

Religiosity and its Predispositions among Post-Secondary Students in Malaysia: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Religion is a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, or both, which may exert certain degree of influence to one's life. As reported by Gallup International in 2012, Malaysia is a highly religious society. Therefore, it could be assumed that religion permeates deep in the lives of all levels of Malaysian society including post-secondary students. Investigation on religiosity among post-secondary students is necessary as emerging research has outlined the importance of religion in shaping post-secondary students' ideals, goals, and habits. Not only that, investigation on religion in classically pluralistic Malaysia could yield novel insights as religiosity in this specific context has idiosyncratic dimensions and its influences are multifold. Accordingly, the objective of this review includes to investigate how religiosity predispose students to certain outcomes and how religiosity of students in Malaysia were measured in previous studies. In addition, this review also identified some the gaps and limitation in the literature concerning investigation of religiosity of students in Malaysia. Summarily, this review found evidence to corroborate effects of religiosity to students' cognition, emotions, as well as behavior. Furthermore, this review also noted that most of the studies utilized cross-sectional survey method which prompted suggestions to improve research methodology in future efforts. Other recommendations include to consider facets of religiosity and the underlying factors that could influence effects of religiosity. In short, this review highlighted insights that could benefit not only post-secondary students, but also all other actors in their social ecologies which encompass tertiary education authorities, mental health helpers, and other policy-making bodies.

Keywords: Religiosity, Post-Secondary Students, Systematic Review, Malaysian Universities

Introduction

Religion was adapted from the Latin term *religio*, which roughly translates to "scrupulousness", "conscientiousness", "devotedness", or "felt obligation". It's crucial to note that the notion of religion did not originally refer to a social genus or cultural type. Rather, the rapid normalization of this generic concept was put forward by European Christians as

they sought to categorize the variety of cultures they encountered as their empires expanded into other parts of the world (Schilbrack, 2022). However, in the present, religion is commonly understood as a variety of social practices which commonly categorized as major religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism (Schilbrack, 2022).

Interestingly, the religion dialogue, religion and/or utility of religion has been discussed by scholars with differing backgrounds. To take some examples, sociologist Durkheim noted “Religion is society worshipping itself” which put forward utility of religion, specifically the collective consciousness that binds individuals together which ultimately promotes social integration (Strathern, 2018). Similarly, theologian Niebuhr in his Christian Realism emphasised utility of religion on the societal level. Within his view, persistent roots of evil in human life makes religiosity crucial in regulating moral conduct (Pardell, 2018) as well as preventing society from self-destructing (Niebuhr, 1960 as cited in Callen, 2014). Meanwhile, anthropologist Malinowski (1999) as cited in Alaszewski (2015) emphasized that on the one hand, religion is the “superior power” that has the capacity to destruction of human life but at the same time, religion is the very asset that enables individuals to transcend themselves in conditions of uncertainty. On the more parabolic view of religion, existentialist Kierkegaard (1851) as cited in Dickman (2020) contended that God is everything and that one’s religious relationship and service to God is the one way to attain appropriate self-realization. Seemingly, religion has multifarious effects as it not only affects society at the macro level as highlighted by Durkheim and Niebuhr, but religion also affects individuals at a very personal level as discussed by Malinowski and Kierkegaard.

Malaysia is a highly religious society (Gallup International, 2012) and religiosity was previously found to be the most dominant factor in predicting public happiness in Malaysia (Ismail & Laidin, 2020). Notably, it’s safe to propose that investigation on religion and/or religiosity is necessary since not only published literature concerning religiosity and happiness mainly focused on Western, Christian, Anglo-Saxon, and English-speaking samples (Abdel-Khalek, 2014) which cannot be generalized to Eastern context (Yang, 2018).

Accordingly, the primary objective of this review was to identify the effects of religiosity specifically among post-secondary students in Malaysia. Additionally, this review also intended to identify the methodologies used in previous research. Lastly, this review also aimed to identify the gaps and limitation in existing literature concerning religiosity and its effects among post-secondary students in Malaysia.

Objectives

This review was done with the following purposes

- To identify the effects of religiosity among post-secondary students in Malaysia.
- To identify how religiosity of post-secondary students in Malaysia were measured.
- To identify the gaps and limitation in the literature concerning exploration of religiosity and post-secondary students in Malaysia.

Methodology

This review searched for literature from multiple databases such as Academic Search complete, PubMed, Scopus, Medline, and CINAHL to retrieve studies on religiosity and its

predispositions to university students in Malaysia. Specifically, this review only included studies with keywords such as “religiosity” or “religiousness” or “Islam” or “Christian” or “Hindu” or “Buddhist” and “university students” or “undergraduate students” or “college students” and “Malaysia” or “Malaysian”. The keywords were combined with the use of Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” to obtain focused results. In addition, this review zoomed on studies that discussed religiousness or religions which are practiced in Malaysia, specifically amongst post-secondary students that was published after the year 2012 until 2022 in English language. Ultimately, this review was done using The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021). The initial search resulted with 548 articles after excluding duplicates and after final assessment was done, only 23 articles was included in this review.

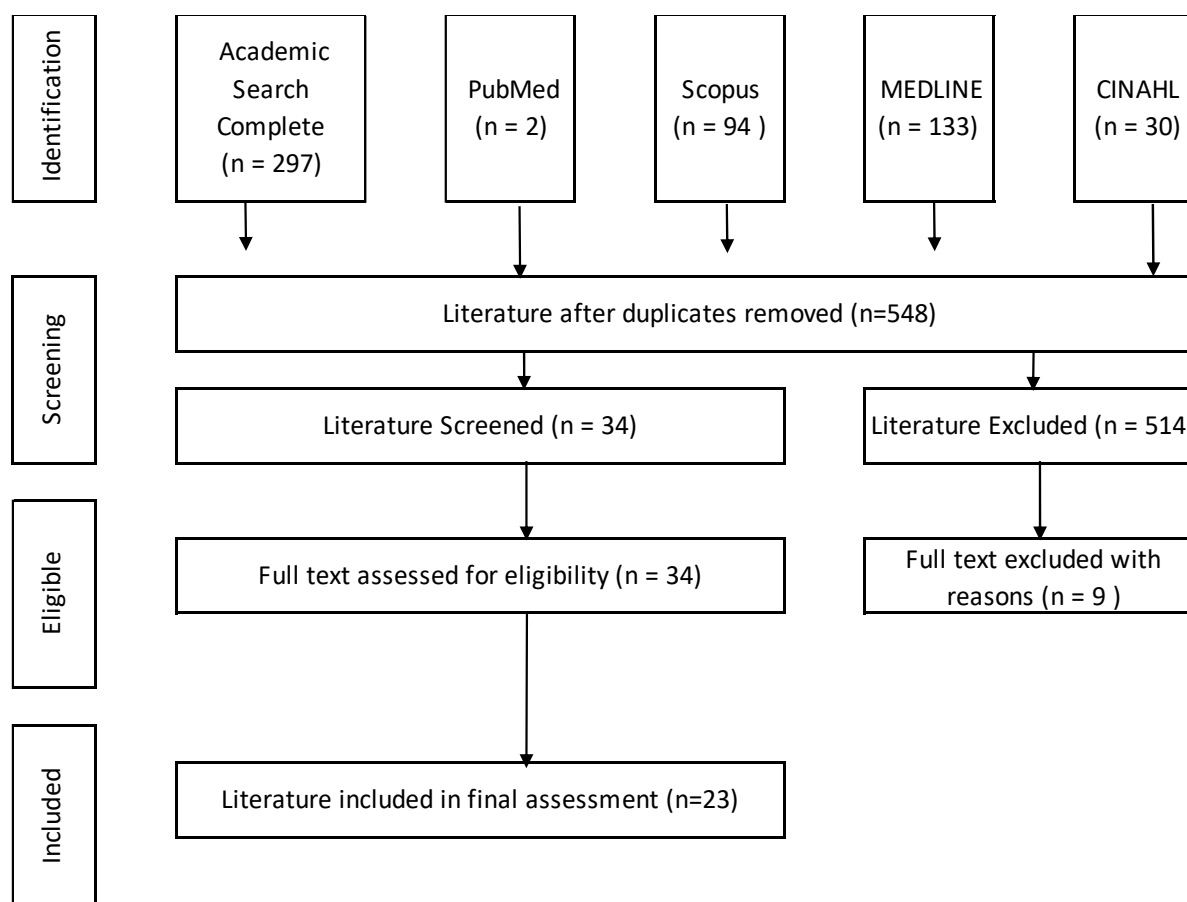


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for a systematic review on religiosity and its effects among post-secondary students in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussion

The summary report of the articles selected in this review is shown in Table 1. From the left – authors and year of publication, title of articles, sample of study, and findings.

Table 1

Summary of selected literature

Authors (Year)	Article's Title	Country	Sample	Findings
Lkalmi et al (2016).	Effect of Religious Beliefs of the Smoking Behaviour of University Students: Quantitative Findings From Malaysia.	Malaysia	145 Muslim students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)	This study found positive influences in regard Islamic beliefs on smoking behaviour.
Ariffin et al (2022).	Islam, Iman, and Ihsan: The Role of Religiosity on Quality of Life and Mental Health of Muslim Undergraduate Students.	Malaysia	179 Muslim students from a selected Islamic university in Klang Valley of Malaysia	This study found religiosity to be a significant predictor of individual's quality of life and mental health.
Mokhtar & Bahari (2021).	Social Media and Islamic Ethics: An Insight to Instagram Use by Muslim University Students in Malaysia.	Malaysia	24 Muslim students from an Islamic university in Malaysia	This study found Islamic ethic to regulate Instagram use by most Muslim students.
Foo et al (2014).	Religious commitment, attitudes toward suicide, and suicidal behaviours among college students of different ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia.	Malaysia	139 students from two university colleges in Klang Valley, Malaysia	This study found students' religious commitment is not linked to students' suicidal behaviours.

Muhammad et al (2017).	Role of Religion in Preventing Youth Sexual Activity in Malaysia: A Mixed Methods Study.	Malaysia	1026 students from 12 randomly selected colleges in Klang Valley, Malaysia	This study found that engagement in religious activity might be effective at preventing female students from being sexually active when sexual urges and desires are in control.
Ellis et al (2013).	Religiosity and fear of death: a three-nation comparison.	Malaysia, Turkey, and United States of America (USA)	2125 students from University of Malaya (UM) and 269 residents in Malaysia	This study found females to be more religious than male, in addition to have increased fear death more than males.
Musa et al (2022).	The Effectiveness of the Islamic Input in Medical Practice (IIMP) in Improving the Knowledge, Attitude and Practice among Medical Students in Malaysia. A 5-year Prospective Study.	Malaysia	102 Muslim students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)	This study found IIMP to be effective in bettering the knowledge, attitude and practice of Medical students.
Iswanto et al (2022).	Studying the role of Islamic religious beliefs on depression during COVID-19 in Malaysia.	Malaysia	3426 Muslim students from universities in Kuala Lumpur	This study found people with increased level of religious beliefs suffered less from depression, which confirmed the negative and significant relationship between Islamic religious beliefs and depression, moreover, religious activities had a significant effect in reducing depression during crisis.

Elkalmi et al (2021).	Discrepancies and similarities in attitudes, beliefs, and familiarity with vaccination between religious studies and science students in Malaysia: A comparison study.	Malaysia	206 students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)	This study found students from religious background to be more particular towards vaccination from the aspect of Islam and although familiarity with vaccination is slim, there's a positive attitude on vaccinations amongst students.
Francis et al (2019).	Religious Coping, Religiosity, Depression and Anxiety among Medical Students in a Multi-Religious Setting.	Malaysia	622 students from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya (UM)	This study found negative religious coping, rather than positive religious coping, has larger, significant association with depressive and anxiety symptoms.
Ishak et al (2013).	Muslim Youths' Perception on Sunnah Diet: A Survey on IIUM Students	Malaysia	45 Muslim students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Gombak Campus	This study found students to have the awareness of practicing Sunnah diet. Moreover, although they're not actively practising the diet, they're optimistic about making it a routine in the future.
Che Rahimi et al (2021,	Psychological well-being of Malaysian university students during covid-19 pandemic: Do religiosity and religious coping matter?	Malaysia	450 students from Health Campus, Universiti Sains Malaysia	This study found that higher positive religious coping to have protective role against psychological disorder. Though the level of religiosity was found to have no significant association with psychological disorder.

Misran et al (2021).	The Role of Religiosity to Address the Mental Health Crisis of Students: A Study on Three Parameters (Anxiety, Depression, and Stress).	Malaysia	148 Muslim students	This study found religiosity serves as a protective factor for depression. Meanwhile, religious components such as avoidance of sinful acts and frequent conduct of recommended acts were found to be a significant protective factor against anxiety and depression, respectively.
Abdul Rashid et al (2021).	Religiosity, Religious Coping and Psychological Distress among Muslim University Students in Malaysia.	Malaysia	467 Muslim students from Universiti Teknologi MARA	This study found positive religious coping to not have significant association with better psychological outcomes although a small effect was observed towards depressive symptoms. Also, this study found students who used negative religious coping are twice likely to experience symptoms of anxiety than those who do not.
Zakaria et al (2020).	Seriously, conspicuous consumption? The impact of culture, materialism and religiosity on Malaysian Generation Y consumers' purchasing of foreign brands.	Malaysia	262 students from three universities in Malaysia	This study found that religious values to not have significant effect to conspicuous consumption.

Mohammad i et al (2020).	Do Islamic Values Impact Social Entrepreneurial Intention of University Students in Malaysia? An Empirical Investigation Into The Mediating Role of Empathy.	Malaysia	202 Muslim students selected from public and private universities in Klang Valley	This study found that Islamic values have a positive impact on empathy which is the strongest predictor of Social Entrepreneurial Intention, demonstrating that the stronger empathic concerns, the higher intention for involvement in social entrepreneurial activities.
Katmon et al (2020).	The Relationship between Facebook, religiosity and academic performance.	Malaysia	60 Muslim students from Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI)	This study found that student's engagement in religious activities promotes better academic performance. In addition, religiosity was also found to be effective in reducing student's interest on Facebook, which in extension leads to better academic achievement.
Singh et al (2020).	Integrating ethical sensitivity through religiosity in accounting education.	Malaysia	213 students from four accounting institutions of higher learning with Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA) syllabi	This study found ethical sensitivity to be influenced by intrinsic religiosity but not influenced by social extrinsic religiosity and personal extrinsic religiosity.

Sallam et al (2018).	Religiosity and Volunteering Intention among Undergraduate Malaysian Muslim Students.	Malaysia	356 Muslim students from Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UNiMAP) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	This study found religiosity to have a positive and significant link with volunteering intention.
Ismail Omar (2017).	Academic dishonesty: An empirical study of personal beliefs and values of undergraduate students in Malaysia.	Malaysia	2447 students from 4 research universities	This study noted that students with higher level of religious faith tend to have lower level of academic dishonesty.
Hamzah et al (2014).	Youth hedonistic behaviour: Moderating role of peer attachment on the effect of religiosity and worldview.	Malaysia	394 students from public and private universities	This study found that religiosity influences the development of hedonistic behaviour, with peer attachment playing a significant role in moderating the overall relationship between worldview and religiosity, and the students' hedonistic behaviour.
Elkalmi et al (2021).	Attitude, Familiarity and Religious Beliefs about Vaccination among Health Science and Non-Health Science Students in a Malaysian Public University	Malaysia	202 students from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Puncak Alam Campus	This study found positive relationship between religious beliefs and vaccination acceptance rate.

Study Characteristics

Summarily, the 23 studies included in this review involved 1 phenomenological study, 1 prospective-cohort study and the remaining 21 studies were all cross-sectional studies. Regarding sampling technique, 4 studies utilized convenience sampling approach, 4 studies utilized purposive sampling approach, 5 utilized random sampling approach, 2 studies utilized stratified random sampling approach, 1 study utilized cluster-random sampling approach, and 1 study used quota-cluster sampling. The remaining studies did not specify their sampling method of choice.

Of the 23 studies, 13 studies targeted only Muslim participants and 8 studies had multi-religious participants. Meanwhile, 2 studies did not specify the religion group of their participants. Overall, the number of participants involved in all 23 studies totaled to 13488 with 10636 being Muslims, 631 Christians, 1346 Buddhists, 447 Hindus, and 243 unspecified religions which includes no religion and other non-major religions. Finally, 2 studies which did not specify the religion group of their participants had the sum of 415 participants. All the studies included in this review was done in Malaysia, apart from Ellis et al (2013) three-nation comparison study which involved 3 countries: Malaysia, Turkey, and United States of America (USA).

Effects of religiosity among post-secondary students in Malaysia.

Precisely, this review has found evidence where religiosity predispose a variety of positive outcomes to post-secondary students in Malaysia. On the flipside, this review also found religiosity to be inconsequential or having limited significance in explaining certain associations. Not only that, but this review also found studies which concluded at contradictive findings when investigating relationship between religiosity or specifically religious coping to psychological outcomes. Importantly, this review also discovered that it is some very specific aspects of religiosity that predispose students to certain outcomes.

Specifically, this review found religiosity to be a form of negative reinforcement for a series of addictive behaviors such as smoking behavior (Ikalmi et al., 2016) and social media usage behavior (Mokhtar & Bahari, 2021; Katmon et al., 2020). Specifically in the Islamic sphere, “fatwa” drives perspectives and decision making in accordance with two primary sources of Islamic law, which are al-Quran and al-Sunnah (Asni, 2018). In Islam, fatwa promotes the strive to resolve problems, to serve mankind, to avoid harm to self and to others. Addictive behaviours are fundamentally self-harm therefore it could be deemed that this clause in the Islamic sphere regulates these behaviours.

Additionally, this review also found religiosity to increase prosocial behaviors such as volunteering intention (Sallam et al., 2018), empathy and consequently, involvement in social entrepreneurial activities (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Likewise, this review also found religiosity to influence a range of behavioural and cognitive functioning among students. Precisely, religion was found to serve as a control in the regulation of student’s healthy eating habit (Ishak et al., 2013) as well as the development of their hedonistic behaviors (Hamzah et al., 2014) in a positive way. Also, religion was also noted to be an efficient buffer to sexual activity inclination (Muhammad et al., 2017).

By the same token, this review also found evidence to support utility of religiosity in improving quality of life and mental health (Tajul Ariffin et al., 2022; Francis et al., 2019; Misran et al., 2021). In extension, religiosity also promotes well-being during crises (Iswanto et al., 2022). Furthermore, in conjunction to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, this review also found religiosity to influence vaccination attitude (Elkalmi et al., 2021; Elkalmi et al., 2021).

Uniquely, this review also found religiosity to affect students' ethical decision making, practices, and behaviours. Specifically, this review has found religion to better ethical sensitivity amongst accounting students (Singh et al., 2020), as well as reducing academic dishonesty amongst students in research universities (Ismail & Omar, 2017). On top of that, Islamic input was also found to better the knowledge, attitude, and practice among medical students (Musa et al., 2022), which is essential when dealing with patients who require specific medical attention. Importantly, when narrowed to intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, Singh et al (2020) in their study noted that ethical sensitivity was influenced by intrinsic religiosity but not social extrinsic religiosity and personal extrinsic religiosity. Therefore, it could be surmised that religiousness not only predispose positive outcomes in certain specific contexts, religiousness or religiosity could be explored in varied facets and these facets could produce rather specific utilities.

On the other hand, this review found evidence where religiosity was suggested to have a negative effect to post-secondary students. For an example, Ellis et al (2013) in their study noted the tendency for female students to be more religious than male students; nonetheless, female students have increased fear towards death than male students.

Interestingly, this review also found mixed findings on the effects of religiosity and religious coping. Concerning this, Rahimi et al (2021) noted positive religious coping to be associated with better psychological outcomes while Abdul Rashid et al (2021) in their study concluded that positive religious coping does not have significant association with better psychological outcomes. Other mixed findings were Azizi et al (2022) and Katmon et al (2020) studies where the former study found no significant relationship between religiosity and academic achievement, but the latter found otherwise.

Notably, this review also found evidence to suggest that religiosity plays no significant role in its relationship with suicidal behaviors (Foo et al., 2014), emotional intelligence, academic achievement (Azizi et al., 2022), and conspicuous consumptions (Zakaria et al., 2020) among post-secondary students.

How religiosity of post-secondary students in Malaysia were measured.

From the 23 articles included in this review, 22 studies utilized quantitative method to measure religiosity. Meanwhile, only 1 study by Mokhtar & Bahari (2021) employed qualitative method where semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide which consisted of questions related to their research objectives. Specifically, this review found a total of 6 studies which measured religiosity with questionnaire designed by researchers themselves. These 6 studies developed their questionnaires after comprehensive literature review and/or using previous literature or studies. Similarly, another 2 studies utilized questionnaire adapted from previous studies, and the remaining 13 studies utilized previously validated questionnaires.

Summarily, the questionnaires that were used in the 13 studies include The 10-item IIUM Religiosity Scale (IIUMReIS), Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al., 2003), the Duke Religion Index (DUREL), the Malay version of the Duke Religious Index (DUREL-M), Brief Religious Coping Scale (Brief RCOPE), the Malay version of the Brief Religious Coping Scale (Brief RCOPE), the Muslim Medical Student Questionnaire (MMSQ), 20-item Islamic Beliefs Questionnaire (Golzari, 2000), Muslim Daily Religiosity Assessment Scale (MUDRAS) (Olufadi, 2017), Hatta Islamic Religiosity Index 1996 (HIRS96), Allport's Religiosity Orientation Scale, 10-item Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith scale (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997), and The Universal Religiosity Personality Inventory (Krauss et al., 2007).

Gaps and limitation in the literature concerning exploration of religiosity and university students in Malaysia.

Evidently, multiple studies included in this review suggested caution especially when generalizing information (Ariffin et al., 2022; Foo et al., 2014; Elkalmi et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2019; Che Rahimi et al., 2021; Misran et al., 2021; Zakaria et al., 2020; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Katmon et al., 2020; Sallam et al., 2018; Elkalmi et al., 2021) which could largely be accounted by the sampling strategies employed by the studies. In this regard, Musa et al (2022) highlighted the necessity to conduct studies in various context, such as comparative studies between different groups, such as religious and non-religious groups (Mokhtar & Bahari, 2021), as well as between Gen-Y and/or Gen-X groups (Zakaria et al., 2020). Moreover, Sallam et al (2018) also suggested inclusion of other ethnic groups and other religions to boost respond rate as well as to enable a more thorough statistical analysis. Meanwhile, variation of locality was noted by Elkalmi et al (2016); Elkalmi et al (2021) where both studies suggested different universities to be involved in future studies' sampling scope. Other than the above, this review also found studies to have recommended using larger sample size in future efforts (Mokhtar & Bahari, 2021; Foo et al., 2014; Musa et al., 2022; Elkalmi et al., 2021; Katmon et al., 2020; Sallam et al., 2018; Achour et al., 2017).

In addition to sampling strategies, this review also found common concern in the bulk of cross-sectional studies which tips the scale to explaining association rather than causation as reported by Francis et al (2019) study and Abdul Rashid et al (2021) study, and also limits the details obtained from data (Zakaria et al., 2020). In response to limitations occurred with research methods, varied or in-depth methodologies such as a complementary qualitative design research to be done after quantitative designed research (Achour et al., 2017) and mixed-method design (Muhammad et al., 2017; Musa et al., 2022; Elkalmi et al., 2021; Che Rahimi et al., 2021; Misran et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Sallam et al., 2018) were recommended with the aim to strengthen data and to better understand findings.

Apart from the above, this review also found multiple studies which noted the need to not only discern the variables involved in research, but also to consider other variables that may have a significant enough effect to alter the outcome of a study. In line with this, Ellis et al (2013) noted that since religiosity was not measured in its totality in their study, future researchers should consider including other aspects of religiosity to produce better covariation information. In the same note, Katmon et al (2020) noted factor analysis as a method in the discernment of variables involved in research to better understand its specific effects. Meanwhile, there were also suggestions to explore other possible predictor variables (Foo et al., 2014; Elkalmi et al., 2021; Che Rahimi et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2020;),

moderating variables (Singh et al., 2020) and mediating variables (Francis et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2020; Ismail & Omar, 2017).

Implication of the review

Summarily, the studies included in this review highlighted the varied ways in which religiosity and/or other specific aspects of religiosity affects post-secondary students which could benefit mental health professionals (Foo et al., 2014; Che Rahimi et al., 2014), health services (Misran et al., 2021), university administration (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Ishak et al., 2013; Katmon et al., 2020; Ismail & Omar, 2017; Achour et al., 2017), clinicians (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021), parents (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021), policymakers (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Katmon et al., 2020), decision makers (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021), social media marketing communicators (Mokhtar & Bahari, 2021; Zakaria et al., 2020), prospective employers (Singh et al., 2020), governments, schools, students themselves (Mohammadi et al., 2020; Ariffin et al., 2022), as well as other actors in students' social ecologies (Hamzah et al., 2014).

Additionally, this review also found confidence to the utility of religiosity specific to health services; where evidence was found to support the significance of Islamic input in improving the knowledge, skill, and attitude of future doctors who serves community within the same belief system (Musa et al., 2022). Moreover, Islamic elements was also concluded to be beneficial when integrated into psychological intervention and therapy as noted in Tajul Ariffin et al (2022); Misran et al (2021) studies.

On the one hand, this review found consistency in which religiosity and/or other specific aspects of religiosity predispose positive outcomes to post-secondary students. The benefits of religiosity and/or other specific aspects of religiosity include regulating students' mental health (Abdul Rashid et al., 2021), addictive behaviors (Katmon et al., 2020), responses during crises (Che Rahimi et al., 2014; Iswanto et al., 2022), ethical conducts (Ismail & Omar, 2017), entrepreneurial motivation (Mohammadi et al., 2020), and responses to vaccination program (Elkalmi et al., 2021; Elkalmi et al., 2021). On the other hand, this review also noted the non-effect of religiosity such as in its relationship with students' suicidal behaviors (Foo et al., 2014), the limited effects of religiosity in regulating sexual urges (Muhammad et al., 2017), conspicuous consumption (Zakaria et al., 2020), and lastly, its inefficiency in regulating certain negative emotions such as fear of death (Ellis et al., 2013). These divergent findings implicate all related bodies to build and compile extensive body of evidence, build around exhaustive methodologies and increased inclusivity.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, although this review found ample evidence to suggest religiosity predispose post-secondary students to certain positive outcomes, this review also noted religiosity as having no evidence of effect in some cases. Moreover, religiosity was also found to have a negative effect in one study. Seemingly, these divergent findings necessitate further scrutinous investigation. In this regard, other than the perpetual effort in improving sampling strategies and research methodologies, this review put forward the importance of considering distinct aspects of religiosity and to examine other extraneous variables which could be unique in producing certain outcomes.

Conflict of Interest/ Disclosure Statement

There is no potential conflict of interest to disclose.

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