



e-ISSN: 2600-7568

Available online at  
<https://gadingssuitm.com/index.php/gadingss>

**GADING Journal for  
the Social Sciences**

GADING Journal for the Social Sciences 29(1) 2026, 218 – 227

# The Relationship of Religious Appreciation with Family Functionality Among Malaysian Secondary School Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 01 August 2025  
Revised 20 January 2026  
Accepted 05 February 2026  
Online first  
Published 28 February 2026

### Keywords:

religious appreciation  
family functionality  
secondary school students Malaysia  
SmartPLS

### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v29i1.668>

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality among secondary school students in Malaysia. Despite the importance of both religion and family in Malaysian society, limited empirical research has explored how religious appreciation influences family functioning, particularly among adolescents. Using a cross-sectional research design, data were collected through questionnaires administered to 250 secondary school students from three educational institutions in Perak, Malaysia. Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3.0, which allowed for simultaneous analysis of measurement models through path analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality ( $\beta=0.334$ ,  $t=6.459$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), with religious appreciation contributing 10.5% to the variance in family functionality. Further analysis confirmed the model's predictive relevance ( $Q^2=0.058$ ) and an appropriate effect size ( $f^2=0.117$ ). These results suggest that religious appreciation serves as an important predictor of family functionality among Malaysian adolescents, though the moderate  $R^2$  value indicates that other factors also contribute to family functioning. The study provides valuable insights for educational policymakers, religious educators, and family counselors, highlighting the potential benefits of incorporating religious appreciation elements in programs aimed at strengthening family functionality among adolescents. Future research should explore additional variables that might influence this relationship and investigate potential mediating or moderating factors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's diverse religious landscape significantly influences family structures and adolescent development. With a population exceeding 27 million, the nation comprises 60.4% Muslim, 19.2% Buddhist, 9.1% Christian, 6.3% Hindu, and 2.6% practicing traditional Chinese religions (Department of

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Statistics Malaysia, 2022). This multicultural context creates a unique environment where religious values shape family dynamics, particularly among adolescents navigating identity formation.

Religious practices in Malaysia extend beyond theological expression to become fundamental aspects of daily life, that influence family cohesion and intergenerational relationships (Kamarzaman et al., 2024). The constitutional framework, which recognises Islam as the religion of the Federation while guaranteeing religious freedom under Article 11(1), provides a distinctive setting for examining faith-family interactions (Federal Constitution, 1957). Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterised by significant biological, psychological, cognitive, and social transformations (Krauss et al., 2012). Secondary school students in Malaysia face unique challenges navigating traditional values amid rapid societal modernisation, making them essential for studying developmental trajectories. In this research, “religious appreciation” refers to the extent adolescents internalise and express commitment to religious teachings through attitudes and behaviours reflecting spiritual understanding (Krauss et al., 2012; Ismail et al., 2022). “Family functionality” encompasses relationship quality, communication patterns, emotional support systems, and parental involvement contributing to adolescent well-being (Tajuddin et al., 2025).

Despite extensive literature on adolescent development in Western contexts, a significant research gap exists regarding the intersection of religious appreciation and family dynamics among Malaysian adolescents. This gap is particularly noteworthy, given that family institutions and religious practices remain central in Malaysian society, yet are evolving amid modernisation pressures (Baharudin et al., 2011, as cited in Krauss et al., 2012). While previous studies have examined religiosity’s impact on mental health and moral values among Malaysian youth (Ismail et al., 2022; Tajuddin et al., 2025), limited research has specifically investigated how religious appreciation influences family functionality across different dimensions. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality among Malaysian secondary school students. The research aims to provide evidence-based insights supporting holistic adolescent development through an enhanced understanding of religion-family dynamics.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia presents a unique landscape of religious diversity, with Islam as the official religion while constitutionally guaranteeing freedom of worship for other faiths. This diversity creates a distinctive context for examining how religious appreciation influences family functionality among Malaysian adolescents, as religious identity functions not only as spiritual orientation but also as a marker of cultural heritage that directly impacts family dynamics (Jalaluddin, 2004). Religious diversity has historically played a complex role in Malaysia’s national development, creating both opportunities for social cohesion and challenges for family integration. While Putnam and Campbell (2010) observed in Western multicultural contexts that religious institutions often serve as sites of community organisation that strengthen social bonds while sometimes creating intergroup boundaries, the Malaysian context presents a more integrated approach where religious diversity within families is less common due to cultural marriage patterns. This distinction is crucial for understanding how religious appreciation operates within Malaysian family systems, where religious homogeneity within families is the norm rather than the exception, potentially creating stronger pathways between individual religious appreciation and family functionality.

Religious education in Malaysian schools varies significantly based on the type of educational institution, creating different pathways for religious appreciation development among adolescents. The national curriculum mandates Islamic education for Muslim students, while moral education is provided for non-Muslims (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). This dual-track approach, while reflecting Malaysia’s commitment to balancing religious instruction with multicultural sensitivities, creates distinct developmental trajectories for religious appreciation that may differentially impact family functionality across religious communities. Islamic education in Malaysian schools emphasises comprehensive development, aligning with Nizar’s (2002) description of Islamic teachings as encompassing “moral education, material and physical, spiritual, then social society to the universe” (Nurhuda, 2023, p. 361). Importantly, this holistic approach to religious education in Malaysia contrasts with the more

compartmentalised approaches found in Western contexts, suggesting that Malaysian adolescents may develop more integrated forms of religious appreciation that encompass family relationships as a core component.

The effectiveness of religious education in fostering religious appreciation that enhances family functionality finds support in both Malaysian and international research, though with important contextual differences. Research suggests that effective religious education can positively influence adolescent development. As Mohammadyari (2012) found, “spiritual intelligence increases parenting skills of parents and that in turn has enhanced children’s competence, self-regulation, psychosocial adjustment and school performance” (Rich et al., 2024, p. 367). While this finding from international research demonstrates the potential developmental benefits of religious education, its application to Malaysian adolescents requires consideration of how Malaysia’s structured religious education system may create more systematic pathways for developing religious appreciation that directly supports family functionality.

Theoretical frameworks for understanding religious and spiritual development during adolescence reveal both universal patterns and culture-specific variations that are particularly relevant to the Malaysian context. Several theoretical frameworks offer insight into this developmental process. Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development remain influential, suggesting that adolescents typically navigate the synthetic-conventional stage where religious beliefs become more personal but remain heavily influenced by significant others. However, in the Malaysian context where family religious homogeneity is common, this stage may be characterised by deepening rather than questioning of religious beliefs, potentially creating stronger connections between religious appreciation and family functionality. Erikson’s (1968) identity formation theory similarly positions adolescence as a critical period for integrating religious values into a cohesive sense of self. More recently, Denton and Flory’s (2020) relational spirituality framework, which emphasises how adolescents’ religious development occurs within social contexts, particularly family systems, aligns closely with Malaysian cultural patterns where family remains the primary context for religious socialisation throughout adolescence.

The factors influencing religious appreciation among adolescents demonstrate both universal patterns and Malaysian-specific characteristics that directly relate to family functionality. Multiple factors influence religious appreciation among adolescents. Among these factors, parental influence emerges as particularly significant across studies, but may be especially pronounced in the Malaysian context due to the cultural emphasis on family hierarchy and respect for elders. Boulis and Torgler (2023) note that “intrafaith couples that believe religion is important lowers the risk of dissolution for many couple types” (p. 299), suggesting that Malaysian parents, who predominantly form religiously homogeneous marriages, may provide particularly strong modeling of religious appreciation for their children. This creates a cycle of reinforcing parental religious commitment and adolescent religious appreciation that enhances family functionality.

Educational settings also play a crucial role, but the structured nature of religious education in Malaysia may foster more systematic development of religious appreciation compared to contexts where religious education is optional or less integrated. As asserted by Nurhuda (2023), “Islamic education has a great responsibility for the development, guidance, direction, and fostering of the potential of children so that they can play a role and function according to their nature” (p. 361). This assertion highlights how Malaysia’s structured religious education system may create more consistent pathways for cultivating religious appreciation that supports family functionality, in contrast to more variable approaches observed in other cultural contexts.

Peer influence represents another significant factor, though research indicates important cultural variations in its relative impact compared to family influence. Adolescents’ religious commitments often align with those of their friendship networks (Smith et al., 2019). However, the relative impact of peer influence versus parental guidance varies across cultural contexts, with collectivist societies like Malaysia, potentially demonstrating stronger family influence compared to more individualistic societies. This cultural pattern suggests that in Malaysia, religious appreciation developed through family socialisation

may likely be more stable and more directly connected to family functionality than in contexts where peer influence predominates.

Family functionality in Malaysian contexts reflects both universal patterns and culturally specific features that create particular pathways through which religious appreciation can enhance family relationships. Family functionality has been conceptualised through various models. The Circumplex Model proposed by Olson et al. (1979) emphasises cohesion, flexibility, and communication as core dimensions of family functionality. The McMaster Model (Epstein et al., 1983) identifies six domains: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control. While these Western-derived models provide useful frameworks, Malaysian family dynamics reflect both universal patterns and culturally specific characteristics that may create different pathways for religious appreciation to enhance family functionality. Traditional Malaysian families, regardless of religious background, tend to emphasise hierarchical structures, collective decision-making, and strong intergenerational bonds (Mohd Noor, 2018). However, as Ramayulis (1994) notes, the family is “defined as the smallest system of life in Islamic society or commonly referred to as the ummah because of restrictions on descent/lineage from the side of religious similarity” (Nurhuda, 2023, p. 361). This highlights how religious affiliation can shape family identity in ways that may create stronger connections between individual religious appreciation and overall family functionality in Malaysian contexts.

The relationship between religious practices and family cohesion demonstrates consistent patterns across cultural contexts but may be particularly pronounced in Malaysian families due to cultural and structural factors. The relationship between religious practices and family cohesion is well-documented across cultural contexts. However, comparative analysis reveals important variations in the strength and mechanisms of this relationship. Goetze-Morey and Cumming (2017) observe that “religiosity may facilitate meaningful conversations between parents and their children, and promote agreements about acceptable standards and behaviour, reducing parent-child conflict” (Rich et al., 2024, p. 367). While this finding demonstrates general patterns, research specifically addressing on Malaysian families indicates that religious practices often function as family rituals that strengthen relational bonds in ways that may be more systematic and intensive than in more individualistic cultural contexts. Jorgensen et al. (2016) found that “participation in religious practices were related to increased opportunities for both parents and their children to connect in similar meaningful ways” (Rich et al., 2024, p. 367). This finding is particularly significant in Malaysian contexts where religious practices are often embedded in daily family routines and major life transitions, creating multiple opportunities for religious appreciation to enhance family functionality.

However, important distinctions emerge regarding which aspects of religiosity most strongly support family functionality, with implications for understanding how religious appreciation operates in Malaysian contexts. Smith (2024) observes that “these linkages are stronger for religious attendance than for more personal forms of religiosity such as subjectively rated importance of faith or frequency of prayer” (p. 284), suggesting that communal religious practices may be particularly beneficial for family functionality. This finding is particularly relevant for Malaysian families, where communal religious practices often involve extended family networks and community participation, potentially creating broader social support systems that enhance family functionality beyond the immediate nuclear family.

Despite substantial research on religion and family dynamics globally, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific mechanisms through which religious appreciation influences family functionality among Malaysian adolescents. Despite substantial research on religion and family dynamics globally, there remains a significant gap in empirical studies examining the specific relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality among Malaysian adolescents. Most existing research has focused on either Western contexts, which feature different cultural patterns of religious socialisation, or adult populations where religious appreciation may operate through mechanisms distinct from those during adolescence. Furthermore, while previous studies have established correlations between religious involvement and family outcomes, they have rarely examined the specific mechanisms through which

religious appreciation might enhance family functionality, particularly in contexts like Malaysia, where religious identity is closely integrated with cultural and family identity.

This research gap is particularly significant given Malaysia's unique position as a religiously diverse society with a strong cultural emphasis on family relationships and systematic religious education. The intersection of these factors creates a distinctive context where religious appreciation may operate through different pathways and with varying intensity than in other cultural contexts. By addressing this research gap, the current study contributes to understanding how religious appreciation influences family functionality among Malaysian adolescents, with implications for educational policy, family counseling, and religious education across Malaysia's diverse faith traditions.

The conceptual framework underlying this study draws on the convergence of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to propose that religious appreciation serves as a mediating factor that enhances family functionality through multiple pathways. First, religious appreciation provides adolescents with shared values and communication frameworks that align with family religious traditions, facilitating better parent-child communication and reducing conflict. Second, religious appreciation connects adolescents to broader meaning systems that emphasise family relationships as spiritually significant, thereby increasing motivation to invest in family relationships. Third, religious appreciation developed through Malaysia's structured religious education system provides adolescents with specific skills and perspectives that support family harmony, including conflict resolution approaches, respect for authority, and commitment to collective well-being. Together, these theoretical pathways, supported by empirical evidence from both Malaysian and international contexts, suggest that religious appreciation should demonstrate a positive relationship with family functionality among Malaysian adolescents.

Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is tested:



**Fig 1.** Conceptual Framework

H1: Religious appreciation has a positive relationship with family functionality.

### 3. METHOD

The research employed a cross-sectional approach, as it enabled the investigator to integrate findings from academic literature on religious appreciation and family functioning, while utilising questionnaires as the primary data collection instrument. It is important to note that this study examines relationships between variables rather than causal effects, given its cross-sectional nature. This methodology facilitated accurate data collection, minimised bias, and enhanced the overall data quality (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

This research was conducted within Malaysia's educational framework. The survey instrument comprised four distinct sections: the first captured participants' demographic information, followed by religious appreciation assessment using modified items from existing research (Hatta, 1996), and the third measured family functioning through adapted items from scholarly literature (Olsen & Gorell, 2003). Each construct was measured using five items for religious appreciation and six items for family functioning. This research administered 300 surveys to high school students, with 250 valid responses ultimately included in the analysis. Purposive sampling was employed to target secondary school students across three educational institutions in Perak, with participant selection randomised within this purposive framework to enhance representativeness. All respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily and provided informed consent. For data analysis, the researcher used SmartPLS software version 3.0. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive analysis, ability to handle smaller sample sizes, and robustness with non-normally distributed data (Hair et al., 2017). This statistical tool allows for the simultaneous analysis of reflective and/or formative measurement models through path analysis (Hair et al., 2017).

#### 4. FINDING & DISCUSSION

The sample consisted of 250 secondary school students with a relatively balanced gender distribution (54.8% female, 45.2% male). The majority were Malay (99.2%), with minimal representation from Chinese and other ethnicities (0.4% each). This demographic homogeneity reflects the local educational context but limits the generalisability of the findings to Malaysia's broader, more diverse population. Age distribution aligned with the targeted secondary school demographic, predominantly 16-year-olds (41.6%). Regarding occupation and income, most respondents identified as self-employed (52.0%) or government-related workers (37.2%), with 68.8% earning RM1,500 or less per month. The results of the construct validity and reliability analysis indicate that the factor loading values for each item exceeded 0.7, religious appreciation ranged from 0.773 to 0.802, and family functional ranged from 0.726 to 0.797. These values demonstrate that the items for each construct meet the set validity and reliability analysis standards (Hair et al., 2017). Furthermore, each construct had a composite reliability value exceeding 0.80, religious appreciation (0.833) and family functional (0.873). This indicates that the measurement scales have high internal consistency (Hair et al., 2017).

The results of the convergent validity test (AVE) indicate that each construct exceeded 0.5, religious appreciation (0.625) and family functional (0.580). This demonstrates that the research constructs adequately explain the variance among the items (Hair et al., 2017). The results of the discriminant test show that the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) values for each construct are below the required critical value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). This indicates that the study constructs meet the set discriminant validity criteria (Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, the value of the variance inflation factor (VIF) test for relationship between the independent variable (religious appreciation) and the dependent variable (family functional) is 1.000. Since these values are below 5, the results confirm that the study data are free from serious collinearity (Hair et al., 2017). Overall, the results of the validity factor analysis confirm that the measurement instrument in this study meets the criteria of validity and reliability.

##### 4.1 Research Hypotheses Results

Table 1 presents the results of hypothesis testing for the direct effect model H1 (Religious Appreciation → Family Functional). The results are as follows: H1 confirms that religious appreciation has a significant positive relationship with family functionality ( $\beta=0.334$ ,  $t=6.459$ ), meaning H1 is accepted. This t-statistic value of 6.459 is well above the threshold for statistical significance, indicating a strong relationship between these variables. In terms of the strength of the model, religious appreciation has contributed  $R^2=10.5\%$  to the change in family functionality. Therefore, these results confirm that religious appreciation acts as an important predictor of family functionality among secondary school students in Malaysia. This finding suggests that higher levels of religious appreciation are associated with improved family functioning, though the relatively modest  $R^2$  value indicates that other factors not included in this model likely contribute to family functionality as well.

**Table 1.** Hypothesis Testing Results  $H_{1a}$ ,  $H_{1b}$ .

Hypothesis	Relationship of Variables	$\beta$	t-statistic	R2	Results
H1	Religious Appreciation → Family Functional	0.334	6.459	0.105	Approved

The t value determines the level of significance of a relationship, which is  $*t>1.69$  ( $p<0.05$ ), one-tailed (Hair et al. 2014; Henseler et al. 2009).

Continuing from the hypothesis testing above, Table 2 present the results of the scale effect size ( $f^2$ ) and the relevant prediction ( $Q^2$ ). The effect size analysis shows that the  $f^2$  values are 0.085 for Family Functional and 0.117 for Religious Appreciation, which are exceeding the 0.02 threshold (Hair et al., 2017). This confirms that the independent variable has a small to medium effect on the dependent variable. The evaluation of the relevant prediction of  $Q^2$  shows that the  $Q^2$  value for Religious Appreciation is 0.058, which is greater than 0, while Family Functional has a  $Q^2$  value of 0.000. This indicates that the Religious

Appreciation construct demonstrates predictive relevance for the Family Functional construct, albeit modest (Hair et al., 2017). The standard root mean residual (SRMR) value is within acceptable limits, indicating an appropriate model fit. The SSO and SSE values further support the analysis, with Religious Appreciation showing a difference between observed (SSO = 1590.000) and predicted (SSE = 1497.508) values, confirming its predictive capability in the model.

**Table 2.** Results of Effect Size Testing ( $f^2$ ) and Relevant Predictions ( $Q^2$ )

Construct	F2		Q2		SRMR
	Family Functional	SSO	SSE	$Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)$	
Religious Appreciation	0.117	1590.000	1497.508	0.058	0.085
Family Functional	-	954.000	954.000	0.000	

The study found a significant positive relationship between religious appreciation and family functionality among Malaysian secondary school students ( $\beta=0.334$ ,  $t=6.459$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), confirming that religious values contribute to family cohesion. This relationship explained 10.5% of the variance in family functionality, indicating that while religious appreciation is an important factor, other variables also play substantial roles in shaping family dynamics. The effect size ( $f^2=0.117$ ) and predictive relevance ( $Q^2=0.058$ ) further support a modest but meaningful influence of religious appreciation on family functionality.

Several mechanisms may explain this association. Religious teachings often emphasise respect, harmony, and family values, which can enhance family functioning. Shared religious practices may act as rituals that strengthen family bonds, facilitating communication and reducing conflict. These findings are aligned with theoretical frameworks such as Fowler's stages of faith development and Erikson's identity formation theory, which highlight adolescence as a critical period for integrating religious values into personal identity and family relationships. The relational spirituality framework also supports the bidirectional reinforcement between religious appreciation and family functionality.

Alternative explanations should be considered for the modest  $R^2$  value. It is possible that other factors such as parenting styles, communication patterns, socioeconomic stressors, and peer influences significantly affect family functionality but were not included in this model. Additionally, measurement limitations or social desirability bias may have attenuated observed relationships. Future research should explore these variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

The demographic homogeneity of the sample, predominantly Malay Muslim students, reflects the local educational context but limits generalisability to Malaysia's religiously diverse population. This context, however, offers insight into how Islamic religious appreciation specifically influences family functionality, given the strong emphasis on filial piety and family bonds in Islamic teachings. Future studies should include diverse religious groups to enable cross-religious comparisons. Socioeconomic factors also contextualise the findings. Lower to middle-income status and occupational patterns may influence how religious appreciation interacts with family resilience, either by providing coping resources or by introducing stressors that challenge family functioning.

The study's implications can be divided into theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the importance of religious appreciation in adolescent identity and family system development. Practically, they suggest that school-based religious education, counselling, and family interventions could leverage religious values to enhance family functionality. Curriculum developers and policymakers might consider integrating family relationship themes into religious education to strengthen these effects.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates a significant positive association between religious appreciation and family functionality among Malaysian secondary school students, highlighting religious values as an important factor in fostering healthy family dynamics during adolescence. Although religious appreciation accounts for a moderate portion of the variance in family functionality, it is clear that other social, economic, and

relational factors also contribute significantly. These findings underscore the value of integrating religious education and family relationship themes in school curricula, counseling programs, and therapeutic interventions to support adolescent development and family cohesion. Future research should extend to diverse religious groups and employ longitudinal and qualitative methods to deepen understanding of how religious appreciation interacts with broader family and social contexts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/FUNDING

The authors would like to thank the Geran Penyelidikan DKPU, USAS for supporting this research.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohd Lokman Sapiee conceptualised the key idea, performed literature search, data curation, formal analysis, and writing up the original draft. Ismail Naim Abdullah and Mohd Syarifuddin Jamaludin reviewing and editing the paper. Nurshahira Ibrahim supervised the research progress, providing guidance throughout the review work, formal analysis, communication with editor and editing the paper. Mohamad Irfan Mohamad Zabidi contributed to editing formatting the paper. Muhammad Shukri Mohd Khalil and Muhammad Rozaidi Ahmad Romil contribute reviewing and editing the paper. All authors have reviewed and approved the last version of the manuscript.

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