

Mapping the Lived Experiences of Spirituality and Youth Well-Being in Malaysia: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Spirituality has been increasingly recognized as a key determinant of youth well-being, influencing resilience, identity, and coping strategies. In Malaysia, where cultural and religious diversity shapes young people's lived experiences, a systematic mapping of the literature is needed to clarify how spirituality contributes to their well-being. This scoping review aimed to map existing evidence on the lived experiences of spirituality and its influence on youth well-being in Malaysia, identify conceptualizations of spirituality, and highlight gaps for future research. Guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework, a systematic search was conducted across databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2000 and 2025. Eligible studies focused on Malaysian youth (aged 15–30) and examined spirituality in relation to psychological, emotional, or social well-being. Data were charted on study design, population, setting, conceptualization of spirituality, and outcomes. A total of 1102 articles were identified and 10 were included in the final analysis. Most were cross-sectional surveys involving university students in urban settings. Spirituality was predominantly conceptualized through religious practices, particularly Islamic traditions, though broader understandings such as mindfulness, cultural rituals, and meaning-making also emerged. Across studies, spirituality was associated with enhanced resilience, reduced depressive symptoms, greater life satisfaction, and stronger social connectedness. However, limited research addressed rural, indigenous, and non-religious youth and few studies used longitudinal or participatory designs. Spirituality plays a protective and identity-shaping role in the well-being of Malaysian youth. Yet, evidence remains fragmented and narrow in scope. Future research should explore diverse spiritual expressions across different youth populations, adopt robust methodological designs, and consider both positive and challenging aspects of spirituality. These insights can inform culturally responsive policies and practices that integrate spiritual well-being into youth development strategies.

Keywords: Spirituality, Youth well-being, Malaysia, Lived experiences, Scoping review

Background

The well-being of youth in Malaysia is increasingly recognized as a critical area of concern, particularly in the context of rapid social changes, economic pressures, and mental health challenges. Spirituality, often intertwined with cultural and religious practices, is a significant aspect of many young people's lives in Malaysia. Youth well-being is multi-dimensional,

spanning psychological, social, and spiritual domains. Global evidence since 2020 highlights adolescence and young adulthood as a formative window when mental health vulnerabilities and protective factors co-evolve, and when meaning-making and value systems consolidate. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that one in six people worldwide are aged 10–19, with rapid biopsychosocial changes that heighten risk for common mental disorders while also making this period highly responsive to promotive interventions that build well-being (World Health Organization, 2024). In parallel, policy framings commonly define “youth” as roughly ages 15–24, a social stage linked to transitions in education, work, and civic life contexts where spirituality may serve as a source of purpose, coping, and community (United Nations, 2023).

In Malaysia, recent monitoring underscores both the urgency and opportunity for action. Recent studies from 2000 to 2025 have highlighted the significant role of spirituality in the well-being of Malaysian youth. Spiritual well-being among Malaysian youth is notably high, with variations observed based on gender, religion, and educational background (Dahalan et al., 2019; Abdullah et al., 2018). This high level of spiritual well-being is crucial as it provides resilience and stability, contributing to overall mental health and quality of life (Lourembam & Ete, 2021). Research indicates that spirituality, particularly religious and existential well-being, is inversely related to mental health issues such as suicidal ideation and depression among adolescents (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Yahaya et al., 2012). For instance, both religious and existential well-being have been shown to significantly reduce the odds of mental health problems, suggesting that spirituality acts as a protective factor (Yahaya et al., 2012). Additionally, spirituality combined with family support has been found to predict lower levels of suicidal ideation, emphasizing the importance of a supportive environment (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Additionally, the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023 (MyMHI'23) reported notable proportions of youth (15–30) exhibiting stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, and called for culturally attuned promotive strategies that leverage family, campus, and community assets (UNICEF Malaysia & Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2023). Within Malaysia's plural religious landscape, emerging studies suggest that religiosity/spirituality can operate as a protective factor via positive religious/spiritual coping, social connectedness, and meaning among university students and young people; however, associations are nuanced and context-dependent (Che Rahimi, Bakar, & Mohd Yasin, 2021). At the global level, a 2025 meta-synthesis of adolescent research found that greater investment in religiosity/spirituality is generally associated with reduced suicidality, strengthening the rationale to examine spiritual dimensions when addressing youth well-being (West, Rana, Awan, Sagot, 2025).

Despite growing interest, the Malaysian evidence base on lived experiences of spirituality among youth remains fragmented across disciplines (public health, psychology, education, Islamic/Religious studies) and study designs (quantitative surveys on coping, small qualitative studies, pandemic-era reports). Existing work often focuses on specific subgroups (e.g., university students) or single traditions, leaving gaps on how Malaysian youth from diverse

backgrounds *experience* spirituality in everyday life, how those experiences intersect with identity, belonging, stressors (academic pressure, family expectations, digital life), and which mechanisms (e.g., meaning, rituals, community participation) are most salient for well-being outcomes.

A scoping review is therefore appropriate to map concepts, populations, contexts, and methodological approaches; to clarify how spirituality is defined and operationalized; and to identify knowledge gaps and implications for practice and policy. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) guidance (updated 2020–2024) specifically positions scoping reviews to examine the breadth and nature of evidence, refine questions, and inform future systematic reviews and intervention research exactly what is needed for this nascent, multi-disciplinary Malaysian topic. Accordingly, this review will chart the terrain of lived spiritual experiences among Malaysian youth and synthesize how these experiences relate to well-being, pointing to culturally grounded avenues for support across education, health, and community settings.

Methods

Study Design

A scoping review was carried out following the Arksey & O'Malley guidelines: 1) identifying the research question, 2) identifying relevant studies, 3) study selection, 4) charting the data and 5) collating, summarizing, and reporting results. The review has also followed the guideline by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews and reported according to the PRISMA-ScR checklist. The scoping review approach is appropriate to comprehensively map the extent, range, and nature of evidence on the lived experiences of spirituality and its relationship to youth well-being in Malaysia, identify knowledge gaps, and inform future research directions.

Databases and Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was developed in consultation with a subject librarian. The scientific databases (CINAHL, SCOPUS, Pubmed and Web of Science) were consulted and keywords from the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) were used. The search strategy was ((spirituality OR religious) AND (wellbeing OR well-being) AND (youth OR adolescent)). The above-mentioned electronic databases were searched from January 2000 to May 2025 in order to capture contemporary evidence.

Additionally, grey literature was explored through Malaysian government and NGO reports such as Ministry of Youth and Sports, Institute for Youth research Malaysia, and UNICEF Malaysia. Apart from that, theses and dissertations from Malaysian universities were also referred to.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review included studies involving youth aged 15–30 years, in alignment with the Malaysian youth policy, and encompassed both adolescents and young adults. Studies that explored the lived experiences of spirituality including religious, spiritual, and meaning-

making practices and their influence on well-being were considered. Only studies conducted in Malaysia or involving Malaysian participants were included. Eligible sources comprised peer-reviewed articles, qualitative and mixed-method studies, surveys, reports, and grey literature. Both English and Malay language publications were included. The timeframe for eligible studies was restricted to those published between 2000 and 2025.

Studies conducted outside Malaysia were excluded. Research focusing on populations outside the youth age bracket (below 15 or above 30 years) was not considered. Studies that examined exclusively clinical or medical interventions without addressing spirituality were excluded. Non-empirical works, such as editorials, commentaries, and opinion papers, were also excluded from the review.

Data Extraction

A data extraction form was developed and piloted on a sample of included studies. Extracted data included bibliographic details such as author, year, journal, and type of publication. Study characteristics, including design, methodology, sample size, and setting, were also recorded. Participant characteristics such as age, gender, educational background, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic factors were extracted. The conceptualization or definition of spirituality used in each study was noted. Reported lived experiences, including themes, narratives, and practices, were identified. In addition, links between spirituality and well-being outcomes were documented. Key findings, limitations, and recommendations from each study were also extracted. All data were charted in a summary table and synthesized thematically to map patterns and gaps in the evidence.

Assessment of Methodological Quality

Although scoping reviews typically did not appraise study quality, a critical appraisal was conducted to enhance transparency and interpretability. Appropriate JBI Critical Appraisal Checklists were applied according to study design (e.g., qualitative, cross-sectional). Each study was independently assessed by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved by consensus or by involving a third reviewer. The appraisal was not used as an exclusion criterion but informed the interpretation of evidence strength and research gaps.

Results

Search Outcome

After initial review in the databases, 1102 articles were obtained. Author examined these records in order to eliminate duplicates, obtaining an initial sample of 1046 references. A total of 969 studies did not meet all criteria during title and abstract analyses, so they were eliminated. Then, 77 articles were read in full text and finally 10 articles were included for analysis. The grey literature search did not retrieve any new studies. The flowchart for these studies is presented in Figure 1.

Study Characteristics

A total of 10 articles were included in this review: 7 quantitative cross-sectional studies, 2 qualitative studies, and 1 mixed-method study. Of these, 80% were published within the last 5 years. All studies focused exclusively on youth aged 15 to 30. Most of the selected articles (70%) examined the influence of spirituality on youth well-being in educational settings such as universities and schools, while approximately 30% focused on community settings. The quality of the studies ranged from medium to good based on reviewers' feedback, ensuring the reliability of the results.

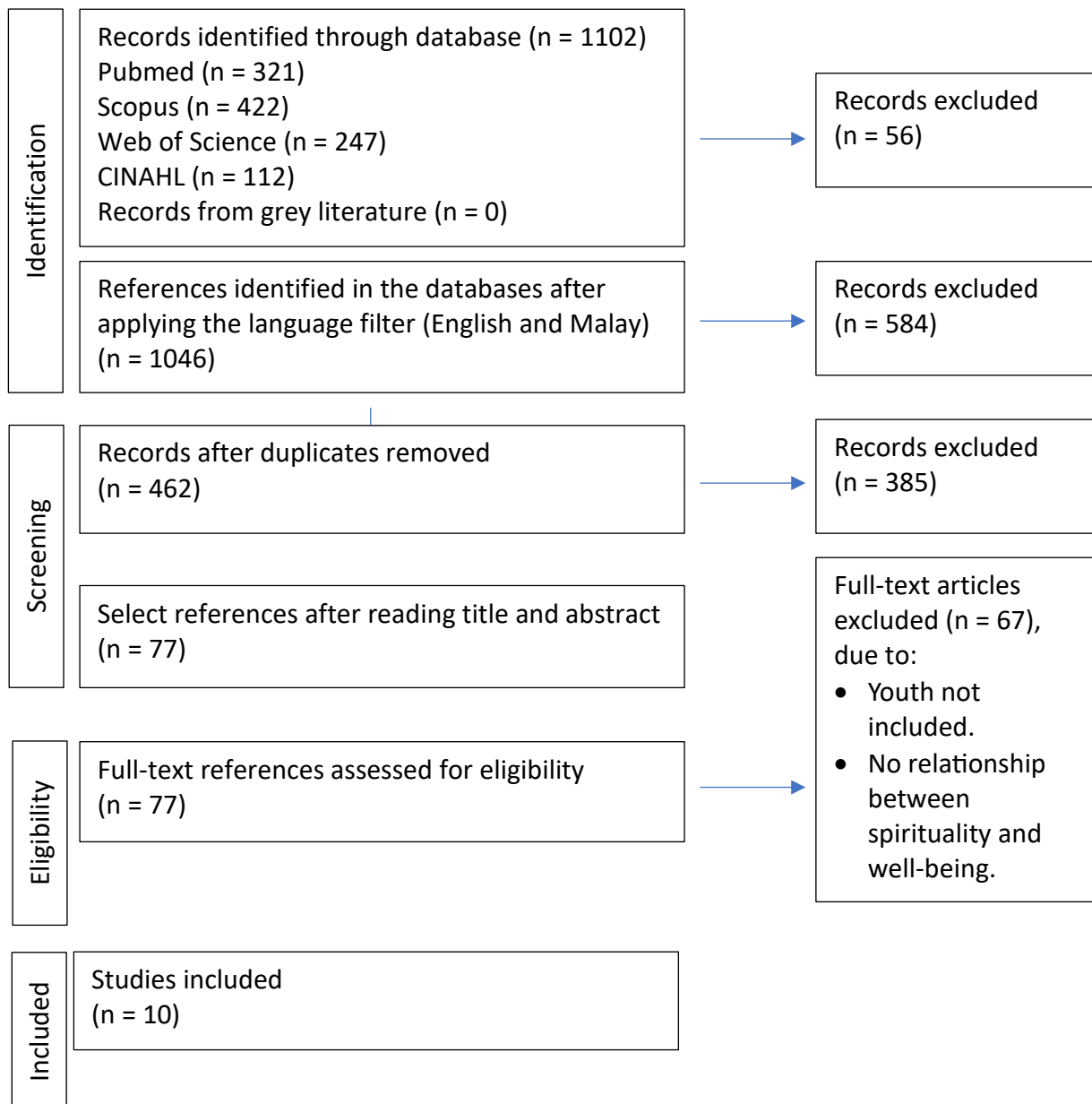


Figure 1: Flowchart for the articles selection by using PRISMA method

Spirituality and Well-Being

The body of literature reviewed between 2000 to 2025 provides a rich yet varied picture of how spirituality has been studied in relation to youth well-being in Malaysia. Ten studies were identified, encompassing diverse methodological approaches including cross-sectional surveys, qualitative interviews and focus groups, as well as mixed-methods designs. The populations studied ranged from secondary school adolescents and university students to rural and low-income youth, reflecting different developmental stages and socio-cultural contexts. Taken together, the evidence consistently highlighted that spirituality whether expressed through religiosity, meaning-making, connectedness, or ritual practices was positively associated with different aspects of psychological and social well-being.

A key theme emerging from these studies lies in the conceptualization of spirituality. Several works treated spirituality as overlapping with religiosity, emphasizing practices such as prayer, coping strategies, and religious beliefs (Ahmad et al., 2021; Che Rahimi et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023; Abdel-Khalek & Tekke, 2019). In these studies, spirituality was operationalized using measures of religiosity and religious coping, often framed within Islam but at times incorporating multi-faith contexts. In contrast, other research adopted a broader and more holistic perspective. For instance, Nor et al. (2023) described spirituality as connectedness to self, others, and God, while Dahalan et al. (2019) conceptualized spiritual well-being as a dynamic and harmonious relationship with the Creator, fellow humans, and the environment, encompassing meaning, purpose, happiness, and fulfillment. Lee and Tan (2022) offered yet another angle, describing spirituality in adolescents as a process of moral guidance and identity formation, whereas Ali and Kumar (2024) emphasized the role of spiritual practices such as prayer, rituals, and family traditions in maintaining continuity and comfort. Velusamy et al. (2024) integrated spirituality with constructs of empathy and moral identity, linking it to broader prosocial outcomes. These varying definitions underscore the conceptual diversity in the Malaysian context, ranging from narrowly religious to inclusively psychosocial interpretations.

The populations studied also reflected this diversity. A majority of studies focused on university students, typically aged 18–25, across both public and private institutions (Ahmad et al., 2021; Ma'rof et al., 2021; Nor et al., 2023; Che Rahimi et al., 2021; Abdel-Khalek & Tekke, 2019). These studies provided quantitative evidence from relatively large samples, often in the range of 200–515 participants, reflecting the accessibility of this population for research. Beyond higher education, two studies shed light on adolescents in secondary schools and rural communities. Lee and Tan's (2022) qualitative interviews with adolescents in urban schools highlighted spirituality as a source of resilience in the face of peer pressure, while Ali and Kumar's (2024) focus groups with rural youth illuminated the importance of rituals and family traditions. Notably, Ali and Kumar also observed that opportunities for youth-led expressions of spirituality were limited in rural settings, suggesting generational gaps in religious and spiritual engagement. Meanwhile, Hassan et al. (2023) specifically focused on low-income Muslim youth, while Dahalan et al. (2019) provided a rare nationwide

perspective, sampling across five geographical zones in Malaysia, thereby capturing urban-rural and regional variations.

Across these varied contexts, the well-being outcomes associated with spirituality were consistently positive. A recurring finding was the protective role of spirituality against mental health difficulties. Ahmad et al. (2021) and Che Rahimi et al. (2021) both found that higher levels of religious coping and religiosity were associated with lower levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and greater psychological adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Ma'rof et al. (2021) reported that spiritual well-being predicted lower suicidal ideation, with social support mediating this relationship, highlighting the importance of social networks in amplifying the protective effects of spirituality. Hassan et al. (2023) extended these findings by showing that religiosity influenced youth mindsets, which in turn shaped emotional outcomes, with higher religiosity linked to better subjective well-being through adaptive cognitive styles. Abdel-Khalek and Tekke (2019) also identified positive associations between intrinsic religiosity and well-being, noting gendered differences, with men reporting higher happiness and mental health, while women scored higher on religiosity. Importantly, the authors suggested that religious practices may be integrated into psychotherapy for youth, pointing to potential applied implications.

Beyond mental health, spirituality was also tied to positive psychosocial outcomes. Nor et al. (2023) found significant correlations between spiritual well-being and life satisfaction, with qualitative themes emphasizing the role of spirituality in fostering a sense of community belonging. Velusamy et al. (2024) demonstrated that spirituality, operationalized alongside empathy and moral identity, positively predicted prosocial behaviour and was associated with higher subjective well-being. Similarly, Dahalan et al. (2019) reported overall high levels of spiritual well-being among Malaysian youth, with links to positive behaviour and self-esteem. Nevertheless, they also noted that loneliness remained a challenge for some young people, suggesting that spirituality may not fully shield against social isolation. Qualitative studies further deepened these insights: Lee and Tan (2022) highlighted adolescents' reliance on spirituality as moral guidance and a resilience-building tool, while Ali and Kumar (2024) emphasized the role of rituals in providing comfort and identity continuity in rural communities, though the absence of youth-driven engagement raised questions about intergenerational transmission of spiritual practices.

The synthesis of these findings highlights several cross-study patterns and divergences. First, across different conceptualizations, spirituality consistently emerged as a positive factor for youth well-being, whether in terms of reducing psychological distress, enhancing resilience, or promoting prosocial behaviours and belonging. Second, the way spirituality was defined shaped the outcomes emphasized: religiosity-focused studies tended to foreground coping and mental health, while broader definitions linked spirituality to identity, belonging, and prosociality. Third, contextual and demographic factors moderated these associations. For instance, Dahalan et al. (2019) found differences in spiritual well-being based on gender, location, and region, while Abdel-Khalek and Tekke (2019) reported gender-specific patterns

in the relationship between religiosity and health. Qualitative studies revealed nuances often overlooked in surveys, such as adolescents' struggles with peer pressure (Lee & Tan, 2022) or the limited opportunities for spiritual self-expression among rural youth (Ali & Kumar, 2024). Despite the positive associations documented, the evidence base also reveals important gaps and limitations. The predominance of cross-sectional survey designs limits causal inferences and may obscure the dynamic role of spirituality over time. University students are heavily overrepresented, leaving the experiences of non-student youth, particularly those outside urban or institutional settings, less well understood. Moreover, while many studies examined spirituality in predominantly Muslim populations, fewer captured the lived experiences of non-Muslim youth, even though some samples included multi-faith contexts. Finally, youth voices are more clearly heard in the qualitative studies, suggesting the need for participatory and longitudinal designs that can better capture the evolving nature of spirituality in shaping well-being.

In summary, Table 1 shows results of the scoping review. The reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that spirituality plays a significant role in promoting youth well-being in Malaysia. Whether understood through religiosity, meaning-making, connectedness, or spiritual practices, spirituality was consistently associated with positive psychological and social outcomes, while also providing resilience in the face of adversity. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of context, highlighting differences by age, gender, socioeconomic status, and setting. Addressing current gaps such as limited youth-led perspectives, overreliance on university samples, and cross-sectional approaches will be critical in advancing a more comprehensive understanding of spirituality's influence on youth well-being in Malaysia.

Table 1: Results of the Scoping Review

Authors	Year	Study Design	Population & Sample	Setting	Conceptualization of Spirituality	Key Findings on Well-Being
Ali & Kumar	2024	Qualitative (Focus Groups)	40 Malaysian rural youth, aged 18-25	Community setting (Malaysia)	Spiritual practices (prayer, rituals, family traditions).	Spiritual rituals provided comfort and identity continuity; however, limited opportunities for youth-led expression were noted.
Velusamy et al.	2024	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	411 Malaysian youth	Universities and schools	Spirituality operationalized alongside empathy/moral identity.	Spirituality positively predicted prosocial behaviour and was linked to positive well-being indicators (higher subjective well-being and prosociality).
Hassan et al.	2023	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	396 Malaysian Low income Muslim youth aged 15-25	Community setting (Malaysia)	Religiosity (practices & beliefs) treated distinct from mindset constructs.	Religiosity influenced mindset and emotional outcomes; higher religiosity associated with better subjective well-being via adaptive mindsets. Men scored higher on happiness, satisfaction, and mental health; women scored higher on religiosity.
Nor et al.	2023	Mixed-methods	200 Malaysian undergraduates (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism)	Private university (Malaysia)	Spirituality as connectedness to self, others, and God.	Found positive correlations between spiritual well-being and life satisfaction; qualitative themes highlighted community belonging.
Lee & Tan	2022	Qualitative (interviews)	30 Malaysian secondary school adolescents, aged 15-17	Urban schools (Malaysia)	Spirituality as meaning-making and identity.	Students described spirituality as a source of moral guidance and resilience when facing peer pressure.

Ahmad et al.	2021	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	450 Malaysian university students, aged 18-24	Public university (Malaysia)	Religiosity (prayer, religious coping).	Higher religious coping was linked to reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms during COVID-19.
Ma'rof et al.	2021	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	515 Malaysian undergraduates	Public university (Malaysia)	Spiritual well-being and social support.	High spiritual well-being predicted lower suicidal ideation; social support mediated the relationship.
Che Rahimi Bakar & Mohd Yasin	2021	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	450 Malaysian university students	Universities (Malaysia)	Religiosity/religious coping (measures of religiosity and coping).	Positive religious coping and higher religiosity were associated which better psychological well-being and adjustment during Covid-19.
Abdel-Khalek & Tekke	2019	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	238 Muslim college students from Malaysia	Higher education	Religiosity primarily as intrinsic religiosity measured by the Arabic Scale of Intrinsic Religiosity, reflecting internal religious commitment.	Religiosity positively correlated with well-being and mental health. Physical health predicted religiosity in men, mental health in women. Religious practices suggested for psychotherapy integration.
Dahalan et al.	2019	Cross-sectional survey Quantitative	500 Malaysian youth aged 19-30 years	Five zones in Malaysia: North, Middle, South, East Coast, and Borneo	Spiritual well-being as a dynamic harmonious relationship with the Creator, fellow human beings, and the environment; involving meaning, purpose, spiritual happiness, and fulfilment.	Overall high level of spiritual well-being among Malaysian youth. Significant differences based on gender, location, and zones. Females and urban youth scored higher. Spiritual well-being linked to positive behaviour and self-esteem. Felt loneliness noted in some youth.

Discussion and Conclusion

This scoping review synthesized the available literature on the lived experiences of spirituality and youth well-being in Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that spirituality plays a significant role in shaping how young people navigate stress, construct meaning, and maintain social connectedness. Across the reviewed studies, spirituality consistently emerged as a protective factor, supporting resilience, mental health, and identity development. However, the evidence base remains fragmented and concentrated in urban, university-based populations, leaving notable gaps in understanding the experiences of rural, indigenous, and marginalized youth.

The findings align with international research that identifies spirituality as an important determinant of youth well-being. Globally, studies have reported that spirituality enhances resilience, provides a framework for meaning-making, and reduces risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Post et al., 2023; Du, 2024). For example, a global synthesis by Piko (2023) found that religiosity and spirituality significantly predicted life satisfaction and reduced mental distress among adolescents across diverse cultural settings. Similarly, recent UNICEF reports (2024) emphasize that spirituality can offer protective mechanisms in times of crisis, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when young people experienced heightened uncertainty and stress.

At the same time, this review highlights cultural distinctiveness in the Malaysian context. Given the country's majority Muslim population, spirituality was frequently conceptualized in terms of Islamic practices such as prayer, Quran recitation, and religious community participation. These practices were reported to foster discipline, hope, and moral grounding. Yet, in line with studies from other multicultural societies, spirituality among Malaysian youth also extended beyond religious affiliation to include meditation, mindfulness, cultural rituals, and acts of community service. This pluralistic understanding mirrors global calls to recognize spirituality as multidimensional, encompassing religious, cultural, and personal expressions of meaning.

The findings of this review have both policy and practical implications. At the policy level, they underscore the importance of incorporating spiritual well-being into youth development and mental health initiatives. Current national policies, such as those led by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES), could benefit from integrating spiritual dimensions alongside psychological and social indicators of well-being. Such integration should adopt a culturally sensitive approach that acknowledges Malaysia's multifaith and multicultural landscape.

In practice, universities and schools could leverage these findings by implementing programs that foster spiritual coping strategies, interfaith dialogues, and peer support networks. For instance, structured spaces for reflection, mindfulness sessions, and student-led community service initiatives could help nurture both spiritual growth and social cohesion. Similarly, community-based youth organizations may consider drawing upon traditional rituals, cultural

heritage, and family-based practices to reinforce resilience and connectedness among young people.

Despite the evidence linking spirituality to positive outcomes, this review identified several key gaps. First, population gaps were evident, as most studies concentrated on urban youth, particularly university students, with minimal attention to rural or indigenous communities. This limits the generalizability of findings and risks overlooking diverse spiritual worldviews. Second, conceptual gaps emerged from the tendency to conflate spirituality with religiosity. Few studies examined secular or non-religious forms of spirituality, such as nature connectedness or personal meaning-making. Third, methodological gaps were notable, with most studies employing cross-sectional designs. Longitudinal and participatory approaches are needed to capture how spirituality evolves across developmental stages and social contexts.

Future research should address the identified gaps by focusing on underrepresented populations, particularly rural, indigenous, and marginalized youth. There is also a need to broaden the conceptualization of spirituality to include secular, cultural, and nature-based dimensions. Additionally, future studies should examine both the positive and negative aspects of spirituality. While spirituality often fosters resilience, some young people may experience guilt, spiritual struggles, or exclusion due to rigid religious norms, and these aspects remain underexplored in Malaysia. Methodologically, longitudinal and mixed-methods designs would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how spirituality interacts with developmental processes and well-being across time. Intervention studies that test the integration of spiritual components into youth mental health programs could further inform practice and policy.

In summary, this scoping review demonstrates that spirituality is a vital yet underexplored component of youth well-being in Malaysia. The current evidence highlights spirituality's role in fostering resilience, identity, and social connectedness but also points to critical research and practice gaps. By systematically mapping this landscape, the review provides a foundation for future culturally grounded studies and holistic youth development strategies. Integrating spiritual dimensions into research, policy, and practice holds promise for supporting the next generation of Malaysian youth in navigating the challenges of an increasingly complex world.

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