

REVISITING THE MORAL CORE OF INTEGRITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING MORAL REASONING AND HONESTY IN CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

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Article history

Received date : 5-8-2026

Revised date : 6-8-2026

Accepted date : 12-9-2026

Published date : 17-9-2026

To cite this document:

Mohd Nadzri, K. M., Mohamad, R. E., Ferdaus, F., Abd Hamid, S. R., & Abdul Rahman, M. A. (2026). Revisiting the moral core of integrity: A conceptual framework linking moral reasoning and honesty in contemporary ethical decision-making. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (86), 345 – 355.

Abstract: *Despite extensive scholarship on ethical behaviour, the relationship between moral reasoning and honesty remains conceptually fragmented, with limited integration across cognitive-developmental and behavioral ethics perspectives. Existing research often treats honesty as a situational or dispositional outcome without sufficiently examining the underlying moral reasoning processes that shape truthful conduct. Drawing on the cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984) and the neo-Kohlbergian framework (Rest et al., 1999), alongside contemporary behavioral ethics insights (Treviño et al., 2006; Aquino & Reed, 2002), this conceptual paper proposes an integrative framework positioning moral reasoning as a foundational driver of honesty. The central argument asserts that higher stages of moral reasoning not only enhance ethical judgment but also strengthen internalized moral identity, thereby increasing the likelihood of honest behaviour across contexts. The paper advances a conceptual model that connects moral reasoning, moral identity, and situational moderators (e.g., organizational climate, social norms) to explain variations in honesty. This framework addresses a critical gap by synthesizing traditionally silo-ed theories into a cohesive explanatory structure. The contribution lies in re-conceptualizing honesty as a function of both cognitive moral development and identity-based motivation, offering a more nuanced understanding of ethical conduct. The paper holds*

significant implications for ethics education, organizational governance, and integrity-based leadership by emphasizing the cultivation of moral reasoning capacities as a pathway to fostering sustainable honesty in complex environments.

Keyword: *Ethics, Honesty, Moral Reasoning*

Introduction

Honesty is widely regarded as a foundational element of ethical behaviour and integrity, yet its underlying cognitive mechanisms remain insufficiently theorized in contemporary literature. In an era marked by corporate scandals, academic misconduct, and ethical lapses across sectors, understanding the moral foundations that drive honest behaviour has become increasingly critical. While honesty is often examined as a behavioral outcome influenced by situational pressures or personality traits, less attention has been given to the role of moral reasoning as a core determinant of truthful conduct (Treviño et al., 2006; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024; Kaptein, 2022; Brown & Mitchell, 2022). This gap is particularly significant given that ethical decision-making is not merely reactive but rooted in individuals' cognitive evaluation of right and wrong. Unlike prior studies that examine moral reasoning, moral identity, and honesty as separate constructs, this study integrates these perspectives into a unified explanatory framework that captures the dynamic interaction between cognition, identity, and situational influences. In this study, honesty is defined as a consistent alignment between moral judgment and truthful behaviour, reflecting both cognitive evaluation and identity-based motivation. Existing studies in moral psychology, particularly those grounded in cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning, suggest that individuals progress through stages of moral reasoning that influence their ethical judgments (Kohlberg, 1984). However, contemporary behavioral ethics research highlights that moral reasoning alone may not consistently predict ethical behaviour due to contextual and identity-based influences (Kish-Gephart et al., 2024). Furthermore, the moral identity perspective posits that the extent to which morality is central to one's self-concept significantly shapes behavioural outcomes, including honesty (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Despite these advances, there remains a lack of integrative frameworks that systematically connect moral reasoning, moral identity, and honesty within a unified conceptual model.

This study addresses this gap by revisiting the moral core of integrity and proposing a conceptual framework that positions moral reasoning as a foundational driver of honesty, mediated by moral identity and moderated by situational factors. Theoretically, this paper contributes to bridging the divide between cognitive moral development theories and behavioural ethics by offering a more holistic explanation of ethical conduct. Practically, it provides insights for educators, policymakers, and organizational leaders seeking to cultivate integrity by emphasizing the development of moral reasoning capacities rather than relying solely on compliance-based approaches. Drawing on seminal and contemporary works (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Treviño et al., 2006; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024), this paper argues that honesty is best understood as a cognitively grounded and identity-driven behaviour. By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to advance a more nuanced and actionable understanding of integrity in modern ethical decision-making contexts. This study adopts a conceptual approach, aiming to develop an integrative theoretical framework rather than to empirically test relationships among variables.

Literature Review

The relationship between moral reasoning and honesty has been extensively examined across moral psychology and behavioural ethics, yet the literature remains theoretically fragmented. A dominant foundation is the cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning, which posits that individuals progress through hierarchical stages of moral reasoning, from pre-conventional to post-conventional levels (Kohlberg, 1984). This perspective was later refined by the neo-Kohlbergian model, which conceptualizes moral reasoning as schema-based and context-sensitive rather than strictly stage-bound (Rest et al., 1999). Empirical evidence suggests that higher levels of moral reasoning are associated with more principled ethical judgments; however, the translation of such reasoning into consistent honest behaviour remains contested (Dong et al., 2022). This disconnect highlights a key limitation of purely cognitive approaches, which often overestimate the predictive power of moral reasoning in real-world ethical conduct. In response, the behavioural ethics literature challenges the rationalist assumptions of cognitive-developmental models by emphasizing the role of unconscious biases, situational pressures, and bounded ethicality (Kish-Gephart, 2024).

From this perspective, individuals may possess advanced moral reasoning capabilities yet still engage in dishonest behaviour due to contextual influences such as organizational culture or social norms (Treviño et al., 2006). While this body of work offers valuable insights into the situational determinants of dishonesty, it has been criticized for under-theorizing the role of internal moral cognition and for treating ethical lapses as largely reactive phenomena. Consequently, behavioural ethics provides a necessary but insufficient explanation of honesty, as it does not fully account for individual differences in moral agency. To bridge this divide, scholars have increasingly turned to the moral identity framework, which posits that ethical behaviour is driven by the centrality of moral traits within an individual's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity has been shown to mediate the relationship between moral cognition and behaviour, suggesting that individuals are more likely to act honestly when moral values are integral to their identity (Hertz et al., 2023). This perspective advances the literature by integrating cognitive and motivational dimensions of ethics. However, it also raises conceptual challenges, particularly regarding the stability of moral identity across contexts and its interaction with external pressures. Moreover, empirical findings remain mixed, with some studies indicating that strong moral identity does not always prevent unethical behaviour under high-stakes or ambiguous conditions (Jennings et al., 2023). Another important strand of literature focuses on dual-process theories, which distinguish between intuitive (automatic) and deliberative (controlled) processes underlying moral judgment and ethical decision-making. Recent evidence suggests that these processes interact dynamically rather than operating as two strictly independent systems, providing a more nuanced understanding of moral cognition (Greene, 2023). These models suggest that honesty may result from both rapid moral intuitions and reflective reasoning, depending on situational demands. While dual-process approaches offer a more nuanced understanding of ethical behaviour, they often lack integration with developmental and identity-based theories, leading to conceptual fragmentation. Additionally, they provide limited guidance on how these processes interact over time to shape stable patterns of honesty. Across these perspectives, a recurring inconsistency lies in the failure to adequately integrate cognitive, identity-based, and situational determinants of honesty into a cohesive framework.

Cognitive-developmental theories emphasize moral reasoning as the primary basis for ethical judgment but often provide limited consideration of contextual variability and the interaction between cognitive and situational influences on moral behaviour (Greene, 2023; Carlson et al.,

2022). Contemporary behavioural ethics research highlights the influence of organizational context, social norms, and situational pressures on ethical decision-making, although these perspectives have been criticized for providing comparatively less attention to the cognitive mechanisms underlying individual moral agency (Kaptein, 2022; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024). Recent studies recognise moral identity as a critical motivational mechanism linking moral cognition to ethical behaviour; however, further conceptual development is needed to explain how moral identity dynamically interacts with moral reasoning and contextual influences across different decision-making environments (Xu et al., 2024; Russo et al., 2025). Consequently, the literature remains theoretically fragmented, with no single framework adequately explaining why individuals possessing similar levels of moral reasoning often display markedly different ethical behaviours due to differences in identity, personality, and contextual influences (Xu et al., 2024; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024). Although recent studies acknowledge the multidimensional nature of ethical behaviour, relatively few conceptual models integrate cognitive moral development, moral identity, and situational influences into a unified explanatory framework (Carlson et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). Furthermore, contemporary empirical research has primarily focused on behavioural outcomes and intervention effectiveness, with comparatively less attention devoted to the underlying cognitive and identity-based mechanisms that explain why honesty is maintained across contexts (Hertwig & Mazar, 2022; Zickfeld et al., 2024). Accordingly, this paper addresses these theoretical limitations by proposing an integrative conceptual framework that synthesizes cognitive-developmental theory, behavioural ethics, and moral identity perspectives. By conceptualising honesty as a function of moral reasoning mediated by moral identity and moderated by contextual influences, the framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of ethical decision-making and responds to recent calls for theoretically integrated models of ethical behaviour (Xu et al., 2024; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024).

Definition of Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning refers to the cognitive process through which individuals evaluate ethical issues and determine what is right or wrong based on moral principles, values, and standards. It involves critical thinking and judgment in resolving moral dilemmas and guiding ethical behaviour. According to Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), moral reasoning develops progressively through hierarchical stages, beginning with obedience to authority and progressing toward universal ethical principles grounded in justice and human rights. Expanding this perspective, James Rest et al. (1999) conceptualized moral reasoning as a schema-based and context-sensitive process that influences ethical judgment and decision-making across different situations. Contemporary research further suggests that higher levels of moral reasoning are associated with more principled ethical judgments, integrity, and honest behaviour in personal and organizational contexts (Dong et al., 2022). Therefore, moral reasoning is widely regarded as a foundational component of ethical decision-making and moral conduct.

Definition of Honesty

Honesty refers to the quality of being truthful, transparent, sincere, and consistent in one's words, actions, and decisions. It reflects an individual's commitment to truthfulness and integrity while avoiding deception, fraud, or manipulation. In behavioural ethics literature, honesty is often viewed as the alignment between moral judgment and actual ethical behaviour. Recent evidence suggests that honest behaviour is motivated by individuals' desire to maintain a positive moral self-concept and internal moral standards. People are more likely to behave honestly when interventions reinforce their moral identity, self-image, and internal commitment to ethical values rather than relying solely on external sanctions (Hertwig & Mazar, 2022).

Similarly, Hertz et al. (2023) argue that honesty is closely connected to moral identity, suggesting that individuals are more likely to act honestly when moral values are central to their self-concept. Recent studies also associate honesty with the honesty–humility construct, emphasizing sincerity, fairness, modesty, and ethical consistency in social behaviour (Zettler et al., 2023). Thus, honesty is understood not only as a moral value but also as a behavioural expression of ethical principles and integrity.

Definition of Ethics

Ethics refers to the system of moral principles, values, and standards that guide individuals and organizations in determining what is right, fair, and responsible within a particular context. According to Linda Klebe Treviño (1986), ethics involves the interaction between individual moral cognition and situational influences in shaping ethical decision-making. Contemporary perspectives define ethics as a dynamic and context-sensitive process involving moral reasoning, accountability, integrity, and socially responsible behaviour in decision-making. In behavioural ethics research, ethics is understood not only as adherence to rules or codes of conduct but also as the interaction between personal moral values and situational influences such as organizational culture, leadership, and social norms. According to Linda Klebe Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006), ethical behaviour emerges from the interaction between individual cognition and environmental factors that shape moral judgment and actions. More recent studies further emphasize that ethics involves reflective decision-making processes that promote transparency, justice, sustainability, and human well-being in increasingly complex social and organizational environments (Schwartz, 2016; Brown & Mitchell, 2022). Therefore, ethics serves as a foundational framework for guiding responsible conduct and maintaining integrity in professional and societal life.



Figure 1: Integrative Framework Grounded In Three Complementary Theoretical Perspectives

Source: (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999), (Aquino & Reed, 2002), (Treviño et al., 2006; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper develops an integrative framework grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: the cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999), moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and behavioural ethics theory (Treviño et al., 2006; Kish-Gephart et al., 2024). These perspectives are synthesized to explain how moral reasoning translates into honest behaviour within complex and dynamic decision-making

contexts. The cognitive-developmental tradition posits that individuals with higher levels of moral reasoning are more likely to make principled ethical judgments (Kohlberg, 1984). However, empirical inconsistencies suggest that moral reasoning alone does not guarantee ethical behaviour, particularly honesty, due to contextual and motivational influences (Dong, 2022). To address this limitation, the framework incorporates moral identity as a mediating construct, reflecting the degree to which moral values are central to an individual's self-concept. Individuals with a salient moral identity are more likely to align their actions with their ethical beliefs, thereby strengthening the reasoning–behaviour link (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hertz et al., 2023). The proposed model conceptualizes honesty as an outcome of the interaction between moral reasoning, moral identity, and situational factors. Moral reasoning provides the cognitive basis for ethical judgment, moral identity strengthens the internalization of moral values, and situational factors influence how these internal processes are expressed in behaviour.

Simultaneously, behavioural ethics theory highlights the moderating role of situational factors, such as organizational climate, social norms, and ethical culture, which can either facilitate or constrain honest behaviour (Treviño et al., 2006). These factors explain why individuals with similar levels of moral reasoning and moral identity may behave differently under varying contextual pressures. Thus, the proposed framework conceptualizes honesty not as a direct outcome of moral reasoning, but as a product of the interaction between cognitive, identity-based, and situational dimensions. The integrated conceptual model proposes that moral reasoning (independent variable) positively influences honesty (dependent variable), both directly and indirectly through moral identity (mediator). Situational factors act as moderators that influence the strength and direction of these relationships. This multidimensional structure advances prior models by embedding moral reasoning within a broader socio-cognitive system. Accordingly, the following propositions are advanced:

P1: Higher levels of moral reasoning are positively associated with honest behaviour.

P2: Moral identity mediates the relationship between moral reasoning and honesty.

P3: Situational factors (e.g., ethical climate, social norms) moderate the relationship between moral reasoning and honesty.

P4: Situational factors moderate the relationship between moral identity and honesty.

Conceptually, the framework can be visualized as a path model: moral reasoning is positioned on the left, with arrows pointing directly to honesty and indirectly through moral identity (centre). Situational moderators are depicted as interacting variables influencing both the direct and mediated pathways. This structure reflects a dynamic and context-sensitive model of ethical decision-making. By integrating these theoretical strands, the framework offers a more comprehensive and nuanced explanation of honesty, addressing limitations in prior literature and providing a foundation for future empirical validation.

Moral Reasoning

According to Lawrence Kohlberg, moral reasoning is the process through which individuals determine what is right or wrong based on their level of cognitive moral development. Kohlberg argued that moral reasoning develops progressively through a sequence of six stages grouped into three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional morality. Each stage reflects increasingly sophisticated ways of thinking about justice, rules, rights, and ethical

principles. At the preconventional level, moral decisions are based primarily on avoiding punishment and satisfying personal interests. Individuals obey rules mainly to avoid negative consequences or gain rewards. At the conventional level, moral reasoning becomes socially oriented, where individuals seek approval from others and uphold laws, authority, and social order. Finally, at the postconventional level, individuals develop autonomous moral principles guided by justice, human rights, and universal ethical values, even when these conflict with laws or societal expectations.

Kohlberg emphasized that moral reasoning is not merely about following rules but about the underlying rationale individuals use when making ethical judgments. Higher stages of moral reasoning reflect more principled and internally guided ethical thinking. Therefore, Kohlberg viewed moral reasoning as a developmental cognitive process that influences ethical judgment, integrity, and moral behaviour across different situations.

Table 1: Level of Moral Reasoning (Kohl Berg)

Level of Development	Stage	Characteristics of Moral Reasoning
Preconventional Level (generally, ages 4–10)	Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation	Behaviour is driven by fear of punishment and obedience to authority. Individuals judge actions based on their consequences rather than moral principles.
	Stage 2: Individualism and Exchange	Behaviour is guided by self-interest and personal benefit. Moral decisions are based on reciprocal advantage (“what’s in it for me”).
Conventional Level (typically from adolescence to adulthood)	Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships	Behaviour is motivated by the desire for social approval, acceptance, and maintaining good relationships with others.
	Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order	Moral reasoning emphasizes respect for laws, authority, and social rules to maintain order and stability in society.
Post-conventional Level (adolescence and adulthood)	Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights	Individuals recognize that laws and rules should promote fairness, justice, and the protection of individual rights. Moral reasoning becomes more flexible and principle-oriented.
	Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principles	Moral decisions are guided by internalized universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, and human dignity, even if they conflict with laws or authority.

Source: Kohlberg, L. (1984)

Conclusion

This paper advances the literature by reconceptualizing honesty as a multidimensional construct grounded in the interplay between moral cognition, identity, and situational context. By integrating the cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning with behavioural ethics and moral identity, the proposed framework addresses a long-standing theoretical fragmentation in understanding ethical behaviour. Prior models have tended to privilege either cognitive reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999) or situational determinants (Treviño et al., 2006),

often overlooking the dynamic interaction between internal moral capacities and external influences. This study contributes theoretically by positioning moral reasoning as a foundational mechanism that operates through moral identity and is contingent upon contextual moderators. Such integration aligns with recent calls for more holistic and process-oriented models of ethical decision-making (Hertz et al., 2023).

A key theoretical implication lies in reframing honesty not as a static trait or isolated outcome, but as a cognitively mediated and identity-driven behaviour shaped by situational contingencies. This perspective extends the explanatory power of existing models by demonstrating that moral reasoning alone is insufficient unless internalized as part of the self-concept. In doing so, the framework provides a more nuanced account of why individuals with similar cognitive moral capacities may exhibit divergent ethical behaviours. It also contributes to bridging the micro–macro divide by linking individual-level cognition and identity with organizational-level influences such as ethical climate and norms (Treviño et al., 2006; Hertz et al., 2023). From a practical standpoint, the framework offers actionable insights for ethics education, organizational governance, and leadership development. Traditional compliance-based approaches that emphasize rules and sanctions may be limited in fostering genuine honesty if they fail to cultivate moral reasoning and identity. Instead, educational institutions and organizations should prioritize developmental interventions that enhance individuals' capacity for principled reasoning and reinforce moral identity through reflective practices and ethical role modeling. For instance, structured moral dilemma discussions and integrity-based leadership programs can strengthen the internalization of ethical values, thereby increasing the likelihood of honest behaviour across contexts (Dong et al., 2022). Moreover, organizations must recognize the moderating role of situational factors by fostering ethical climates that support transparency, accountability, and psychological safety. Without such supportive environments, even individuals with strong moral foundations may experience ethical dissonance or succumb to contextual pressures (Kish-Gephart et al., 2024).

The proposed framework demonstrates several strengths. First, it offers theoretical integration across previously siloed domains, enhancing conceptual clarity and coherence. Second, it adopts a dynamic perspective that accounts for both stability (moral reasoning and identity) and variability (situational influences) in ethical behaviour. Third, it provides a flexible structure that can be empirically tested across diverse contexts, including education, business, and public administration. These strengths position the framework as a valuable foundation for advancing both theory and research on integrity. However, the framework is not without limitations. As a conceptual model, it lacks immediate empirical validation, and the proposed relationships require rigorous testing using longitudinal and multi-method approaches. Additionally, the model may oversimplify the complexity of ethical decision-making by focusing primarily on moral reasoning and identity, potentially underrepresenting the affective and intuitive cognitive processes that interact dynamically with deliberative reasoning during moral judgment and ethical decision-making (Greene, 2023; Carlson et al., 2022). Cultural variability also presents a limitation, as moral reasoning and expressions of honesty may differ across sociocultural contexts, thereby affecting the generalizability of the framework. Critically, this study underscores the need to move beyond reductionist explanations of ethical behaviour. Honesty cannot be fully understood through isolated constructs; rather, it emerges from the interaction of cognitive development, self-concept, and environmental conditions. Future research should explore these interactions more deeply, particularly through empirical designs that capture temporal and contextual dynamics. By doing so, scholars can further refine the moral

architecture of integrity and contribute to more effective strategies for fostering honesty in increasingly complex ethical landscapes.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes that honesty is not merely a behavioural outcome, but a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of moral cognition, identity, and context, highlighting the importance of holistic approaches in understanding ethical decision-making. By positioning moral reasoning as the cognitive foundation of honesty, the proposed framework advances a more comprehensive perspective that recognizes ethical behaviour as the result of both internal moral capacities and external environmental influences. This integrated approach contributes to the growing body of literature that calls for moving beyond isolated theoretical perspectives toward multidimensional models capable of explaining ethical behaviour across diverse personal, organizational, and societal contexts.

Furthermore, the framework offers important practical implications for educational institutions, organizations, and policymakers seeking to cultivate integrity and ethical conduct. Rather than relying solely on compliance mechanisms or punitive regulations, ethics initiatives should focus on strengthening individuals' moral reasoning abilities while simultaneously fostering moral identity and creating supportive ethical climates. Educational programmes that incorporate moral dilemma discussions, reflective learning, ethics-based leadership development, and values-oriented decision-making may contribute to the development of more principled and internally motivated ethical behaviour. Similarly, organizations should cultivate ethical cultures characterized by transparency, accountability, fairness, and psychological safety to enable individuals to translate moral judgement into honest action despite situational pressures.

From a theoretical perspective, this conceptual framework provides a foundation for future empirical investigation. Researchers are encouraged to validate the proposed relationships using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches across different cultural, educational, and organizational settings. Future studies may also explore additional mechanisms that influence honesty, such as ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, moral courage, self-regulation, or cultural values, to further refine the explanatory power of the framework. Longitudinal and cross-cultural research would be particularly valuable in examining how moral reasoning, moral identity, and contextual factors interact over time and across diverse institutional environments.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the literature by integrating cognitive-developmental theory, behavioural ethics, and moral identity into a coherent conceptual framework that explains honesty as a multidimensional and context-sensitive ethical phenomenon. By bridging previously fragmented theoretical perspectives, the study provides a stronger conceptual basis for understanding integrity in contemporary ethical decision-making. It is anticipated that this framework will not only stimulate further scholarly inquiry but also inform the design of more effective ethics education, organizational governance, and integrity-building strategies capable of promoting sustainable honesty in increasingly complex and rapidly evolving societies.

Acknowledgements:	The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to University Poly-Tech Malaysia (UPTM) for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.
Funding Statement:	This research received financial support from Centre for Islamic, General & Language Studies (CIGLS). The funding body had no role in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or the decision to publish this manuscript.
Conflict of Interest Statement:	The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)
Ethics Statement:	This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
Author Contribution Statement:	All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Khadijah Maisarah Mohd Nadzri was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Siti Rafiah Abd Hamid and Farah Ferdaus handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Mohd Asyraf Abdul Rahman and Rogayah Estar Mohamad contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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