

PARENTING STYLES, EXTRINSIC RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION, AND ANXIETY AMONG RESEARCH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract. This conceptual paper examines the mediating role of extrinsic religious orientation in the relationship between parenting styles and anxiety among research university students in Malaysia. Using a narrative literature review approach, it positions extrinsic religiosity a form of religious involvement driven by external or utilitarian motives as a key psychological and sociocultural factor influencing how parenting practices affect anxiety outcomes. While the direct effects of parenting styles on mental health have been well documented, limited attention has been given to the mechanisms through which these effects occur, particularly in diverse cultural and religious settings like Malaysia. The paper critiques dominant psychological models that focus on direct causality, arguing that they overlook the complex interactions between family dynamics and belief systems. Extrinsic religiosity may act as a coping strategy or psychosocial filter that mediates the impact of parenting, potentially intensifying or mitigating anxiety depending on context. The influence of cultural norms, religious practices, and individual differences underscores the importance of a more nuanced understanding. Existing frameworks such as attachment theory and multidimensional models of religiosity provide useful starting points but fall short of capturing these indirect pathways. Therefore, the paper advocates for future empirical studies to explore this mediating role in greater depth, aiming to inform culturally sensitive approaches to mental health interventions for university students in Malaysia.

Keywords: *anxiety, religious orientation, parenting styles, extrinsic religious orientation*

Introduction

The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) undertaken by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in 2016 unveiled a concerning reality: Malaysia harbours a significant portion of its population grappling with psychological well-being issues, with the highest prevalence observed among low-income individuals and those aged 16 to 19. Over a decade, these issues burgeoned from 10.7% in 1996 to 11.2% in 2006, escalating to a staggering 29.2% by 2015. This trajectory presents a problematic scenario, particularly underscored by the prediction of the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) Council that mental illness would become the second-largest health concern by 2020, trailing only behind heart disease. The aftermath of the epidemic has only exacerbated psychological well-being challenges in Malaysia, manifesting in heightened instances of worry, stress, depression, social isolation, financial instability, and grief. These emotional states, including isolation, sorrow, uncertainty, fear, worry, and powerlessness, can significantly undermine individuals' psychological well-being. In normal circumstances, experiencing anxiety is a natural response to stressful situations, such as facing exams or interviews. At moderate levels, anxiety serves as an adaptive mechanism, fostering concentration, attentiveness, and motivation to overcome challenges. However, when stress or anxiety becomes persistent, excessive, or overwhelming, it poses significant threats to individuals' mental, emotional, and

physical well-being, as highlighted by various scholars (Zulkeflee et al., 2025; Bruce et al., 2024; Muskin et al., 2023; Lavoie, 2013). Anxiety emerges as a prevalent psychological issue globally, Malaysia notwithstanding, characterised by feelings of unease, dread, and apprehension. Distinguished from fear, which responds to immediate danger, anxiety revolves around anticipated threats, contributing to a distinct physiological response and potential hindrance in individuals' pursuit of daily activities (Painter et al., 2019).

The pervasive nature of anxiety has garnered widespread concern among specialists and authorities worldwide, particularly evident in a Rakuten Insight survey indicating that 59% of respondents aged 16 to 24 in Malaysia reported extreme stress or anxiety over the past year. This concern is particularly acute among university students, often viewed as a vulnerable group due to the myriad stressors they encounter during the transition to adulthood, compounded by financial and material difficulties. Studies have consistently demonstrated the prevalence of psychological well-being issues among this demographic, attributing their heightened risk to prolonged exposure to high-stress levels during academic life (Kondo et al., 2023; Na and Tian, 2023). A comprehensive study by Khaiyom et al. (2019) highlighted the variability in anxiety prevalence rates across students, the public and clinical populations in Malaysia. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating concerns regarding university students' psychological well-being underscored the urgent need for intervention. With substantial spikes observed amidst the pandemic, local research has revealed alarming rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among university students in Malaysia (Azlan et al., 2024). Considering these developments, understanding the factors contributing to anxiety's development assumes paramount importance. Previous research has implicated attachment and parenting styles, as well as religious orientation, in shaping psychological well-being issues. The present study seeks to explore the potential influence of parental relationships and religious factors among research university students on anxiety levels. However, it is crucial to clarify that the researcher intends to assess the likelihood of experiencing anxiety rather than diagnosing anxiety disorders, recognising the complexities involved beyond the scope of this study.

Literature review

Anxiety among university students

Anxiety is a complex psychological and physiological response that arises when an individual perceives a threat to their self-concept or well-being. According to Spielberger (1983), anxiety is characterized by consciously experienced feelings of tension, apprehension, and heightened autonomic nervous system activity. In the context of academic settings, anxiety can significantly impair students' cognitive functioning, leading to difficulties such as distorted information processing, impaired concentration, and disruptions in memory retrieval and recall. Spielberger further conceptualizes anxiety into two distinct but interrelated forms: state anxiety and trait anxiety. State anxiety refers to a transient emotional response triggered by specific situations perceived as threatening, such as exams or public speaking. In contrast, trait anxiety is viewed as a stable personality characteristic, reflecting a predisposition to respond with anxiety across a broad range of circumstances. Understanding these distinctions is essential for identifying students at risk of anxiety-related academic challenges and for developing appropriate interventions tailored to both situational

triggers and enduring personality traits. Previous research has consistently demonstrated that anxiety has a significant impact on students' academic performance. The construct of anxiety, traditionally examined within general psychological frameworks, has been increasingly applied to educational contexts to better understand how emotional distress manifests during academic activities. Various sources, such as academic pressure, fear of failure, or high expectations, can contribute to increased anxiety during the learning process. These negative experiences not only hinder students' immediate academic performance but may also be internalized and carried into future academic situations, thereby reinforcing a cycle of anxiety and underachievement. This adaptation aims to explore the prevalence and implications of anxiety among students, particularly in relation to their cognitive functioning, motivation, and overall academic achievement.

Ajmal and Ahmad (2019) conducted a case study on anxiety factors affecting students in a distance learning setting at an open university in Pakistan. Their findings, which highlight the significant impact of anxiety on academic performance, particularly in the context of distance learning, underscore the need for further research in this area. The research highlighted an inverse relationship between anxiety and academic outcomes, with anxiety hindering both cognitive and emotional achievements. Furthermore, unique factors such as computer, language, and social anxiety increased resistance to distance learning. Despite previous studies focusing on attitudes, dropout rates, and academic achievement in distance learning, gaps remain in understanding the specific impacts of anxiety in this context. In Malaysia, Kader Maideen et al. (2015) explored the prevalence and predictors of anxiety among adults in Selangor. Their findings showed that anxiety is the most common mental health condition, with 14% of adults experiencing it in the past year. Particular phobias were the most prevalent (6.4%), while panic disorder was the least common (1.8%). The World Health Organisation (WHO) survey, which included data from 17 countries, showed a global lifetime prevalence of anxiety at 14.3% and a 12-month prevalence of 8.3%. Women were found to have a higher disease burden and were more likely to experience multiple anxiety disorders. Notably, there has been limited research on anxiety predictors within community settings in Malaysia. However, understanding these predictors could pave the way for developing effective mental health treatment programs for the community, offering hope for those affected by anxiety.

Parenting styles

Parenting styles refer to the approaches and practices parents use in raising their children, aimed at fostering the child's social and intellectual development. They involve a combination of parental attitudes and behaviours exhibited in different situations (Kordi and Baharudin, 2010). Parenting is not a single act but a continuous process that includes a wide range of behaviours intended to shape a child's life (Yusuf et al., 2021). Parenting styles are often categorized based on two key dimensions: demandingness (the extent to which parents set and enforce standards) and responsiveness (the degree to which parents are attuned to and supportive of their children's needs). According to Panetta et al. (2014), authoritarian parenting is marked by high demandingness but low responsiveness. Parents who adopt this style enforce strict rules and expect obedience, often with little regard for the child's individual emotional needs or input. The focus is primarily on control and discipline, and warmth or nurturing is often minimal. In contrast, permissive parenting is characterized by low demand and high responsiveness. Permissive parents are highly supportive and

nurturing but place few demands or controls on their children. They are indulgent and may avoid setting firm boundaries, allowing children significant freedom, which can sometimes lead to issues with self-regulation and authority. The uninvolved or indifferent parenting style is distinguished by both low demandingness and low responsiveness. Parents who exhibit this style show minimal interest in their child's life, provide little guidance, and offer limited emotional support, often resulting in children feeling neglected and lacking essential developmental support. In addition to these three styles, authoritative parenting represents a balanced and widely endorsed approach. Authoritative parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive. They establish clear standards and expectations while simultaneously showing warmth, support, and respect for their child's autonomy. This style promotes a healthy balance between discipline and nurturance, fostering an environment conducive to positive emotional, social, and academic outcomes for children.

Parenting styles and anxiety

Numerous studies have been conducted to analyze the relationship between parenting styles and anxiety. Study conducted by Cong et al. (2020) on perceived parenting style and adolescents' social anxiety in Selangor, Malaysia explores the impact of parenting styles on social anxiety in adolescents, focusing specifically on how Malaysian youth interpret and respond to different parenting behaviours. Using Baumrind's framework, the study examines three main parenting styles: authoritative (characterised by warmth and structure), authoritarian (high control with low warmth), and permissive (high responsiveness but limited structure). The study found that authoritarian parenting, marked by strict control and limited emotional support, is often linked to higher levels of social anxiety in adolescents. This style, which can feel restrictive and overbearing, may inhibit adolescents' social skills, potentially leading to more significant discomfort and anxiety in social settings, raising concerns about potential harm. Conversely, authoritative parenting, which balances warmth with clear expectations, was associated with healthier social interactions and lower levels of social anxiety. This approach encourages independence while providing emotional security, fostering adolescents' confidence in social situations. The study suggests that parenting styles play a significant role in shaping social anxiety levels among adolescents and highlights the importance of considering cultural factors. Since Malaysian cultural norms may influence how adolescents perceive these styles, the study advocates for culturally tailored interventions to address social anxiety effectively, emphasising the need for cultural sensitivity in addressing this issue. This article ultimately calls for greater awareness of parenting practices and their psychological impacts on adolescents, especially in non-Western settings like Malaysia.

In another article by Seet et al. (2022) about Parenting Styles and Academic Achievement among Malaysian Students: Mediating Role of Parental Involvement, researchers investigated the relationship between parenting styles and academic outcomes, focusing on the unique role of parental involvement as a mediator. The study highlights Baumrind's three parenting styles, authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive, and assesses their effects on academic success among Malaysian students. The findings indicate that authoritative parenting, support, and structured guidance positively correlate with academic achievement. This style promotes autonomy and responsibility and creates an environment where students are motivated and better equipped to succeed academically. By contrast, authoritarian parenting is linked with

lower academic performance. This approach, characterised by high control and low emotional responsiveness, may create stress and reduce students' intrinsic motivation, harming their educational success. Similarly, the permissive style, which lacks consistent rules and boundaries, is associated with weaker academic results. It may fail to provide the structure for academic discipline, undermining academic success. The study underscores the role of parental involvement, such as assisting with homework and participating in school activities. It finds that parental involvement enhances the positive effects of authoritative parenting on academic performance. This suggests active engagement in a child's education strengthens their academic outcomes. These findings advocate for educational programs that promote authoritative parenting alongside active parental involvement, as this combination appears to be especially beneficial for students' academic success in the Malaysian context. The study thus highlights the importance of parenting style and engagement and advocates for policies that foster these supportive behaviours to improve educational outcomes.

Singh et al. (2021) examined the correlation between parenting styles and adolescents' psychological well-being in India, emphasising the importance of addressing mental health in childhood to prevent issues that may extend into adulthood. The study found that adolescents with authoritative parents displayed better mental well-being than those with authoritarian or permissive parents, indicating that an authoritative parenting style is most effective for fostering positive mental health outcomes. In contrast, adolescents with permissive parents exhibited lower well-being, diverging from some research that links permissive parenting with more favourable mental health outcomes (Singh et al., 2021). These findings align with earlier work, such as Zahra et al. (2014), which found permissive parenting could negatively impact mental health, though the effect was less pronounced than with authoritarian parenting. However, Rezai Niaraki and Rahimi (2013) found no significant mental health differences between authoritarian and permissive styles, suggesting cultural factors might play a role. Specifically, Singh et al. (2021) suggest that the non-harmful impact of authoritarian parenting in Indian contexts may be influenced by the country's cultural norms that accept authoritarian practices. Kadoglou et al. (2024) investigated how parenting styles and parental characteristics affect anxiety levels in preschool-aged children, filling a gap in models that largely overlook environmental and parenting influences on anxiety. This study found that permissive parenting, especially among mothers, correlated with higher levels of anxiety in young children, supporting the view that certain parenting styles, authoritarian and permissive, can heighten a child's risk of internalising issues like anxiety (Kadoglou et al., 2024). Similarly, Yap and Jorm (2015) noted limited cross-cultural evidence on how authoritarian and permissive parenting affect internalising problems, indicating a need for further studies on cultural applicability. Kadoglou et al. (2024) findings reinforce that both authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, particularly in permissive mothers, may increase children's anxiety levels.

Hwang (2019) study in Korea explored the impact of neglectful parenting on children's behavioural and emotional development, underscoring a significant rise in unsupervised children and the need for a robust child welfare program. Unlike previous research, which often focused on the more extreme aspects of abuse, this study highlights the consequences of neglect, such as reduced concentration, aggression, somatic symptoms, anxiety, and depression in children who experienced neglectful parenting (Hwang, 2019). The study's longitudinal data reveal that neglectful parenting

significantly correlates with both externalising and internalising problems, with depression emerging as the most substantial impact on children's development. Hwang (2019) findings emphasise the necessity for attention to neglect as a unique form of maltreatment with distinct, harmful effects on child outcomes.

Extrinsic religious orientation

Religious orientation refers to the way individuals relate to their religious beliefs and how these beliefs are expressed and integrated into their daily lives (Brown, 2008). Allport and Ross (1967) proposed two primary forms of religious orientation: intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. Intrinsic religiosity is characterized by a genuine internalization of religious beliefs, where religion serves as a central guiding force in one's life. Individuals with this orientation view their faith as an end in itself and strive to live in accordance with its teachings. In contrast, extrinsic religiosity involves engaging in religious practices for instrumental purposes rather than for the sake of religion itself. People with an extrinsic orientation may participate in religious activities to gain social status, emotional comfort, security, or other personal or societal benefits. For them, religion is often a means to achieve external goals, such as building social networks, finding community support, or attaining a sense of belonging. This approach to religion is typically more utilitarian and less focused on deep spiritual commitment. García-Alandete and Valero (2013) explored how different religious orientations (intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest) relates to psychological well-being, using 180 Spanish university students. The analysis revealed that individuals who internalized their religious beliefs (intrinsic orientation) reported higher levels of psychological well-being, while those with extrinsic orientations demonstrated lower levels of well-being. These findings corroborate other authors' initial assumptions and are consistent with prior research indicating that intrinsic religiosity is generally associated with enhanced psychological health, whereas extrinsic religiosity tends to exhibit either negative or negligible associations with well-being. Furthermore, prior studies have identified intrinsic religious orientation as a protective factor against depressive responses to adverse life events, demonstrating an inverse relationship between intrinsic religiosity and depression (Hettler and Cohen, 1998; Kendler et al., 1997). Conversely, empirical evidence suggests that extrinsic religious orientation is significantly linked to increased psychological distress and anxiety. Individuals exhibiting a predominantly extrinsic approach to religion have been found to report elevated levels of depression, emotional distress, and anxiety (Kawa and Shafi, 2015; Khansanami et al., 2015; Davis and Epkins, 2009).

Materials and Methods

This conceptual paper adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine existing research on parenting styles and anxiety among students, with a specific focus on the mediating role of extrinsic religious orientation in the Malaysian university context. Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews summarize and interpret selected evidence to support the author's perspective, allowing flexibility in structure while still requiring methodological rigor to reduce bias (Coughlan and Cronin, 2020; Ferrari, 2015). Although there is no standardized format, narrative reviews often follow the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results and discussion) structure and may incorporate steps such as searching, mapping, appraisal, synthesis, and evaluation (Hopkinson and

Blois, 2014; Greenhalgh et al., 2005). This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of key gaps in literature, facilitating the identification of new research directions. Thereby building a strong foundation by rigorously analysing secondary sources, including journal articles and case studies obtained from reputable databases such as Elsevier, emerald, google scholar and research gate.

Results and Discussion

Current literature has highlighted various effects of parenting styles on anxiety, suggesting that authoritarian styles tend to increase anxiety while authoritative styles can promote better mental health outcomes. However, the influence of religious orientation, mainly extrinsic religious motivation, is relatively unexplored in this context. It is proposed that extrinsic religious orientation, a topic of significant importance, should be a primary focus for future research, particularly in understanding its role as a mediator between parenting styles and anxiety among university students in Malaysia. By examining how extrinsic religious orientation intersects with parenting styles, future research could reveal deeper insights into the factors that influence student anxiety. Extrinsic religious orientation, characterised by religious engagement for external benefits, such as social support or personal safety (Nazri and Sulaiman, 2021; Forouhari et al., 2019), may be crucial in amplifying anxiety among students, mainly when motivated by external pressures. This term refers to a religious orientation where individuals engage in religious practices primarily for external rewards or to meet external expectations rather than out of genuine belief or personal connection to the faith. For instance, university students with authoritarian parents might feel compelled to adhere to religious practices primarily to meet parental expectations, rather than out of intrinsic belief. This externally motivated religious engagement could increase anxiety, as students might perceive religion as a duty rather than a source of personal solace or empowerment (Munir and Malik, 2020). Investigating extrinsic religious orientation as a mediator could thus shed light on how students' religious motivations either buffer or exacerbate the anxiety associated with certain parenting styles.

Additionally, as religious motivations are often shaped by parental influence (Noreen et al., 2020), understanding whether students internalise their parents' extrinsic religious orientation or develop a more autonomous, intrinsic perspective could have significant implications for mental health. For instance, students who adopt an extrinsic orientation primarily for social standing or compliance may be at greater risk of anxiety if they feel their religious practices do not authentically align with their beliefs. By examining these dynamics, future research could explore how the intersection of extrinsic religious orientation and parenting styles shapes mental health in university students. This focus would contribute to a more culturally nuanced understanding of the interplay between family dynamics, religious orientation, and anxiety, which is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where Islam is the predominant religion and plays a central societal role, influencing family structures, social norms, and individual behaviours. In summary, focusing on extrinsic religious orientation as a mediator offers a promising direction for understanding the complex ways in which family and religious factors influence anxiety. Future research that examines how this orientation affects anxiety within various parenting styles could provide valuable insights into culturally appropriate interventions, ultimately supporting better mental health outcomes for

university students in Malaysia. The potential impact of this research on mental health outcomes underscores the urgency and importance of this proposed study.

Conclusion

This concept paper addresses a critical gap in existing literature by exploring the mediating role of extrinsic religious orientation in the relationship between parenting styles and anxiety among research university students in Malaysia. While previous studies have established that authoritarian parenting is often associated with adverse mental health outcomes and authoritative parenting with more positive psychological well-being, limited attention has been given to how religious motivations, particularly extrinsic religious orientation, influence this dynamic. Extrinsic religious orientation comes from the view of looking at engagement in religious practices for external validation or social conformity which may exacerbate anxiety, especially when shaped by authoritarian parental expectations. In Malaysia's sociocultural context, where religion and family structures are deeply intertwined, examining this intersection offers a culturally nuanced approach to understanding student anxiety. By reviewing relevant literature, the study provides foundational insights that can inform targeted and context-sensitive mental health interventions for university students. Substantial empirical evidence indicates that religious involvement is positively associated with various indicators of mental health, including enhanced psychological well-being, improved overall psychological functioning, greater life satisfaction, a stronger sense of hope, and reduced levels of anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and suicidal tendencies. However, it is essential to conceptualize religion as a complex and multidimensional construct that cannot be fully understood through simplistic frameworks. Moreover, the potential for curvilinear relationships between religious orientations and psychological or behavioural variables warrants further investigation, as linear models may inadequately capture the nuanced dynamics of religious beliefs, practices, and orientations. Future research should aim to deepen understanding of these relationships across diverse religious groups and subpopulations to account for cultural and contextual variations.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm there are no conflict of interest with any parties involve in this publication.

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