Youth religiosity as a mediator of the relationship between psychosocial factors and positive youth development

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to investigate the mediating role played by youth religiosity in the relationship between the psychosocial factors of parental attachment, peer attachment, and institutional social bonding with positive youth development (PYD). PYD was based on the 5Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring & compassion)model. This study involved a cluster sampling of 677 youths in Malaysian community colleges; their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years (M = 19.47; SD = 3.59). Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires. The findings indicated that youth religiosity fully mediated the relationships of parental attachment, as well as peer attachment with PYD. Religiosity also partially mediated the relationship between institutional social bonding and PYD. Hence the findings suggest that youth religiosity, which comprises ritualistic and prosocial behaviour, contributed considerably to positive youth development.

Keywords: Positive youth development; parent an peer attachment; religiosity; community colleges; institutional bonding

1. Introduction

Youths are assets[7,8] and resources[21,67,83,84] that need to be developed so that they can be agents of change[9,36] who can contribute effectively to the community[50,66]. Every youth has his or her own unique strengths and assets that must be carefully nurtured to ensure their full development so the individual can contribute usefully and effectively towards the family, community and country. Well developed internal and external assets[6,86] are able to extend youth potential[96]. As youth have a vital role to play in society as agents of change and development, it is important that they are imbued with positive values based on their religious beliefs. Previous studies have found that religiosity positively impacts the development of youth[43,54,57]. Values espoused by a religion enhance positive youth development, helping to strengthen character and mould desirable attitudes and morals, thus reducing risk behaviour[26,32,75,93].

Malaysia is a thriving country with youth comprising more than 50% of the population[25]. The majority of youth in Malaysia are Muslims who are ethnic Malays[55]. However, Malaysians also practise other religious faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism[56]. The focus of this study is on Islamic religiosity as there is a paucity of research on the development of the 5Cs among Muslim youths, especially in non-western countries[57]. The Islamic development principle is based on a study of the nature of human development as asserted by Islamic psychologist Al Ghazali[1]. According to Al Ghazali, human development should be viewed holistically in terms of spiritual and physical development, which is the combination of Qalb (heart), al-ruh (soul), al-aql (mind), and al-nafs (desire) that drive human beings to develop positive attitude and behaviour. When the heart and soul are nourished with morally correct practices, the mind will always be concerned with things being rational; together with desire which makes the youth patient, and calmness which enables the youth to thrive, the youth will become a successful adult acting as an agent of

change for self, family, society and nation.

Religiosity is one of the most powerful forces that can counteract undesirable or negative elements which wreak havoc on one's emotional and mental state. Religious teachings provide vital guidance to youth in times of distress or when they are confronted with identity crisis[4,29–31,41]. According to Erikson[29,31], religion provides social support and helps develop positive values, thus protecting youth from isolation or exclusion[100]. Erikson emphasizes the importance of religion in youth development. Religion is closely related to positive and prosocial values; thus, it plays a role in reducing delinquency and other undesirable behaviours[26,98]. Therefore, the development of religious and spiritual values during adolescence needs to be investigated thoroughly in order to ensure positive youth development[53,59].

In Malaysia's youth policy, youths are categorized into various youth target groups to ensure the smooth implementation of youth development programmes to targeted groups, namely those in secondary schools and higher educational institutions such as public universities, private universities, skills training institutions, polytechnics, and community colleges[74]. Community colleges are a good example of training venues for youths in Malaysia. Established 15 years ago, community colleges have successfully provided training to nearly 80,000 graduates in various fields including engineering, hospitality, commerce, etc. Community colleges continue to offer technical and vocational education (TVET) that caters to the needs of the country. Youth in community colleges are important assets for the country as their skills will contribute considerably to the success of the national transformation plan towards sustainable economic development[73]. Malaysia needs to produce holistic, knowledgeable, and capable first-class human capital to face various challenges in the years ahead as the nation endeavours to achieve Vision 2020 of a developed, high-income nation. Such challenges include building a strong identity, inculcating ethical values while striving to be competitive[76]. Currently, the first and fourth objectives of the Higher Education Development Plan[47] are being structured to produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates as well as to produce quality technical and vocational (TVET) students.

Positive Youth Development or PYD is a youth development model used as a guide to identify desirable traits to be nurtured in adolescents during their formative years. Youth in community colleges are one of the target groups. The high employability (97%) of graduates from community colleges shows that these educational institutions are capable of producing students who are highly in demand[52]. However, studies have yet to be conducted to investigate whether students in Malaysian community colleges possess the PYD attributes or 5Cs, viz. competence, confidence, connection, character, and lastly, caring and compassion[35,83,84,66].

2. Positive Youth Development Perspective

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a contextualised approach[62,63] that was introduced by youth development scientists based on comparison research and biology evolution on the potential of youth to be systematically and flexible in their development[89]. According to the developmental science theory, the potential that the youth possesses in developing his behaviour is unleashed by the impact of a bidirectional relationship between the individual with the characteristics of biology, psychology, family, community, culture, physical ecology and historical factors[66,64]. Bidirectional relationships in developmental science theory originated from the ecology of human development introduced by Bronfenbrenner[13–5] prior to 1990's[81]. These relationships consist of five correlated systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the stage where the youth's immediate environment exerts a strong influence on his or her development. Such an environment comprises the youth's parents, friends, teachers, siblings, as well as other people at home and in school. The next stage is recognised as the mesosystem. This stage occurs when two components in the microsystem interact, e.g. the interaction between family and school, peer and family etc. The third stage is the ecosystem, the external environment that is involved in the development of an individual. The macrosystem refers to a system that can affect the elements of sociocultural and socioeconomic position in the development of an individual. The last stage is the chronosystem. This comprises sociohistorical processes and events that occur during the development of the individual within a specific period. All the stages are pertinent processes involved in the development of an individual.

Lerner *et al.*[66] and Roth & Brooks-Gunn[83] operationalize PYD as the 5Cs, i.e. Competence, Confidence,

Connection, Character, and Caring, essential attributes for the healthy, successful development of individuals and the way to idealized personhood. According to Roth et al.[85], the 5Cs are associated with positive outcomes when they are fully integrated. Competence is an attribute that is especially important for social, academic, cognitive and vocational development; confidence is related to self-worth and self-efficacy; connection is bonding with people and institutions; character reflects correct behaviour, morality and integrity; caring and compassion is sympathy and empathy for others[35,66,83]. When these attributes (i.e. 5Cs) are successfully nurtured, the youth will be able to achieve not only personal success but also contribute more to the family, community and civil society at large[10]. The sixth C, contribution, which may emerge later[65,69,89] is strongly correlated with PYD[35]. Thus, this study will identify the factors contribute to develop PYD among community colleges youth in Malaysia since research in PYD for diverse youth and context will enhance more results and outcomes for development of youth[49].

2.1 Factors Influencing Positive Youth Development

2.1.1 Parental Attachment

The individual's parents are his or her closest elements in the early stages of development[14].From childhood to adolescence, parental influence plays an important role in the development of the individual. The attachment between parents and children purposely for the proximity seeking[77,80]. The attachment is due to the affectionate bond between infant and caregiver (mother)[80]. According to Bowlby[12], the attachment between parents and children is a strong bonding capable of inculcating values and moulding character. Bowlby's Attachment theory postulates that children of well-behaved parents would also be well-behaved themselves. The quality of attachment to parents and peers is causally related to well-being[11]. Secure attachment with parents will produce a healthy and functioning individual[87]. The behaviour of parents is positively correlated with the youth's well-being and development[37,88]. Hence it is important to encourage bonding between parents and child not only in the early years, but perhaps more so during adolescence before the youth switches his or her attachment to others such as friends or teachers[60]. Thus, this study will identify the levels and relationships between parental attachment and PYD elements among community college students.

2.1.2 Peer Attachment

Peer attachment features prominently in the life of the youth studying in college/institution. During adolescence, youth usually spend less time with their parents than when they are children[45,92]. When children are growing up, they want to be with people they are familiar with. The attachment occurs when they feel safe and comfortable with the people and environment. According to the Attachment theory by Bowlby[12], the instinct to create a second attachment during adolescence is normal behaviour in the development of an individual. The interaction between parents and children will be directed to other relationships as the youth mature[33]. Youth's formation of relationship with peers during adolescence is inevitably be influenced by what they have been taught by their parents in the early years. The positive influence of peers is important for leading healthy social lives[60]. Peer relationships are inevitable when adolescents spend more time with one another, building up knowledge, skills and confidence[14,15]. Hence it is critical that youth are able to selectively choose peers who could provide support in a positive way.

2.1.3 Institutional Social Bonding (ISB)

The role of institutions in developing bonding with youth is very challenging; it is an enormous task not only to provide the necessary guidance for positive development but also to prevent students from indulging in delinquent activities[97]. According to Hirschi's[48] Social Bonding theory, the individual is less likely to engage in delinquent activities when he or she has strong ties with parents, peers and school /institution. When youth actively participate in activities and programmes planned by their institutions, they would not have much leisure time left to indulge in undesirable or unhealthy activities. Institutions/schools act as agents of social bonding and are capable of promoting positive youth development [18]. Schools are established to offer a social and academic environment conducive to the development of youth[99]. A study by Debnam et al.[23] suggests that the school environment is an important setting for promoting youth development. ISB is a relationship that emerges between students and institution through commitment, attachment, involvement and abiding by school rules. Many studies on student attachment show that being part of a

school or institution has a positive impact on the student's academic outcomes[17,44,51]. Young people will do better at school when they feel connected to their school, have a sense of belonging, and have supportive friends and teachers[70,71].

2.2 Religiosity as a mediator

Religiosity is a variable frequently debated in youth development as it plays a role in positive youth development[27,34,54]. Various studies on religiosity show that this variable act as mediator[2,5]. Theoretically, youth religiosity may act as a mediator of the relationship between socialization agents (such as parents, peers, schools, etc.) towards youth developmental outcomes[98]. Although theoretical studies on the role of religiosity and spirituality in the formation of youth development are still in their early stages and need to be explored further[53], they show that religiosity and spirituality are crucial elements in youth development[24]. Mediator is the variable that intermediates between the relationship of predictor variables and criterion variables. Hence, this study was aimed at investigating religiosity as a mediator in the relationship between predictor variables, namely parental and peer attachment and institutional social bonding towards positive youth development.

2.3 The Current Study

Human development is theoretically influenced by the contextual components of the closest to the furthest setting[13–16]. The closest components include parents, peers, schools, siblings, and other contextual components. Past research shows that parents are individuals who can influence the behaviour of their children[20,60,88]. Peers are the second set of people who can exert influence on the development of youth[20,58,79]. In addition, schools/institutions act as social agents that facilitate bonding with youth to promote their positive development [18,61]. It is important to examine how these three components impact the behaviour of youth in community colleges.

PYD is not just a perspective; it goes beyond a preliminary debate among youth development scholars[68]. PYD is applicable to three categories of youth development (tripartite) as proposed by Hamilton[42]: 1) as the natural process of youth development; 2) as a philosophy or approach to youth program, and 3) as the actual implementation of youth programmes. This study applied the first application of the PYD model as a guide to measuring the natural development of youth in community colleges in Malaysia by using the model introduced by Lerner and his colleagues, namely the 5Cs positive youth development (PYD) model. It is the robust youth development framework, having been tested and validated in cross sectional and longitudinal studies on youths especially in the United States[10,46,49]. The 5Cs model is aimed at identifying the characteristics or attributes of youth in order to thrive. This study would determine if PYD in Malaysia follows similar trends as for youth worldwide.

Since it has been established by various previous studies that psychosocial factors (parents, peers, and institutions) influence the development of youth, this study, therefore, focused on these three factors to assess youth's natural positive development at community colleges in Malaysia. In addition, religiosity was examined as a mediator between each relationship of three components towards PYD. The following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Religiosity mediates the relationship between parental attachment and PYD.
Hypothesis 2: Religiosity mediates the relationship between peer attachment and PYD.
Hypothesis 3: Religiosity mediates the relationship between institutional social bonding and PYD.

2.4 Methodology

2.4.1 Population

The participants in this study were youths enrolled at community colleges throughout Malaysia. There were approximately 16,000 students studying in 89 community colleges nationwide in Malaysia[94]. The community colleges were zoned as North, East, West, South, Sabah and Borneo. As the population for this study was large and spread geographically across the country, cluster sampling was used. Two community colleges in each zone for the North, East, West, South, and 1 community college each for Sabah and Sarawak were selected through a simple random sampling. A total of 677 students from 10 selected community colleges out of the 89 community colleges across the country were

involved in this study.

Of the 677 respondents, 320 (47.3%) were males and 357 (52.7%) females. A slight majority (56.7%) were from urban areas while the rest (43.3%) were from rural/suburban areas. The average age of the participants was 19.5 years (SD = 3.59); their ages ranged from 18 - 30 years. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires after obtaining permission from the headquarters and the respective director of every college. The participants took 30 - 40 minutes to answer the questionnaire. The data were analysed using SPSS v. 22. Descriptive statistics were used to compare the mean scores of each variable and structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test hypothesized relationships.

2.5 Measurement

2.5.1 Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development was measured using a questionnaire adapted from the Bridge-Positive Youth Development by Lopez *et al.*,[72]. Five dimensions are measured through this questionnaire, namely competence, confidence, connection, character and caring & compassion (the 5C attributes in positive youth development). The 5-point scale was used to gauge the responses to statements in the questionnaire, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.5.2 Religiosity

The adapted questionnaire for measuring religiosity was the only instrument designed to measure youth religiosity according to the local culture in Malaysia. This instrument, known as the Muslim Religiosity-Personality Inventory (MRPI) designed by Krauss, Hamzah & Idris[56], was modified to fit the Universal Religiosity Personality Inventory (URPI) as the Malaysian community consists of people from various racial and religious backgrounds. Three dimensions were measured through the URPI, namely prosocial, ritual, and antisocial behaviour. However, only the first two dimensions were used in this study in order to adapt to this study on positive youth development.

2.5.3 Parental Attachment

Developed by Armsden & Greenberg[3], the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) is a valid and reliable instrument to assess attachment beyond infancy and prior to late adolescence[38]. The questionnaire was adapted in this study to measure parental and peer attachment among youth in community colleges in relation to PYD. The original questionnaire measures the dimensions of trust, communication, and alienation. However, this study focused on only trust and communication because both dimensions are associated with PYD.

2.5.4 Peer Attachment

The tool for measuring peer attachment was also adapted from the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) developed by Armsden & Greenberg[3]. Only two dimensions were chosen, namely trust and communication. A total of 18 items were used to measure these two dimensions, of which 10 items were selected to measure the dimension of trust and 8 items to measure the dimension of communication.

2.5.5 Institutional Social Bonding

Institutional social bonding was measured by an instrument introduced by Patricia H. Jenkins[51] called school delinquency and the school social bond. The instrument aims to measure the bonding of students with schools to avoid delinquent behaviour. For this study, 12 items were selected from the original instrument to measure four dimensions, namely commitment, attachment, involvement, and belief in school rules.

3. Results and discussion

The analysis was based on the structural equation modelling (SEM) for testing the mediating factor of religiosity towards the relationship between parental attachment, peer attachment as well as institutional social bonding with PYD. Before bootstrapping analysis was used to test the mediation effect, we performed a second order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to diversify the CFA methodology for testing validity and reliability in a small construct[39.40]. This was followed by development of the measurement model and structural model. The results showed that second order CFA for every variable were a good fit of the data. For example, the goodness of fit index (GFI), comparative fit index

(CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and root mean square of error approximation (RMSEA) for PYD indicated a good fit of the model. [2/df = 3.343, p =0.000, GFI = 0.943, CFI = 0.921, IFI = 0.912, TLI = 0.892 and RMSEA = 0.059. The GFI, CFI, TLI and RMSEA for the remaining variables also indicated good fit indices to each model designed. **Table 1** shows the results of second order CFA for every variable and the goodness of fit indices.

Table 1. Second order CFA for goodness of fit

Goodness of fit / Variables	CMIN	χ^2/df (<5.0)	GFI	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA (<=.08)
PYD	327.584	3.343	0.943	0.921	0.912	0.892	0.059
Parental attachment	32.144	4.018	0.984	0.979	0.980	0.961	0.067
Peer attachment	10.151	1.269	0.995	0.998	0.998	0.997	0.020
Institutional social bonding	218.720	4.374	0.949	0.926	0.926	0.902	0.071
Religiosity	123.503	4.750	0.961	0.953	0.954	0.936	0.074

Note: CMIN, chi-square minimum

Analysis was continued to the next step in SEM analysis, i.e. development of the measurement model and structural model. The results for measurement and structural model showed that the model fitted the data, with the fit indices meeting the expected requirements [χ^2/df = 1.932, p =0.000, GFI = 0.886, CFI = 0.907, IFI = 0.907, TLI = 0.900 and RMSEA = 0.037]. **Figure 1** shows the structural model developed in this study for measuring the hypotheses between construct and the fitness with the theory [39,40,95] For examining the hypotheses using bootstrapping analysis, H1 indicated that religiosity fully mediated the relationship between parental attachment and PYD since the standardized indirect effect (SIE) was significant (β =0.107, p = 0.013). At the same time, β was reduced in the mediation model while the relationship between parental attachment and PYD was not significant (β = 0.022, p = 0.640). According to Hair et al.[40], full mediation is deemed to have occurred when the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable is not significant when mediator is included as additional variable. The data for H1 analysis are shown in **Table 2**.

H2 showed that religiosity fully mediated the relationship between peer attachment and PYD since the standardized indirect effect (SIE) was significant (β = 0.118, p = 0.017). The β value was reduced in the mediation model while the relationship between peer attachment and PYD was not significant (β = 0.065, p = 0.201), as shown in Table 2. Therefore, both parental and peer attachment were fully mediated by religiosity towards PYD; H1 and H2 were supported.

H3 was also supported as religiosity partially mediated the relationship between institutional social bonding and PYD since the standardized indirect effect (SIE) was significant (β = 0.259, p = 0.000). The β value was also reduced in the mediation model whereas the relationship between peer attachment and PYD remained significant (β = 0.311, p = 0.000) as indicated in **Table 2**. According to Hair et al.,[39,40] there is partial mediation when the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is still significant with the inclusion of a mediator as an additional variable.

Table 2. Indirect effects in relationship between every factor and PYD through religiosity

Hypothesized Path	Beta	p-value	95% Bootstrap BC CI	
			LB	UP

Direct Model				
Parental attachment → PYD	0.130	0.009		
Peer attachment→ PYD	0.182	0.000		
Institutional social bonding → PYD	0.574	0.000		
Mediation Model				
Parental attachment	0.022	0.640	0.023	0.219
Parental attachment → PYD	0.107	0.013	0.019	0.230
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	0.065	0.201	0.159	0.395
Peer attachment	0.118	0.017		
Peer attachment→ PYD	0.311	0.000		
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	0.259	0.000		
Institutional social bonding				
Institutional social bonding → PYD				
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)				

BC = Bias-corrected confidence interval; 5000 sample
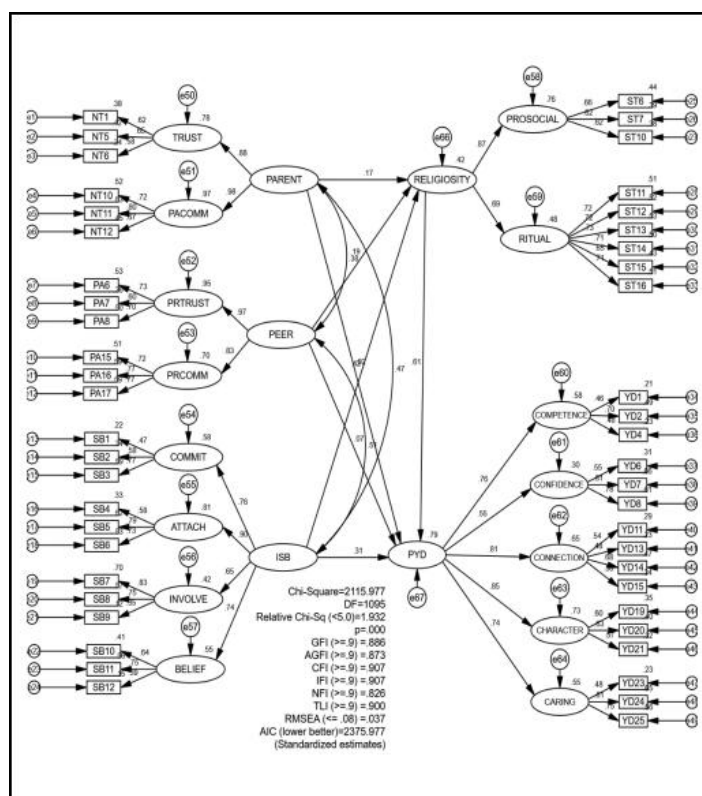
Figure 1. Structural model of the influence of parental attachment, peer attachment, institutional social bonding (ISB) and religiosity towards PYD.

After the structural model showed the goodness of fit indices, bootstrapping analysis was conducted to determine the mediation effect of religiosity towards the relationship of each variable. The bootstrapping method can estimate the magnitude of the indirect effect as well as the statistically significance of the indirect relationship. This method will also determine the confidence interval (CI) of each estimated point. AMOS software was used to perform bootstrapping by generating bootstrapped Bias-corrected Confidence Interval for indirect effects. Bootstrapping is a resampling process

for 5000 times at 95% CI for the Bias-Corrected option.

In parallel with the Multi Model Analysis (MMA) to test the effect of the mediator, the decision for the mediator test for each hypothesis was made by comparing the direct model with a full mediation model created in the structural model. The MMA performed to determine the effect of the mediator through AMOS was based on a structural model of mediation that had been manually programmed with a direct model and full mediation model before running bootstrapping analysis to determine the goodness of fit indices.

The findings indicated that religiosity acted as a mediator in the relationship of psychosocial factors (parental attachment, peer attachment and institutional social bonding) with PYD among students at Malaysian community colleges. This study supported the findings of Barton *et al*.[5] and Adnan *et al*.[2] who carried out a study with adolescents found that religiosity act as mediator. The findings of this study answered the questions raised by Wallace and William[98] regarding adolescent religiosity as a mediator in the relationship between socialization agents (such as parents, peers, schools, etc.) with youth development outcomes. The findings were in line with the views of King and Roeser[53] that religiosity and spirituality need to be explored because both factors are essential to youth development.

This study showed that religion played a major role in the relationship between parental attachment and PYD. This is proven when the relationship between parental attachment and PYD was not significant when religiosity was included in the relationship. When youth enter middle adolescence[74], there was less influence of parental attachment on the development of youth, and so religiosity takes over to help youth develop the 5Cs. Early adolescents look to their parents for support more often than middle adolescents[22]. Peer attachment too does not influence the development of youth significantly when religiosity is included as a mediator. This finding shows that religiosity will drive youth towards PYD in the absence of parental and peer attachment. However, institutional social bonding still influences the development of youth as religiosity partially mediates the relationship between institutional social bonding and PYD. Institutional social bonding thus plays an important role in youth development. According to Catalano *et al*.[18], schools/institutions are social agents and bonding with schools play a vital role in PYD. In addition, Debnam *et al*.[23] suggest that the school environment can be an important setting in promoting youth development. In this study, all three psychosocial factors (parental attachment, peer attachment and institutional social bonding) had significant influence before religiosity was included in the relationship. However, religiosity changed the status of these variables when it was included as a mediator in the relationships discussed. Hence, the findings of this study indicate that religiosity is a very strong and robust factor when elements of ritual and prosocial behaviours are practised.

4. Conclusion

This study examined religiosity as a mediator in the relationships between psychosocial factors (viz. parental and peer attachment and institutional social bonding) with PYD. The dimensions of PYD comprises the 5Cs, namely competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and compassion. The findings showed that parental attachment, peer attachment, and institutional social bonding influenced PYD, as asserted in the human ecological theory[14]. However, the influence of parental attachment was not significant when religiosity was included in the relationship between parental attachment with PYD. This finding showed the strength and the robustness of religiosity factors (ritual and prosocial) towards PYD. There was also similar influence of religiosity as a mediator in the relationship between peer attachment and institutional social bonding with PYD.

Future studies are suggested to explore other influences such as the role of siblings, neighbourhood communities and others who are not in the closest setting, but also the role of components in remote settings such as media, friends' families, social welfare agencies and so forth in the same model. In addition, the model discussed in this study used religiosity as a mediator but other mediators can be included in the same model. In conclusion, religiosity, parental attachment, peer attachment, institutional social bonding and PYD need to be explored further to enable youth to thrive so that they can lead successful lives and contribute effectively and meaningfully to the community as adults.

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