

RELIGIOUS APPRECIATION AS A PREDICTOR OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

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Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between religious appreciation and psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students. Within Malaysia's unique multi religious context, understanding how religious appreciation influences adolescent psychological development has significant implications for educational policy and practice. Using a cross-sectional research design, data were collected from 290 secondary school students across three institutions in Perak, Malaysia, predominantly comprising Malay students (99.3%) aged 13-16 years. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) revealed religious appreciation significantly predicted psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.391$, $t = 7.682$, $p < 0.001$) with a moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.180$), explaining 15.3% of variance in psychological well-being. Measurement model assessment confirmed satisfactory reliability and validity for both constructs. These findings demonstrate that religious appreciation constitutes a meaningful contributor to adolescent psychological well-being in Malaysia's educational context, suggesting that nurturing religious understanding and appreciation may support positive psychological development among secondary school students, regardless of their specific faith tradition.*

Keywords: *Religious appreciation; Psychological well-being; Malaysian adolescents; Secondary education; Cross-sectional study; PLS-SEM; Multireligious context; Adolescent development*

Introduction

Religious Appreciation and Psychological Well-being in Malaysia's Multireligious Context presents a unique multireligious educational landscape where Islam as the official religion (63.5% of population) coexists with Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%), and Hinduism (6.1%), creating a rich tapestry of faith traditions within educational institutions (Ting et al., 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). This intersection of ethnicity and religion creates distinctive environments where adolescents navigate identity formation through religious frameworks that significantly influence psychological development.

In the context of education, religion has played a significant role since the early stages of schooling. Islamic education is comprehensively incorporated into the mainstream education system, including at the secondary and university levels. Religious appreciation among adolescents is shaped by various factors, including parental influence, peer groups, and the educational environment. This article highlights that the rising religious consciousness among Muslim youth corresponds with the wave of Islamization, which has been reinforced by governmental policies and institutional support. In contrast, religious adherence among Buddhist youth tends to be more ritualistic, placing less emphasis on theological aspects. This distinction reflects the critical role of education, religious institutions, and community in shaping adolescents' religious understanding (Awang et al., 2022).

Religious appreciation during adolescence represents a critical developmental resource that provides moral frameworks, coping mechanisms, and social support networks contributing to positive psychological outcomes (Afandi & Pranajaya, 2023). These religious dimensions—including concepts like sabar (patience), ikhlas (sincerity), syukur (gratitude), and tawadhu (humility)—serve as psychosocial capital that potentially enhances adolescents' resilience and well-being.

Despite Malaysia's rich religious diversity, there exists a significant research gap regarding how different dimensions of religious appreciation specifically influence psychological well-being within Malaysia's unique multicultural context (Ting et al., 2023). While research has examined religiosity's impact on well-being in Western contexts, limited studies address how Malaysia's distinctive religious pluralism shapes adolescent psychological outcomes across different faith traditions.

Understanding this relationship is imperative for developing culturally appropriate interventions that harness religious resources to promote adolescent mental health in Malaysia's multireligious society, particularly during times of psychosocial challenges.

Literature Review

Religious appreciation, conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, encompasses religious affiliation, religious attendance, self-professed religiosity, personal prayer, and religious beliefs (Mannion et al., 2024). Religiosity refers to one's relationship with a faith tradition, demonstrable through religious attendance, holding religious beliefs, and participation in organized religious activities, which can be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Allport & Ross, 1967; Holdcroft, 2006).

Religious coping, a related construct, specifies how individuals utilize religion to comprehend and manage daily life events (Dein, 2018), with positive religious coping involving religious forgiveness and spiritual support, while negative religious coping includes feeling abandoned by God or interpreting negative events as divine punishment (Pargament et al., 2004).

Psychological well-being, as conceptualized by Ryff (1989), comprises six dimensions: autonomy (self-understanding and individuation), environmental mastery (managing one's surroundings), personal growth (developing one's potential), purpose in life (sense of direction and goals), positive relations with others (warm interpersonal relationships), and self-acceptance (acceptance of oneself and one's past). The relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being has been extensively studied globally, with a large-scale analysis by Hoogeveen et al. (2023) finding that religious people generally self-report higher well-being (median $\beta=0.120$) and that the relationship depends on perceived cultural norms of religion. Studies with Turkish medical students have shown that religiosity is positively associated with psychological well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Akbayram & Keten, 2024), while research with Portuguese university students demonstrated that positive religious coping is linked to enhanced purpose in life but negative religious coping correlates with diminished psychological well-being (Graça & Brandão, 2024).

Research in Asian contexts remains limited, revealing a significant gap particularly regarding Malaysia's unique multi-religious landscape where Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity coexist within the educational system. Developmental aspects of adolescent religious identity are particularly important, as this life stage involves identity formation and meaning-making (Mannion et al., 2024). Contradictory findings have emerged across studies, with some showing no significant relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being (Mannion et al., 2024), while others demonstrate positive associations, particularly when examining specific dimensions like purpose in life or environmental mastery.

Theoretical models explaining these relationships include Pargament's (2001) religious coping framework, which extends Folkman and Lazarus's (1986) transactional model of stress by defining religious coping as seeking meaning in the sacred during stress. Methodologically, studies have employed various approaches, from correlational designs with self-report measures to multilevel analyses accounting for cultural contexts, with inconsistencies potentially stemming from measurement variations and cultural differences (Hoogeveen et al., 2023). Critical research gaps include limited investigation in diverse cultural settings like Malaysia, insufficient longitudinal research examining causality, inadequate exploration of religious identity development during adolescence, and the need for mixed-methods approaches that capture both quantitative relationships and qualitative experiences of how religion influences psychological well-being across diverse cultural contexts.

The discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis: Religious appreciation has a positive and insignificant relationship with psychological well-being.

The literature has guided the investigators to frame the conceptual framework for this investigation, as depicted in figure 1.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methods

Research Approach

The investigation employed a cross-sectional research paradigm to explore correlations between religious appreciation and psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students. This methodological framework integrated comprehensive literature analysis with primary data collection via structured questionnaires. Cross-sectional methodology was selected for its effectiveness in addressing methodological limitations, enhancing data reliability, reducing systematic bias, and strengthening analytical quality (Cresswell, 1998; Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

Instrument Development

The assessment instrument comprised two principal components focusing on distinct constructs. The first section evaluated religious appreciation through four items adapted from Hatta's (1996) measurement framework, while the second component assessed psychological well-being utilizing four items derived from Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being scale. Both sections implemented five-point Likert-type response formats. Additionally, demographic variables were collected, including gender identification, ethnic background, age categorization, and parental socioeconomic indicators (occupational classification and income parameters).

Sampling Procedure

Researchers implemented purposive sampling techniques to engage 318 adolescent participants across three secondary educational institutions in Perak, Malaysia. This methodological choice facilitated direct researcher-participant interaction during data collection. The investigation achieved exceptional response efficiency, with 290 completed instruments returned, representing a 91% completion rate.

Data Analysis

The analytical strategy utilized SmartPLS software, selected for its capabilities in handling latent variable modeling, accommodating modest sample dimensions, processing non-normally distributed data, and evaluating complex structural relationships (Hair et al., 2016; Henseler et al., 2009). The analytical protocol involved sequential procedures: confirmatory factor analysis to establish measurement validity and reliability; hypothesis evaluation using two-tailed t-statistics (significance threshold: 1.96); predictive relevance assessment via Q^2 values; and model fit evaluation using standardized root mean square residual indices (acceptable threshold: <0.1) (Hair et al., 2016). This comprehensive analytical approach ensured robust examination of hypothesized relationships while maintaining methodological rigor.

Results

Characteristics of the respondent

The study sample ($N=290$) consisted predominantly of female students (55.9%), with male students comprising 44.1% of participants. The overwhelming majority were of Malay ethnicity (99.3%), with minimal representation from Chinese and other ethnic backgrounds (0.3% each). The age distribution reflects typical secondary school demographics, with the largest concentration being 16-year-olds (37.6%), followed by 14-year-olds (31.7%), 15-year-olds (20.0%), and 13-year-olds (10.7%). This age range (13-16 years) appropriately represents the target population of Malaysian secondary school students. Regarding parental occupation,

slightly more than half of respondents' parents were self-employed (52.8%), with government employment representing the second largest category (37.2%), followed by private sector employment (9.7%). The household income distribution revealed that nearly half of the respondents came from families earning between RM0-1000 monthly (46.6%), with 25.2% in the RM0-500 range and 21.4% in the RM501-1000 bracket. Another significant portion (20.7%) reported family income between RM1001-1500, while approximately 10% came from higher-income households earning above RM3000 monthly. This demographic profile provides context for interpreting the relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality among Malaysian secondary school students.

Measurement model Analysis

Based on Table 1 the analysis reveals both constructs demonstrate satisfactory psychometric properties. Religious Appreciation shows acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.700$, $\rho_c = 0.788$) with AVE exceeding the 0.50 threshold (0.512), indicating the construct explains approximately 51% of indicator variance. Similarly, Psychological Well-being exhibits adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.701$) with stronger composite reliability ($\rho_c = 0.813$) and slightly higher variance extraction (AVE = 0.523). These values confirm both constructs possess sufficient internal consistency and convergent validity for structural model testing. Discriminant validity assessment employed the HTMT ratio methodology (Henseler et al., 2016), which compares inter-construct versus within-construct indicator correlations. Using threshold criteria of HTMT < 0.90 for related constructs and < 0.85 for distinct constructs (Hair & Alamer, 2022), all obtained values fell below 0.85, confirming appropriate construct differentiation within the measurement model. This comprehensive assessment establishes a methodologically sound foundation for examining relationships between religious appreciation and psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students.

Table 1: The outcomes of convergent validity analysis and composite reliability

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average
Religious Appreciation	0.700	0.788	0.512
Psychological Well-being	0.701	0.813	0.523

Structural Equation Modelling

Based on Table 2, the structural model demonstrates Religious Appreciation functions as an exogenous variable (no R^2 value), while explaining 15.3% of variance in Psychological Well-being ($R^2=0.153$). The adjusted R^2 value (0.150) indicates minimal impact from sample size and predictor quantity, confirming model parsimony. The Q^2 value for Psychological Well-being (0.072) exceeds zero, establishing modest predictive relevance, while the model exhibits expected absence of predictive capability for the exogenous Religious Appreciation construct ($Q^2=0.000$). These findings reveal Religious Appreciation makes a meaningful contribution to explaining psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students, accounting for approximately one-sixth of its variance. While not achieving substantial explanatory power, this moderate effect is theoretically significant, suggesting religious appreciation represents one important factor among multiple influences on adolescent psychological well-being in Malaysia's multireligious context.

Table 2: Coefficient of Determination for the PLS-SEM

Relationship among constructs	R-square	R-square adjusted	Q ² predict
Religious Appreciation	-	-	0.000
Psychological Well-being	0.153	0.150	0.072

Based on Table 3, the structural equation modeling results provide compelling evidence supporting the primary research hypothesis (H1). Religious Appreciation demonstrates a significant positive influence on Psychological Well-being ($\beta = 0.391$, $t = 7.682$, $p < 0.001$). The moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.180$) indicates Religious Appreciation makes a meaningful contribution to psychological well-being beyond what might be explained by other factors. The bootstrap confidence intervals (LLCI = 0.318, ULCI = 0.487) establish robust precision in the parameter estimate, with both bounds remaining positive and relatively narrow. These findings conclusively support hypothesis H1, confirming that religious appreciation significantly enhances psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students. This result aligns with theoretical expectations regarding the psychological benefits of religious appreciation within Malaysia's multireligious society, suggesting that students with stronger religious appreciation tend to experience enhanced psychological well-being, regardless of their specific faith tradition. The identified relationship demonstrates not only statistical significance but practical relevance within educational and developmental contexts.

Table 3. Structured equations model results

Hypotheses	Relationship among constructs	β	Sample mean (M)	S. D	t-values	f-square	p-values	LLCI 5.0%	ULCI 95.0%	Remarks
H1	AP $\rightarrow$ PWB	0.391	0.404	0.051	7.682	0.180	0.000	0.318	0.487	Accepted

Discussion

The study reveals a significant positive relationship between religious appreciation and psychological well-being among Malaysian secondary school students with a substantial effect size ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.001$). Religious appreciation explains approximately 15.3% of variance in psychological well-being, representing a moderate effect size ($f^2 = 0.180$). The magnitude of this relationship exceeds the median effect ($\beta = 0.120$) reported in previous international meta-analyses (Hoogeveen et al., 2023), suggesting a particularly strong association in this cultural context.

Malaysian Cultural Context

The strength of the relationship between religious appreciation and psychological well-being must be understood within Malaysia's unique multi-religious context, where religious identity is deeply intertwined with cultural and ethnic identity. The predominantly Malay-Muslim sample (99.3%) indicates that religious appreciation functions both as a personal resource and a collective cultural value, potentially amplifying its psychological benefits through strong community reinforcement and institutional support. This cultural embeddedness distinguishes these findings from studies in more secularized Western contexts where religion operates primarily as an individual choice rather than a collective social identity.

Theoretical Framework

The results support Pargament's (2001) religious coping framework, suggesting that religious appreciation provides adolescents with meaning-making resources during a critical developmental period. The positive relationship aligns with Erikson's (1968) identity formation theories, indicating that religious appreciation may contribute to identity consolidation, enhancing psychological well-being through increased purpose in life and environmental mastery, dimensions identified by Ryff (1989) as central to psychological well-being. Educational Implications Educational institutions in Malaysia should recognize religious appreciation's potential contribution to student well-being by integrating culturally-sensitive spiritual development into comprehensive well-being programs. This implementation must be inclusive to accommodate Malaysia's multi-religious landscape, ensuring students from minority faiths receive equal support for their religious identity development (Ahmad & Ghani, 2017).

Explanatory Mechanisms

Religious appreciation may enhance social support through community belonging, providing adolescents with vital social connections during identity formation. Religious frameworks offer cognitive structures for understanding life challenges, potentially reducing existential anxiety among developing adolescents. Religious practices provide emotion regulation strategies through rituals and contemplative practices, offering adolescents tools to manage emotional turbulence. Moral guidelines established through religious appreciation may reduce decision-making stress during a period characterized by increased autonomy and choice.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's cross-sectional design prevents making causal inferences about the relationship between religious appreciation and psychological well-being. Limited ethnic diversity in the sample (99.3% Malay) restricts generalizability to Malaysia's broader multi-ethnic society. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causality between religious appreciation and psychological well-being. More diverse ethnic and religious samples reflecting Malaysia's pluralistic society should be included in subsequent studies. Qualitative methods could explore nuanced cultural interpretations of religious appreciation across different faith traditions within the Malaysian context.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious appreciation represents a significant resource for enhancing psychological well-being among Malaysian adolescents, with findings revealing a substantial positive relationship ($\beta = 0.391$) that exceeds effect sizes typically reported in Western contexts. Operating within Malaysia's unique cultural landscape where religion intertwines with ethnic identity, religious appreciation appears to provide adolescents with crucial meaning-making resources, social support, and moral frameworks during a critical developmental period. While acknowledging limitations in sample diversity and cross-sectional design, these findings suggest educational institutions should thoughtfully integrate culturally-sensitive spiritual development into comprehensive well-being programs, ensuring inclusivity across Malaysia's multi-religious landscape and establishing foundations for future longitudinal research exploring causal mechanisms across diverse faith traditions.

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