# THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF MORAL BELIEF IN PREDICTING ONLINE MORAL ENGAGEMENT

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**ABSTRACT**
The aim of this study is to investigate whether moral traits, moral identity, and moral belief affect online users' moral engagement. Specifically, the objectives of the study are: (1) to determine the levels of moral traits, moral identity, moral belief, and online moral engagement; (2) to determine the relationships between moral traits, moral identity, moral belief, and online moral engagement; and (3) to investigate the mediating effect of moral belief on the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement. This study employed a quantitative research design using the online survey technique for data collection. A total of 153 respondents was collected. Results show high levels of moral traits, moral identity, moral belief, and online moral engagement exercised by the students. Moral belief partially mediated the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement. These findings support Mill's harm principle that any kind of expression should be allowed but guided by self-restriction and not harm others. Therefore, the study suggests for a focus on moral nurturing among Malaysian youths to minimize the total freedom of expression of harmful information being disseminated unnecessarily especially online.

**Keywords**: Moral beliefs; moral identity; moral traits; online moral engagement; youth online expressions.

***ABSTRAK***
*Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat sama ada sifat moral, identiti moral, dan kepercayaan moral mempengaruhi penglibatan moral pengguna sosial media. Secara khususnya, objektif kajian adalah (1) untuk menentukan aras sifat moral, identiti moral, kepercayaan moral, dan penglibatan moral dalam talian; (2) untuk mengenalpasti perhubungan antara sifat moral, identiti moral, kepercayaan moral, dan penglibatan moral dalam talian; dan (3) untuk menyiasat kesan pengantaraan kepercayaan moral terhadap hubungan sifat moral dan identiti moral dengan penglibatan moral dalam talian. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk penyelidikan kuantitatif menggunakan teknik tinjauan dalam talian. Seramai 153 responden telah menyertai kajian. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan aras yang tinggi pada sifat moral, identiti moral, kepercayaan moral, dan penglibatan moral dalam diri pelajar. Kepercayaan moral didapati secara separa mengantarakan hubungan sifat moral dan identiti moral dengan penglibatan moral dalam talian. Penemuan ini menyokong prinsip kemudaratan Mill bahawa apa-apa jenis ekspresi harus dibenarkan tetapi haruslah berpandukan sekatan kendiri dan tidak membahayakan orang lain. Oleh itu, kajian ini mencadangkan untuk memberi tumpuan kepada pemupukan moral di kalangan belia Malaysia*

*bagi meminimumkan kebebasan bersuara total yang melibatkan maklumat berbahaya daripada disebarkan.*

*Kata kunci: Kepercayaan moral, identiti moral, sifat moral, penglibatan moral dalam talian, kebebasan bersuara belia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Protecting society's freedom of speech is one of the essential aspects of a democratic society, and it may also reflect the state of the country's economic, political and legal system. The degree of freedom of expression and discourse setting in a country, such as the creation of independent media and the unregulated expression of society, in particular through the internet, can be calculated under these conditions (Naab, 2012). However, with a freer discourse setting, the flourishes of online engagement and expression in the social media of course, came with other prevalent consequences.

Youth especially, practices cyberbully openly by spreading rumours, demeaning comments and posting hurtful photos (Cavete et al., 2010; Ang et al., 2010). For example, in Malaysia, the regular citizens are becoming more active and braver in expressing views through the internet and social media, but are ranked second in Asia for cyberbullying and the increase in irresponsible hate speech in social media (Ahmad Ghazali, et al., 2020; Murni, 2016; Nur, 2020; Razak, 2020). These behaviours are now seen as the new norm in social media for people to freely express themselves without weighing the consequences of their online conduct (Lai, 2019).

The Malaysian government has laws and regulations in place as a guiding sanction when communicating online, such as the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998, which states that the sharing of offensive and menacing content is an offence under Section 233 of the Act. However, the new social media norm is indicating declining civic and moral examples in the platform realm when expressing oneself even with the existence of many regulations that protect and guide the practice of freedom of expression in Malaysia. While the laws play huge roles in regulating social media usage and helping to control the current social media's worrisome culture, those issues are still unsettling.

The nation's future depends on a strong and cohesive moral foundation of her citizens, and those noble values must be continuously preserved and nurtured. Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye (2018), the Senior Vice-Chairman for Malaysia Crime Prevention Foundation (MCPF), once stressed his concerns over the spread of negative social media culture and emphasized that there are increased needs for moral and noble values nurturing to be ingrained in the hearts of the Malaysians. Upon looking at the issues, the study came across John Stuart Mill's harm principle that rejects the notion of authoritative control over one's freedom of expression and supports that the control that should exist is the individual's own moral consciousness.

Thus, this raises the question of whether the nation should introduce more authoritative laws to curb all the mentioned issues from spiralling out of control or more should be done to nurture moral and noble values in society, especially when exercising their civic engagement. Hence, the study sought to investigate whether Malaysians' behaviour in social media is fully guided by the effectiveness of laws and regulations or influenced by Malaysians' moral traits, moral identity, and moral belief.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Specifically, the study sought to address the following objectives:
(1) To determine the levels of the respondents' moral traits, moral identity, moral belief, and online moral engagement;
(2) To determine the relationships of the respondents' moral traits, moral identity, and moral belief with online moral engagement; and
(3) To investigate the mediating effect of moral belief on the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is expected to provide an understanding of the mediating effect of moral belief between students' moral traits, moral identity, and online moral engagement. Practically, understanding the importance of moral belief and noble values will highlight the need for social media users to always be reminded of good practices when communicating online, which is in line with two of the national principles: Belief in God, and Courtesy and Morality. Specifically, the study hopes to suggest the need for and to focus on moral nurturing among Malaysians rather than introducing more laws and regulations supplementing the existing ones to restrict Malaysians' freedom of expression.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Moral Traits

In recent years, online abuse cases have been increasing in number to the extent of becoming a toxic culture in social media. However, with good moral and practice among its diverse users, positive social media environment and civic engagement are possible. Harrison-Evans and Krasodomski-Jones (2017) suggested that social media should create opportunities to display moral and civic traits, such as honest and empathetic communication, new norms of civic participation, and acts of courage that counter online abuse.

Emphasizing moral traits, Kihlstrom and Klein (1994) defined moral traits as a part of connected components that help to define the moral identity of a person. It is how a person sees him/herself; hence, it is a measure of self-importance and is seen central in defining one's self-concept. Moral traits have also become a psychological need, making it among the most powerful determinants of others' impression on a person (Prentice et al., 2019; Sun & Goodwin, 2020). Thus, moral traits, as reflected in one's identity, is seen and visible through one's action.

Aquino and Reed (2002) mentioned that before measuring one's moral identity, a set of traits in the individual must be identified as it works as a 'salience induction stimulus', linking traits to self-concept. This is because tapping certain trait stimuli can invoke a broader associative network of related traits. For example, honesty would also tap the integrity trait in

a person. Recent research in moral conceptions and moral character has also begun to identify key moral traits in a person, such as compassion, generosity, and kindness (Prentice et al., 2019; Sun & Goodwin, 2020). Thus, moral traits are conceptualized as a part of connected components that help define the moral identity of a person that would shape other's impression of his/her behaviour. Since moral traits are said to be visible through one's action, hypothesis first hypothesis for the study is developed, where:

H₁: There is a positive relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement.

## Moral Identity

Aquino and Reed (2002) defined moral identity as a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits based on recent social cognition-oriented definitions of the self. Moral identity is viewed as linking to specific moral traits, but it may also be amenable to a distinct mental image of what a moral person is likely to think, feel, and do (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994).

Moral identity has been described as a kind of self-regulatory mechanism that motivates moral actions (Blasi, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1992; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). Like other social identities that people embrace, moral identity can be a basis for social identification that people use to construct their self-definitions. A person's moral identity may be associated with a certain belief, attitude, and behaviour (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999), particularly when that identity is considered highly self-important. Moreover, moral identity has been proven to be highly associated with moral action (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Hence, through this association, the second hypothesis is developed where:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement.

## Moral Belief

Moral beliefs are values that are held by individuals and shared socially by a cohesive group of individuals concerning what is wrong and right in human conduct. The most well-known theory of moral development is by Kohlberg (1984), where people pass through three levels of moral development (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional). However, the moral codes developed from the theory are primarily meant for Western society. This is because the moral belief of an individual shared with the society could define one's self-concept, generalize the social, moral traits and help define the moral identity of a person (Kihlstrom &Klein, 1994; Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). Hence, the current study refers to the Islamic approach to a moral belief that defines the traits and identity of the Muslims youth in Malaysia instead. With this, since moral belief would define the traits and identity of a person, the second and third hypotheses are developed where:

H₃: There is a positive relationship between moral traits and moral belief;
H₄: There is a positive relationship between moral identity and moral belief.

Several studies have been conducted on the belief and behavioural components correlations. For example, Mokhlis and Spartkas (2020) suggested that religious belief should be a determinant in the consumer behavioural model, as the belief does influence buyers' behaviour. Meanwhile, Stephens, Young, and Calabrese (2007) analyzed undergraduates' beliefs and behaviours related to conventional and digital cheating. In their study, beliefs were

classified and referred to as students' judgement of personal moral responsibility to refrain from cheating and having the tendency to neutralize the responsibility for cheating.

According to Syed Muhamad Naquuib Al-Attas (1995), the fundamental elements of Islamic worldview and the system of values convey the meaning of virtue, freedom, and happiness. The activity of "freedom" is known as "*ikthiyar*" (an act) in Islam. *Ikthiyar* is about making choices not between several alternatives but between two alternatives: the good or the bad. A choice for the better one is, therefore, an act of freedom; it is also an act of justice ('*adl*) done to oneself and to others. *Iman*, on the other hand, implies the consciousness of God and remembrance of Him that brings about the condition of tranquillity in the soul where it is free from worrying that results from doubt. This Islamic philosophy of freedom relates to moral values or belief, which will then be reflected in an act or habit, known as *akhlaq*.

The Islamic worldview, which focuses on three dimensions of Islamic core values, was used as the principle to develop the inventory of this study. These values were classified into nine sub-values based on traditional Islamic values, namely, patience, gratitude, humility, positive regard, honesty, love and care, *tawakkul*, sincere, and *taqwa*. As discussed, since moral belief would be reflected in ones' act, the third hypothesis is developed where:

$H_5$: There is a positive relationship between moral belief and online moral engagement.

## Online Moral Engagement

The extra features available on social media platforms have encouraged the public to have an interest and increase their participation in public affairs. This phenomenon supports Brady, Crockett, and Jay's (2020) model of moral contagion where emotionally arousing content is correlated with online communication engagement and influences the spreading of the content. The model proposes motivation, attention, and design as the determinants in the spreading of moralized content online.

Moreover, individuals are able to share different kinds of expression, be it in a positive or negative light, to agree or disagree, and to support or not to support any subjects. This is in line with Kohlberg (1969), who discovered that the presumptions for engaging in moral behaviour depend to some degree on perspective-taking abilities and moral maturity that can be obtained through the model determinants. The perspective-taking ability and moral maturity could also be the individual's self-conception developed through moral traits, identity, and belief. Although moral structures are not seen as directly related to moral action, Blasi (1983) sees that they serve to appraise the moral landscape. Therefore, for this study, online moral engagement is conceptualized as the level of moral judgment and motivated decision making of an individual when engaging in social media.

The numerous studies cited in this literature shows supported the influence between moral traits, moral identity and behaviour. The current study adds weight by proposing to test whether a moral belief would mediate the relationships between moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement. This is because an individual's moral belief may define one's self-concept, social moral traits and help define a person's moral identity, which led to his/her act/habit. Thus, hypotheses six and seven are developed where:

$H_6$: Moral belief mediates the relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement;
$H_7$: Moral belief mediates the relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement.

**Free Speech Theory (Mill's Harm Principle)**

In John Stuart Mill's harm principle (1947), he promoted that any ideas, stands, and opinions should be allowed in expression no matter how immoral they may seem to everyone else in order to allow for absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment in all subjects. Such liberty is needed to push people's arguments to their logical limits. Everyone should be allowed to do everything he/she wants to, but the behaviour should not harm people around oneself, and this decision is made based on what an individual thinks is right or not right to do.

However, Mill asserts that some rules of conducts (not necessarily legal regulations) are needed to regulate the deliverance of free expression. For example, in the COVID-19 situation where the government provides instructions on the preventive measures to contain the pandemic from spreading further, certain minorities asserted their rights to go against the instructions (Matose & Lanphier, 2020). In this situation, it is only right to abide by the instructions as going against it would only harm others; hence the collective health of society must be observed and protected. As mentioned earlier, the rules of conducts are often self-regulated and can be applied to an individual's moral cognition; however, some interventions are needed when public health is threatened.

Mill's harm principle also includes any type of morally disengaged behaviour, such as pornography and hate speech. The principle suggests that legal sanctions or regulations and disapprobation should be distinguished as a means of limiting speech. Further, Mill also mentioned that those who practice speeches that could harm or affect others must be given some actions; the actions mentioned include ignoring and avoiding them so that others would not promote such behaviour (Wilkinson, 2020). To define harm, Mill asserts that people have no right to incite violence (referring to physical hurts and injuries); however, everyone has the right to offend other people, and causing hurt to others' feelings does not count as harm (Mill, 1947). Hence, Mill's harm principle suggests that all forms of speech that are found to be offensive but easily avoidable should go unpunished under any regulated sanctions.

This principle can be used as a reference on the culture of moral disengagement behaviour (e.g., unintended cyberbullying, plagiarism, defaming) as it supports the concern of the marketplace of ideas on the social media. If the theory does condone the control of the state/government over freedom of expression, are Malaysian social media users' moral cognitions sufficient to guide their online behaviour?

**Conceptual Framework**

Based on the literature review, the conceptual framework is developed with two independent variables involved: moral traits and moral identity. The mediating variable is a moral belief, while the dependent variable is online moral engagement. The hypotheses are summarized in accordance with the framework developed. The conceptual framework proposes that:
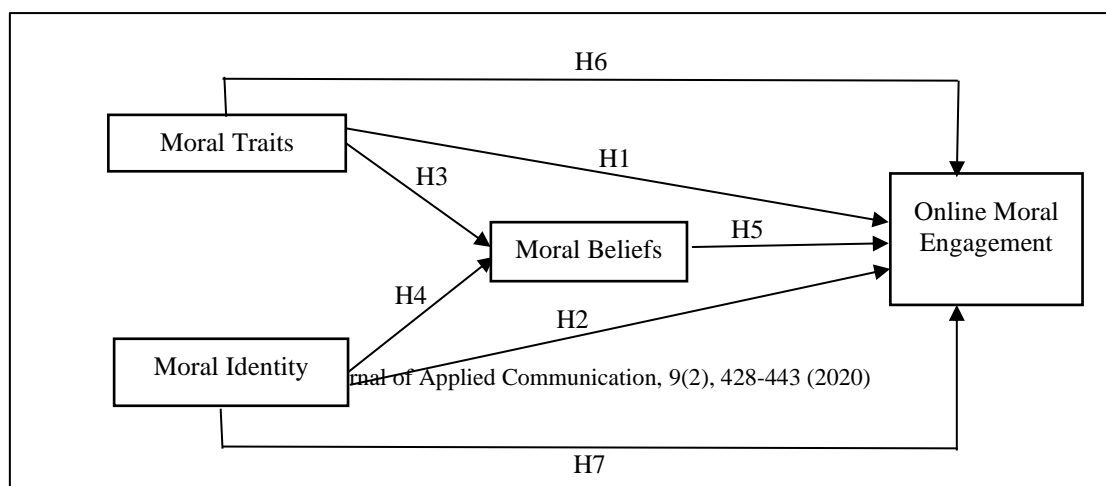
FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework of the study

H$_1$: There is a positive relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement;
H$_2$: There is a positive relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement;
H$_3$: There is a positive relationship between moral traits and moral belief;
H$_4$: There is a positive relationship between moral identity and moral belief;
H$_5$: There is a positive relationship between moral belief and online moral engagement;
H$_6$: Moral belief mediates the relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement;
H$_7$: Moral belief mediates the relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed the quantitative research design by using an online survey questionnaire as the research instrument for data collection from the students of Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Shah Alam. The samples recruited were students from undergraduate communication classes, which were mostly attended by first and second-year students. The criteria for sample selection are that the students should be frequent users of social media. The data collection took place in July 2020.

**Research Instrument and Measurement**
The questionnaire consisted of five sections: Section A: Demographic Characteristics tapped on the respondents' background such as gender, age, and education level; Section B: Moral Traits explored the respondents' attributes, such as caring, friendly, and helpful; Section C: Moral Identity elucidated the respondents' moral identity in social media; Section D: Moral Belief consisted; and finally, Section E: Online Moral Engagement Behavior.

 **Moral traits** as an independent variable measuring the extent to which one believes it is necessary to possess the morals to be considered as a moral person. The items were adapted from Aquino and Reed (2002). Only nine items were selected for the present study. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert-like scale, where 1 = *unimportant to me*, 2 = *somewhat important to me*, 3 = *important to me*, 4 = *very important to me*, and 5 = *extremely important*.

 **Moral identity** had 13 items, where 10 items were adopted and 3 were adapted from Aquino and Reed (2002). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly agree*, 4 = agree, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

 **Moral belief**, with nine items, was developed based on the Moral Value Inventory for Muslim Adolescents (MVIMA) scale from Abdullah et al. (2010), with reference to the Islamic worldview proposed by Syed Naquib Al-Attas (1995). The items consisted of patience, gratitude, humility, positive regard, honesty, love and care, *tawakkul*, sincere, and *taqwa*. They were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly agree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

 **Online moral engagement behaviour** consisted on 15 adapted items from the newly developed Online & Face-to-Face Moral Disengagement Scale (OFF-MDS), based on the

original Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996; Saulnier, 2019) for moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparisons, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly agree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

## Validity and Reliability

The Cronbach's alpha for moral traits ($\alpha$ =.841), moral identity ($\alpha$ =.922), moral belief ($\alpha$ =.806), and online moral engagement behaviour ($\alpha$ =.859) indicate high reliability (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Reliability test for the selected variables of the study

| Section | Variable | No. of Items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---------|----------|--------------|------------------|
| B | Moral traits | 9 | .841 |
| C | Moral identity | 13 | .922 |
| D | Moral belief | 9 | .806 |
| E | Online moral engagement behaviour | 15 | .859 |

## Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed descriptively and inferentially using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The descriptive statistics include frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, as well as minimum and maximum values.

The objectives of the study are mainly tested using inferential analysis. One-sample t-test is used for objective one: to determine the level of each of the variable and its items. Pearson's correlation for zero-order correlation is used for objective two: to test the relationships between all variables. Finally, partial correlation and hierarchical regression are used for objective three: to investigate the mediating effect of moral belief on the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement.

## FINDINGS

## Demographic Information

A total of 153 respondents participated in the study. The demographic information of the respondents collected includes gender, age (years old), and Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). Most of the respondents are females (65.4%) while the rest (34.6%) are males. Since the respondents were first degree students, many of them were 21 and 22 years old (82.4%), while the rest were 20 years old (8.5%) and 23 years old and above (9.1%). For the respondents' CGPA, two-thirds of the respondents (66.7%) acquired CGPA of 3.21 and above, followed by 32.6% of them who obtained a CGPA of 2.41–3.20 and only 0.7% of the respondents reported a CGPA of 2.00–2.40. Overall, the findings show that the respondents consisted of mainly females in the age range of 21–22 years old, and reporting a CGPA of 3.21 and above.

## Moral Traits

The results in Table 2 below show the level or extent to which each moral trait is important to the respondents. The results were found to be significant with the highest mean value recorded by "being honest" ($M$ = 4.667, $SD$ = 0.538; $t$ = 38.317, $p$ = .000), whereas the lowest mean

value was reported by "being friendly" (*M* = 4.294, *SD* = 0.733; *t* = 21.825, *p* = .000). The overall one-sample t-test yielded a high percentage of 89.96% (*M* = 4.498, *SD* = 0.432; *t* = 42.911, *p* = .000). Other moral traits of the respondents include being fair, helpful, kind, hardworking, caring, generous, and compassionate. These findings show that the respondents see that the moral traits listed are extremely important and seen as central in defining one's self-concept, as emphasized by Kihlstrom and Klein (1994).

TABLE 2. Level of moral traits

| Moral traits (*N* = 153) | *M** | *SD* | % | *t*** | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Honest | 4.667 | 0.538 | 93.3 | 38.317 | .000 |
| 2. Fair | 4.614 | 0.586 | 92.3 | 34.059 | .000 |
| 3. Helpful | 4.608 | 0.610 | 92.2 | 32.629 | .000 |
| 4. Kind | 4.549 | 0.697 | 91.0 | 27.482 | .000 |
| 5. Hardworking | 4.529 | 0.639 | 90.6 | 29.593 | .000 |
| 6. Caring | 4.451 | 0.648 | 89.0 | 27.685 | .000 |
| 7. Generous | 4.392 | 0.754 | 87.8 | 22.831 | .000 |
| 8. Compassionate | 4.379 | 0.618 | 87.6 | 27.612 | .000 |
| 9. Friendly | 4.294 | 0.733 | 85.9 | 21.825 | .000 |
| **Overall for moral traits** | **4.498** | **0.432** | **90.0** | **42.911** | **.000** |

* On a 5-point Likert-like scale, where 1 = unimportant to me, 2 = somewhat important to me, 3 = important to me, 4 = very important to me, and 5 = extremely important.
** Test value = 3.

## Moral Identity

The result in Table 3 below shows the extent of the respondents' agreement on their level of moral identity. The results show that all moral identity items are significant with the highest mean value being reported by the item "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics" (*M* = 4.614, *SD* = 0.586; *t* = 34.059, *p* = .000) and the lowest mean value going to the item "I often portray or post my photos that identify me as having these characteristics" (*M* = 3.222, *SD* = 1.160; *t* = 2.370, *p* = .019). The overall one-sample t-test for moral identity yielded a percentage of 79.7% (*M* = 3.983, *SD* = 0.642; *t* = 18.944, *p* = .000).

Hence, all items in moral identity are positive and significant. The findings indicate that the respondents felt that having the characteristics that show a positive identity would make them happy and is an important part of displaying who they are. Hence, they desired to have such characteristics to make them feel important. This reflects Blasi's (1984) views for moral identity to be a kind of self-regulatory mechanism for social identification.

TABLE 3. Level of moral identity

| Moral Identity (*N* = 153) | *M** | *SD* | % | *t*** | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics. | 4.614 | 0.586 | 92.3 | 34.059 | .000 |
| 2. I would be happy to be a person who has these characteristics. | 4.601 | 0.611 | 92.0 | 32.436 | .000 |
| 3. Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am. | 4.438 | 0.751 | 88.8 | 23.692 | .000 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Having these characteristics is an important part of my sense of self. | 4.399 | 0.719 | 88.0 | 24.047 | .000 |
| 5. I strongly desire to have these characteristics. | 4.399 | 0.729 | 88.0 | 23.747 | .000 |
| 6. Having these characteristics is really important to me. | 4.353 | 0.711 | 87.1 | 23.522 | .000 |
| 7. A big part of my emotional well-being is tied up in having these characteristics. | 4.177 | 0.770 | 83.5 | 18.887 | .000 |
| 8. I am often involved in social media activities that communicate the fact that I have these characteristics. | 3.719 | 0.956 | 74.4 | 9.302 | .000 |
| 9. The fact that I have these characteristics is communicated to others by my participation in social media. | 3.569 | 0.978 | 71.4 | 7.188 | .000 |
| 10. I am actively involved in activities in the social media that communicate to others that I have these characteristics. | 3.510 | 1.101 | 70.2 | 5.728 | .000 |
| 11. The kinds of content I exposed to social media identify me as having these characteristics. | 3.490 | 1.113 | 69.8 | 5.449 | .000 |
| 12. The types of things I do in my social media clearly identify me as having these characteristics. | 3.288 | 1.139 | 65.8 | 3.122 | 0.002 |
| 13. I often portray or post my photos that identify me as having these characteristics. | 3.222 | 1.160 | 64.4 | 2.370 | 0.019 |
| **Overall Moral Identity** | **3.983** | **0.642** | **79.7** | **18.944** | **.000** |

\* On a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree (1–20%), 2 = disagree (21–40%), 3 = somewhat agree (41–60%), 4 = agree (61–80%), and 5 = strongly agree (81–100%).
\*\* Test value = 3.

## Moral Belief

Table 4 shows the extent of the respondents' agreement on their level of moral belief. The result shows that all items in moral belief are significant with the highest mean value reported by the item "I trust in God's plan after making efforts in doing or achieving something (*tawakkul*)" ($M = 4.790$, $SD = 0.454$; $t = 48.810$, $p = .000$) and the lowest mean value obtained by "I am a patient (*sabr*) person" ($M = 3.771$, $SD = 0.900$; $t = 10.605$, $p = .000$). The overall percentage of the one-sample t-test for moral belief is 89.9%, with a mean value of 4.495 ($SD = 0.425$; $t = 43.557$, $p = .000$).

Since the respondents are Muslims youth, the fundamental elements of Islamic worldview and the system of values are mostly embedded in their life or in their education. Hence, a moral belief like sincerity, with love and care, belief in humility, gratitude, honesty, optimistic, and practising the right conduct were abided regularly by the respondents.

TABLE 4. level of moral belief

| Moral Belief ($N = 153$) | M* | SD | % | t** | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I trust in God's plan after making efforts in doing or achieving something (*tawakkul*). | 4.790 | 0.454 | 95.8 | 48.810 | .000 |
| 2. It is important to have sincerity or the right intention when communicating with others. | 4.712 | 0.496 | 94.3 | 42.732 | .000 |
| 3. Love and care are important to maintain a good relationship with others. | 4.654 | 0.701 | 93.1 | 29.188 | .000 |
| 4. I believe in humility (being humble). | 4.575 | 0.635 | 91.5 | 30.659 | .000 |
| 5. I believe in gratitude (thankfulness) in my daily life. | 4.562 | 0.594 | 91.2 | 32.520 | .000 |
| 6. In everything I do, I will make sure to practice the right conduct as I am conscious that God is watching me (*taqwa*). | 4.523 | 0.679 | 90.5 | 27.724 | .000 |
| 7. I believe in honesty when communicating with others. | 4.464 | 0.744 | 89.3 | 24.353 | .000 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. I believe in positive regards in everything that is happening around me. | 4.405 | 0.790 | 88.1 | 22.001 | .000 |
| 9. I am a patient (*sabr*) person. | 3.771 | 0.900 | 75.4 | 10.605 | .000 |
| **Overall Moral Belief** | **4.495** | **0.425** | **89.9** | **43.557** | **.000** |

\* On a 5-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree (1–20%), 2 = disagree (21–40%), 3 = somewhat agree (41–60%), 4 = agree (61–80%), and 5 = strongly agree (81–100%).
\*\* Test value = 3.

## Online Moral Engagement Behavior

The respondents' extent of frequencies on online moral engagement behaviour is shown in Table 5. The results demonstrate that all items for online moral engagement behavior are positive and significant, where the highest mean value goes to "I respect anyone's race, ethnic group, or disability online" ($M = 4.686$, $SD = 0.556$; $t = 37.533$, $p = .000$), while the lowest mean value is for "I screenshot relevant pictures online with permission for my need only" ($M = 3.477$, $SD = 1.052$; $t = 5.611$, $p = .000$). The overall percentage for the one-sample t-test for online moral engagement behavior is 81.0% ($M = 4.051$, $p = .000$).

Hence, the one-sample t-test shows that all items in online moral engagement behaviour are significant, reporting them to be highly ethical when online. These findings indicate that the students rated themselves as behaving positively and having a high level of online moral engagement. The result reflects that the respondents have a high degree on perspective-taking abilities and moral maturity as presumed by Kohlberg (1969) on the engagement of moral behaviour.

TABLE 5. Level of online moral engagement behaviour

| Online Moral Engagement Behavior ($N = 153$) | $M$* | $SD$ | % | $t$** | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I respect anyone's race, ethnic group, or disability online. | 4.686 | 0.556 | 93.7 | 37.533 | .000 |
| 2. I respect others' private personal information online. | 4.647 | 0.623 | 92.9 | 32.717 | .000 |
| 3. I use the information found on the internet appropriately. | 4.235 | 0.776 | 84.7 | 19.691 | .000 |
| 4. I give positive comments on social media applications. | 4.183 | 0.807 | 83.7 | 18.143 | .000 |
| 5. I share/post my real photos without extreme alteration. | 4.170 | 0.826 | 83.4 | 17.530 | .000 |
| 6. I say things pleasantly to others online. | 4.150 | 0.887 | 83.0 | 16.045 | .000 |
| 7. I welcome anyone to an online conversation. | 4.033 | 0.983 | 80.7 | 12.996 | .000 |
| 8. I send sensible messages online. | 3.987 | 0.827 | 79.7 | 14.760 | .000 |
| 9. I share/post appropriate pictures of others online. | 3.974 | 1.019 | 79.5 | 11.819 | .000 |
| 10. I buy original online items. | 3.961 | 0.999 | 79.2 | 11.893 | .000 |
| 11. I access others' accounts appropriately with permission. | 3.941 | 1.182 | 78.8 | 9.847 | .000 |
| 12. I am sincere in displaying my actual identity online. | 3.830 | 0.944 | 76.6 | 10.871 | .000 |
| 13. I accept someone's post at its face value. | 3.784 | 0.917 | 75.7 | 10.577 | .000 |
| 14. I download commercial music and videos properly. | 3.712 | 1.017 | 74.3 | 8.661 | .000 |
| 15. I screenshot relevant pictures online with permission for my need only. | 3.477 | 1.052 | 69.5 | 5.611 | .000 |
| **Overall Online Moral Engagement** | **4.051** | **0.526** | **81.0** | **24.703** | **.000** |

*On a 5-point scale, where 1= never (1–20%), 2 = rarely (21–40%), 3 = sometimes (41–60%), 4 = often (61–80%), and 5 = always (81–100%).
** Test value = 3.

## Hypothesis Testing

Table 6 shows the existence of a significant, positive, and weak relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement ($r = .344$, $p = .000$), supporting hypothesis one (H$_1$) of the study. There was also a significant, positive, and moderate relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement ($r = .449$, $p = .000$) and between moral belief and online engagement ($r = .433$, $p = .000$). Therefore, H$_2$ and H$_5$ are both supported.

These findings are in line with Prentice et al. (2019) presumptions that moral traits would be a powerful determinant of others' impressions through actions or habits shown. One's moral identity are also highly associated with moral action (Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). Hence, making the respondents to have high moral traits and moral identity, which influenced their online moral engagement. The result also supported Mokhlis and Spartkas (2020) and Stephens, Young and Calabrese (2007) ideas that belief should be determinant in behaviour.

In addition, there was a positive moderate significant relationship between moral traits and moral belief ($r = .508$, $p = .000$); hence, H$_3$ is supported. Similarly, there was a positive moderate significant relationship between moral identity and moral belief ($r = .448$, $p = .000$), thus supporting H$_4$. This is also supporting past studies on how moral traits would shape moral identity and the presumptions that it may be associated to a certain belief and behaviour (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). Since all hypotheses are supported, the mediating effect of moral belief on the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement could be tested.

In the partial correlation and regression test, the moral belief was found to partially mediate the relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement as the relationship between them was still significant even though it was reduced from $r = .344$ ($p = .000$) to $r = .160$ ($p = .025$). Similarly, moral belief mediated the relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement because the relationship was reduced from $r = .443$ ($p = .000$) to $r = .317$ ($p = .000$).

TABLE 6. Zero-order and partial correlations among variables

| Control Variable | Variable (N = 153) | OME | MT | MI | MB |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| None | Online moral engagement | 1 | | | |
| | Moral traits (MT) | $r = .344$, $p = .000$ | 1 | | |
| | Moral identity (MI) | $r = .449$, $p = .000$ | | 1 | |
| | Moral belief (MB) | $r = .433$, $p = .000$ | $r = .508$, $p = .000$ | $r = .448$, $p = .000$ | 1 |
| Moral belief | Moral traits (MT) | $r = .160$, $p = .025$ | | | |
| | Moral identity (MI) | $r = .317$, $p = .000$ | | | |

The results were further confirmed by the hierarchical regression conducted to test the mediation effect of moral belief on the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement in Table 7. The result shows a small reduction in the beta value of model 1 ($\beta = .136$, $p = .120$) and model 2 ($\beta = .032$, $p = .725$) for moral traits. Hence, the result indicates that moral belief partially mediated the relationship between moral traits and online

moral engagement. Thus, H6, which states that moral belief mediates the relationship between moral traits and online moral engagement, is partially supported. The result also shows a reduction in the beta value of model 1 ($\beta = .374$, $p = .000$) and model 2 ($\beta = .307$, $p = .001$) for moral identity. Hence, the result indicates that moral belief partially mediated the relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement. Thus, H7, where moral belief mediates the relationship between moral identity and online moral engagement, is also partially supported.

The results confirmed that the association of moral traits, moral identity and moral belief would influence the respondents' online moral engagement. Since the result is only partially mediating, it is presumed that the items in moral traits, identity, and belief are almost reflecting the same moral components. However, moral belief is found to be significant to be a mediating variable in the study. This is because beliefs are classified as the respondents' judgement of personal responsibility to behave morally (Stephens, Young, and Calabrese, 2007).

TABLE 7. Hierarchical regression analysis of online moral engagement behaviour with moral traits, moral identity, and moral belief

| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | SE | β | | |
| 1 | Constant | 2.083 | .399 | | 5.221 | .000 |
| | Moral Traits | .166 | .106 | .136 | 1.565 | .120 |
| | Moral Identity | .307 | .071 | .374 | 4.297 | .000 |
| 2 | Constant | 1.320 | .449 | | 2.943 | .004 |
| | Moral Traits | .039 | .110 | .032 | 0.352 | .725 |
| | Moral Identity | .252 | .071 | .307 | 3.543 | .001 |
| | Moral belief | .346 | .104 | .279 | 3.339 | .001 |

## CONCLUSION

The findings show that the respondents had high levels of moral traits, moral identity, moral belief, and online moral engagement. This is because the respondents' moral traits and identity are important in self-conception that would shape others' impressions towards them. Thus, behaving morally online is seen as the thing to do and considered as a positive image representation. Furthermore, as communication major students, the respondents had learned and been exposed to media law and ethics to guide them on the use of any social media platforms, personally or professionally.

The moral belief, on the other hand, is the fundamental elements of Islamic worldviews that should be ingrained in the heart of every Muslims and reflected in their behaviour. These components of moral belief are learned by Muslims to distinguish right from the bad. Since all of the respondents are Muslims, they should practice good Islamic values and perform moral practices online too. The findings of the study resulted that moral traits, moral identity, and moral belief had some influence on the students' online moral engagement behaviour. Seeing how important moral traits to the respondents and the high level of moral identity and moral belief would influence their online engagement, it further affirms that moral education and awareness would develop a healthier online engagement sphere and better self-censorship.

Further, moral belief partially mediated the relationships of moral traits and moral identity with online moral engagement. These findings concluded that religious, moral belief also plays an important role in influencing moral action. All moral variables in this study are

proven to play a part in guiding online engagement behaviour of the respondents. This study brings further affirmation that a high moral society would have fewer issues on online moral disengagement. Hence, more focus should be put forwards towards moral awareness education to allow healthier civic engagement and strengthen democracy practices online.

Finally, the findings also support Mill's harm principle, which proposed that any kind of expression should be allowed but guided by self-restriction and not to harm others. Thus, it can be inferred that the online engagement culture could also be affected by the respondents' moral traits, identity, and belief.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The sample selected for this study is not sufficient to represent the whole UiTM student population, what more the Malaysian youths. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to focus on nurturing moral values among Malaysian youths rather than implementing more laws to restrict their freedom of expression. Moreover, since the sample consisted of communication major students, the respondents were already taught and exposed to subjects such as media law and ethics to guide them to be more literate and responsible in using any form of social media, personally and professionally. To add values for future research, a wider and more cohesive sample selection should be executed, and more moral cognition items should be tested. Future research may also extend the sample to other races and culture. Perhaps, a qualitative research design involving the participant observation method can be performed in addition to the content analysis of selected social media platforms on online moral engagement activities.

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