, educational institutions, and social media platforms. Research by Hasan (2024) Khalilli (2025) demonstrated that code-switching strengthens group solidarity and reinforces cultural affiliation in digital interactions. Similarly, Benzehaf, (2023), Ilma et al. (2023) argued that multilingual practices are influenced not only by communicative needs but also by religious and cultural identities. Other scholars, including Alvero et al. (2024) Benabbes & Taleb (2024), have shown that fictional narratives frequently employ linguistic variation to represent social differences and cultural values. At the same time, studies investigating Muslim identity in digital spaces emphasize that language functions as a medium through which religious norms and collective memories are preserved. Despite these valuable contributions, most existing studies concentrate on real-life communication rather than on the representation of religious identity in digital narratives.

Research on webtoons has also expanded considerably over the past decade. (Jeon (2021) examined multilingual expressions in webtoon narratives and concluded that language variation reflects broader processes of cultural exchange. Meanwhile, Yoon (2024) highlighted the potential of webtoon-based media to communicate religious values to diverse audiences. Other studies have explored readers' engagement, digital literacy, and audience participation in webtoon communities, revealing that online comics are capable of shaping social perceptions and intercultural understanding (Kim, 2023). However, these investigations tend to prioritize educational functions, entertainment value, or audience reception. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the sociolinguistic mechanisms through which religious identities are constructed within webtoon narratives themselves.

Although the existing literature has significantly enriched discussions of language, identity, and digital media, several gaps remain (Khan et al., 2024; Kianpour et al., 2026). First, most studies examine identity formation in social media interactions and educational contexts, leaving fictional digital narratives relatively unexplored. Second, research on webtoons has largely emphasized visual storytelling and audience responses rather than linguistic practices associated with religion. Third, only a limited number of scholars have investigated how fictional characters negotiate religious identity through language in intercultural settings (Shah et al., 2024). This gap is particularly important because digital narratives increasingly influence public perceptions of culture, religion, and social relations. Accordingly, further research is needed to understand how language contributes to the construction of Muslim identity in contemporary webtoon narratives.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine how language is used to construct religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon by applying Thornborrow's

theory of linguistic identity within a sociolinguistic framework. The study focuses on the ways Arab characters express their identities as Muslims through naming practices, linguistic choices, and everyday interactions. Particular attention is given to the representation of group membership, the use of code-switching, and social behaviors associated with Islamic values. By analyzing these linguistic features, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and religious identity in digital narratives. Theoretically, the study contributes to sociolinguistic discussions concerning identity construction in contemporary media, while practically it offers insights into the representation of Muslim communities and intercultural communication in popular culture.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine how language constructs religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon. A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate because the objective of the study was not to measure variables statistically but to explore the meanings embedded in the characters' utterances and their sociocultural contexts. More specifically, the study adopted a library research design, as all data were derived from textual and visual materials available in digital form. The analysis was framed by Thornborrow's theory of linguistic identity, which emphasizes the role of language in shaping both personal and collective identities. Particular attention was given to the ways Muslim identity is represented when Arab characters interact with Korean characters in different cultural settings, namely Seoul, South Korea, and Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. By combining sociolinguistic perspectives with textual analysis, the study sought to reveal the relationship between linguistic practices and religious identity construction.

Participants

Rather than involving human respondents, this study focused on linguistic units appearing in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon, written by Soo-Kyoung Kim and illustrated by Wonderworks. The data source consisted of ten episodes and one prologue episode published on the Spottoon platform. The units of analysis included words, phrases, utterances, and expressions that reflected the construction of religious identity. The data were selected through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. Three inclusion criteria guided the selection process: first, the utterances had to involve Arab Muslim characters; second, they had to occur either in Seoul or Abu Dhabi; and third, they had to demonstrate linguistic features associated with religious identity, such as naming practices, code-switching, or culturally embedded behaviors. Dialogues that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the analysis. This sampling strategy enabled the study to concentrate on interactions that most clearly illustrated the linguistic construction of Muslim identity.

Instruments

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting data. In this study, the researcher was responsible for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing linguistic expressions related to religious identity.

To support this process, a documentation sheet and an analytical framework based on Thornborrow's theory of linguistic identity were employed. The framework consisted of four analytical categories: personal identity, group identity, ingroup and outgroup relations, and linguistic variation. Within these categories, special attention was paid to naming practices, social representations, code-switching, and language maintenance strategies. Screenshots of relevant webtoon panels were also collected to preserve the connection between verbal expressions and their visual contexts. The use of these instruments ensured that the analysis remained systematic and theoretically grounded.

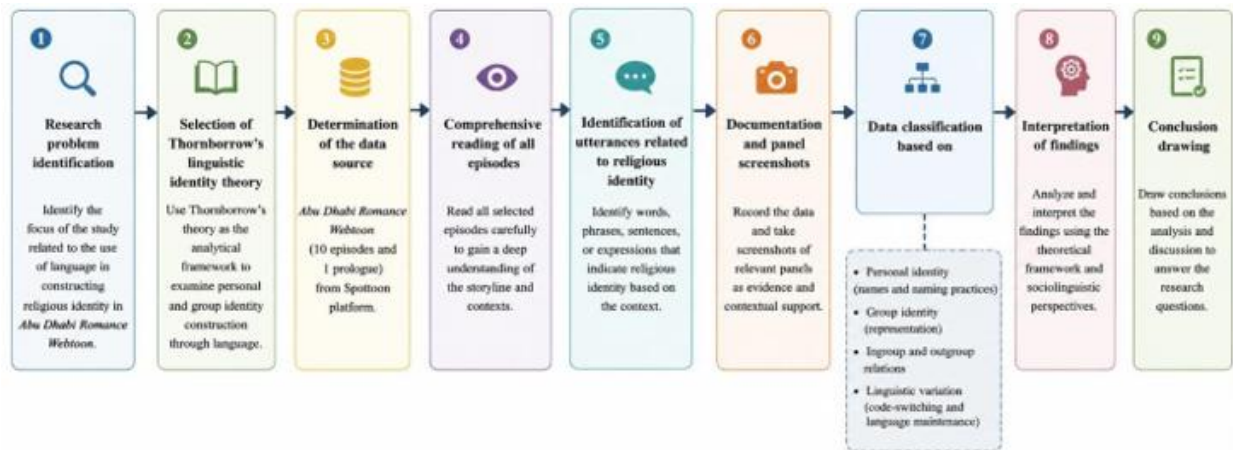


Figure 1. Research procedure

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the identity method, which determines the meaning of linguistic units by considering factors outside language itself, particularly social context and interlocutors. The analytical process began with repeated readings of all selected episodes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Subsequently, utterances associated with religious identity were identified and organized according to Thornborrow's classification of personal identity, group identity, and linguistic variation. After the classification stage, the data underwent thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in the linguistic construction of Muslim identity. Each category was then interpreted in relation to the broader sociocultural context depicted in the webtoon. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the researcher repeatedly compared textual evidence with the visual elements accompanying each utterance. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing the relationships among language use, religious values, and intercultural interactions represented in the narrative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis indicates that religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon is developed through a complex interaction between language, social relationships, and cultural practices. Rather than functioning solely as a medium of communication, language becomes a mechanism through which the characters express their religious affiliation and negotiate their position within different social environments. By employing Thornborrow's framework of linguistic identity, the findings reveal that Muslim identity is

represented through three interconnected dimensions: personal identity, group identity, and linguistic variation. These dimensions emerge primarily in situations where Arab characters encounter cultural differences while living in Seoul or interacting with Korean characters in Abu Dhabi. Such encounters create opportunities for the characters to reaffirm their religious values and social belonging through language.

Table 1. Dimensions of religious identity construction in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Linguistic indicator	Interpretation
Personal identity	Islamic names	The use of the name <i>Ahmed</i>	Islamic names signify individual religious affiliation.
Personal identity	Naming practices (<i>nasab</i>)	The address form “Ms. Ahmed”	Patronymic naming reflects Islamic traditions and family lineage.
Group identity	Representation	Arab characters are represented as Muslims	Religious identity is associated with Arab identity in the narrative.
Group identity	Ingroup and outgroup relations	Code-switching practices	Language distinguishes members of the Muslim community from outsiders.
Group identity	Religious practices	Selection of halal food	Dietary restrictions reinforce Muslim identity.
Group identity	Religious practices	Restriction of interfaith marriage	Marriage norms reflect religious values.
Group identity	Religious practices	Boundaries between men and women	Social interaction is regulated by Islamic principles.
Linguistic variation	Language maintenance	Retention of Arabic expressions	Arabic is preserved as a symbol of cultural and religious belonging.

As summarized in Table 1, religious identity in the webtoon is constructed not only through explicit references to religion but also through everyday linguistic choices and social behaviors. The findings suggest that identity is continuously shaped by the interaction between language and the cultural norms that govern the characters’ lives. In this sense, language operates as both a communicative resource and a marker of collective belonging.

Personal Identity Through Naming Practices

One of the most visible expressions of religious identity in the webtoon appears in the use of names. The analysis shows that Islamic names carry meanings that extend beyond personal identification, as they also communicate religious and cultural affiliations. The name Ahmed, for instance, functions as a marker of Muslim identity and situates the character within a particular social and religious tradition. The narrative also presents the patronymic naming system, or *nasab*, through forms of address such as “Ms. Ahmed,” which reflect the custom of linking children’s identities to their fathers’ names. Through these naming conventions, the webtoon portrays identity as something that is socially

recognized and reinforced in everyday interaction. Consequently, names become an important linguistic resource for preserving continuity between individual identity and communal values.

Group Identity and the Construction of Social Boundaries

At the collective level, religious identity is constructed through the way the narrative represents Arab characters and positions them within broader social relations. Throughout the story, Muslim identity is closely associated with Arab identity, creating an image in which religious affiliation becomes an essential aspect of group membership. Although the text does not explicitly claim that all Arabs are Muslims, Islamic values and practices consistently shape the representation of Arab characters. As a result, religion functions as a central element in defining who belongs to the group and who remains outside it.

The distinction between ingroups and outgroups becomes particularly apparent in the interactions between Clude and Young-One. While Arab characters are portrayed as members of the Muslim community, Young-One occupies the position of an outsider who gradually learns about Islamic norms and Arab culture. This contrast highlights how language contributes to the establishment of social boundaries and reinforces collective identity. In many instances, linguistic choices serve not only to facilitate communication but also to signal solidarity and difference. The webtoon therefore illustrates that group identity is continuously negotiated through social interaction and cultural exchange.

A significant feature of this process is the use of code-switching. The data demonstrate that Arab characters frequently alternate between Arabic and other languages when interacting with people from different backgrounds. These shifts in language choice do more than accommodate different interlocutors; they also emphasize membership in a shared religious and cultural community. By retaining Arabic expressions in multilingual settings, the characters preserve connections to their cultural heritage and reaffirm their identity as Muslims. In this context, code-switching operates as a symbolic practice that strengthens group cohesion while simultaneously distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

Religious Practices as Identity Markers

Beyond naming practices and language choice, the webtoon portrays religious identity through everyday behaviors that reflect Islamic values. Three practices emerge consistently throughout the narrative: the selection of halal food, the restriction of interfaith marriage, and the regulation of relationships between men and women. These

practices are presented not merely as personal preferences but as social obligations that shape the characters' decisions and interactions. Through these recurring themes, the narrative emphasizes that religious identity extends beyond belief and is embodied in daily life. Among these practices, dietary restrictions provide one of the clearest examples of how language communicates religious identity. In one scene, Clude refuses to eat a particular dish by saying, "No, it'll have pork in it." Her response reflects an awareness of Islamic dietary rules and illustrates the challenges of maintaining religious practices in a cultural environment where halal food is not readily available. The utterance also demonstrates that language serves as a means of asserting religious commitment in

situations where social expectations differ. By expressing her refusal verbally, Clude reaffirms her belonging to the Muslim community despite her minority position in South Korea.

The narrative further presents religious norms governing marriage and gender relations as integral aspects of Muslim identity. Differences in religious beliefs complicate the relationship between Clude and Young-One, while social expectations shape the ways male and female characters interact with one another. These themes reinforce the idea that religious identity is maintained through adherence to shared norms and values. Consequently, the webtoon depicts religion not only as a system of belief but also as a framework that structures everyday social life.

Linguistic Variation and Language Maintenance

The final dimension identified in this study concerns linguistic variation, particularly the maintenance of Arabic expressions within intercultural interactions. Among the categories proposed by Thornborrow, language maintenance emerges as the most prominent phenomenon in the webtoon. Even when communicating in multilingual contexts, Arab characters continue to use linguistic forms associated with their cultural background. This persistence suggests that language maintenance is closely connected to the preservation of religious identity.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon is shaped through the interaction of linguistic practices, social relationships, and cultural norms. Personal identity is expressed through naming conventions, whereas collective identity is reinforced through representation, code-switching, and religious practices. The continued use of Arabic expressions further illustrates that language plays a central role in sustaining Muslim identity across different cultural settings. These findings support Thornborrow's argument that language is deeply involved in the construction of both individual and social identities.

Discussion

The findings suggest that religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon is constructed through an ongoing process of interaction in which language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a resource for negotiating social belonging. Rather than presenting religious identity as an inherent characteristic, the narrative depicts it as something that is continuously shaped by cultural encounters and

interpersonal relationships. This pattern supports Thornborrow's proposition that identity emerges through discourse and social practices rather than through fixed categories (Spezzano, 2025). The prominence of intercultural interactions in the story further indicates that identity becomes particularly salient when individuals are confronted with different value systems and cultural expectations. In this respect, the webtoon illustrates how linguistic choices enable characters to position themselves within specific communities while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from others. Such a representation broadens existing discussions by demonstrating that the construction of religious identity is not confined to everyday communication but also extends to contemporary digital narratives (Evolvi, 2022; Pujiati et al., 2025).

A particularly significant aspect of the findings concerns the role of naming practices in expressing personal religious identity. The use of Islamic names and the patronymic system (nasab) suggests that names function as social symbols that connect individuals to religious traditions and collective histories. In the context of the webtoon, forms of address such as “Ms. Ahmed” do more than identify a character; they also communicate lineage, cultural affiliation, and social belonging. This interpretation aligns with sociolinguistic arguments that names contribute to the formation of identity by embedding individuals within broader cultural structures (Michael et al., 2026). However, unlike many previous studies that focus on naming conventions in face-to-face communities, the present study demonstrates that digital comics can preserve and circulate these linguistic practices to audiences beyond their original cultural context. As a result, naming practices in Abu Dhabi Romance operate not only as markers of identity but also as vehicles for transmitting religious and cultural values across national boundaries (Rabie, 2024).

The analysis also reveals that collective identity is largely established through the close association between Arab identity and Muslim identity. Throughout the narrative, religion functions as an important framework through which social relationships are organized and interpreted. This tendency reflects the assumptions of Social Identity Theory, which emphasizes that group membership influences the ways individuals define themselves and perceive others (Jost et al., 2022; Spears, 2021). The webtoon repeatedly portrays shared religious values, linguistic habits, and social norms as the foundations of collective belonging, thereby reinforcing the distinction between insiders and outsiders. At the same time, the findings suggest that religious identity in the narrative is not exclusively based on faith but is intertwined with ethnicity and cultural heritage. This observation contributes to ongoing debates concerning the intersection of language, religion, and ethnicity in multicultural contexts (Bakshi, 2024; Johansson, 2024).

The role of code-switching provides further insight into the relationship between language and identity construction. In many scenes, Arab characters alternate between Arabic and other languages while interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. These shifts in language choice appear to perform social functions that go beyond the practical needs of communication. Code-switching serves to reinforce solidarity among members of the Muslim community while simultaneously marking social distance from those who do not share the same linguistic and religious background.

Similar conclusions have been reached in studies of multilingual communities, where language alternation is often interpreted as a strategy for negotiating identity and maintaining group cohesion. Nevertheless, the present findings expand this perspective by demonstrating that code-switching in fictional narratives can carry symbolic meanings comparable to those found in real-life interactions. Consequently, language variation in the webtoon becomes a mechanism through which religious identity is preserved and expressed in intercultural settings (Ren, 2024).

Another noteworthy finding concerns the representation of religious practices in everyday life. The selection of halal food, restrictions on interfaith marriage, and social boundaries between men and women are portrayed not merely as individual preferences but as expressions of shared religious commitments. These practices indicate that religious identity is enacted through routine behaviors as much as through verbal expressions. From

a sociolinguistic perspective, such representations highlight the close relationship between discourse and ideology, as language contributes to the legitimization of social norms and moral values (Etaywe & Zappavigna, 2022; Sholeh et al., 2026). Moreover, the narrative demonstrates that religious practices acquire greater significance when characters live in environments where their beliefs are not part of the dominant culture. In this sense, *Abu Dhabi Romance* offers a nuanced portrayal of how everyday decisions become sites for the affirmation of collective identity (Cosquer, 2021). A more critical reading of the findings, however, reveals that the construction of religious identity in the webtoon is shaped by particular cultural and narrative choices. The repeated association between Arab identity and Islam simplifies the diversity that characterizes Muslim communities across different regions of the world. Likewise, the emphasis on dietary rules and gender norms foregrounds specific aspects of Islamic life while leaving other dimensions relatively unexplored. These tendencies should not be understood as weaknesses of the narrative itself, but rather as reminders that fictional texts inevitably select and prioritize certain representations over others (Andrade, 2025). By acknowledging this contextual limitation, the study underscores the importance of approaching digital narratives as socially situated texts that both reflect and shape public understandings of religion. Such an interpretation adds a critical dimension to previous research on language and identity, which has tended to focus primarily on educational or interpersonal contexts (Ghiasvand & Seyri, 2025).

The present study also contributes to broader discussions concerning the role of digital media in contemporary identity formation. As webtoons continue to gain popularity across national boundaries, they increasingly function as spaces where cultural values and social meanings are negotiated. Within this context, *Abu Dhabi Romance* does more than tell a romantic story; it provides readers with a particular vision of Muslim identity and intercultural relationships. Unlike earlier studies that have concentrated on audience engagement or multilingual communication, this research directs attention to the sociolinguistic mechanisms through which religion is represented in digital narratives (Alsaawi, 2022). The findings therefore suggest that webtoons should be considered not only as entertainment products but also as cultural artifacts that participate in the construction and circulation of social identities (Nam & Jung, 2022).

Taken together, these findings extend existing discussions of linguistic identity by demonstrating how personal identity, group affiliation, and language variation interact within a digital narrative environment. The study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by connecting Thornborrow's theoretical framework with the emerging field of webtoon studies, an area that remains relatively underexplored. In practical terms, the findings provide insight into the ways popular media shape public perceptions of Muslim communities and mediate intercultural understanding. More importantly, they show that language continues to function as a powerful instrument for preserving religious identity even within highly globalized and digitally mediated settings (Khamis, 2024). Future studies may build on these findings by examining other webtoon genres or by exploring how readers interpret the linguistic representations of religion presented in contemporary digital media (Rachmawati et al., 2026).

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the use of language in constructing religious identity in Abu Dhabi Romance Webtoon by employing Thornborrow's theory of linguistic identity. The findings reveal that religious identity is constructed through the interaction of personal identity, group identity, and linguistic variation, all of which are reflected in the characters' linguistic choices and social practices. At the personal level, Islamic names and the patronymic naming system (nasab) function as markers of religious affiliation and cultural continuity, while at the collective level, Muslim identity is reinforced through shared values, social boundaries, and the distinction between ingroups and outgroups. The study further demonstrates that code-switching and the maintenance of Arabic expressions play a significant role in preserving religious and cultural belonging within intercultural contexts. In addition, religious identity is expressed not only through language itself but also through everyday practices, such as the selection of halal food, attitudes toward interfaith marriage, and the regulation of relationships between men and women. These findings support Thornborrow's argument that identity is dynamic and continuously negotiated through social interaction rather than existing as a fixed attribute. By examining the intersection of language, religion, and digital storytelling, this study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship and highlights the potential of webtoons as cultural spaces in which religious values and social identities are represented, maintained, and reinterpreted across different cultural settings.

AUHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Lia Jumana: Conceptualized the study, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the original draft of the manuscript.

Ubaidillah: provided academic supervision, contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, critically reviewed the manuscript, and offered suggestions for improvement.

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