

Faith, Tolerance, and National Identity: Rethinking Character Education in a Multicultural Society

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Abstract

Keywords:
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National Identity;
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This study aims to investigate the impact of religious character on the development of students' social and national identities in higher education, encompassing tolerance, patriotism, politeness, nationalism, and cultural openness. The research employed a quantitative approach, involving an online survey of 1,025 students from three public universities in West Java. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings show that religious character significantly influences patriotic character ($\beta = 0.653$, $f^2 = 0.744$), tolerant character ($\beta = 0.317$, $f^2 = 0.134$), and polite character ($\beta = 0.132$, $f^2 = 0.028$). Patriotic character, in turn, has the most potent effect on nationalistic character ($\beta = 0.841$; $f^2 = 2.426$), which significantly influences culturally respectful character ($\beta = 0.558$). The model also confirms that the influence of religious character on nationalism and cultural openness is indirect, mediated through patriotic and nationalistic characters. These results highlight the sequential and integrative formation of national character, beginning with the internalization of spiritual values and extending to inclusive civic attitudes. The model makes a theoretical contribution to the character education discourse and supports the design of curricula that integrate religiosity and national values to address identity fragmentation in multicultural societies.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
Religiusitas;
Pendidikan Karakter;
Identitas Nasional;
Mahasiswa; PLS-SEM

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh karakter religius terhadap pembentukan karakter sosial dan karakter kebangsaan mahasiswa di perguruan tinggi, meliputi sikap toleran, patriotik, santun, nasionalistik, dan keterbukaan budaya. Penelitian dilakukan dengan pendekatan kuantitatif melalui survei daring yang melibatkan 1.025 mahasiswa dari tiga perguruan tinggi negeri di Jawa Barat. Data dianalisis menggunakan metode Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa karakter religius berpengaruh signifikan terhadap karakter patriotik ($\beta = 0.653$; $f^2 = 0.744$), karakter toleran ($\beta = 0.317$; $f^2 = 0.134$), dan karakter santun ($\beta = 0.132$; $f^2 = 0.028$). Karakter patriotik memiliki pengaruh paling kuat terhadap karakter nasionalistik ($\beta = 0.841$; $f^2 = 2.426$), yang pada gilirannya secara signifikan memengaruhi karakter ramah budaya ($\beta = 0.558$). Model ini juga menunjukkan bahwa pengaruh karakter religius terhadap nasionalisme dan keterbukaan budaya bersifat tidak langsung, dimediasi oleh karakter patriotik dan nasionalistik. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pembentukan karakter kebangsaan berlangsung secara berurutan dan integratif, dimulai dari nilai-nilai spiritual yang terinternalisasi hingga berkembang menjadi sikap kewargaan yang inklusif. Model ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dalam diskursus pendidikan karakter dan mendukung perancangan kurikulum yang mengintegrasikan nilai religiusitas dan kebangsaan untuk merespons fragmentasi identitas dalam masyarakat multikultural.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a key strategy in universities to foster ethical, resilient, and socially engaged graduates. Various initiatives, such as character-strength integration for academic-social adjustment (Grinhauz et al., 2024), reflective leadership education (Cohen de Lara et al., 2024), and hybrid leadership models (Brooks et al., 2024), have proven effective. Moreover, character education that incorporates moral exemplars and local wisdom has enhanced students' sense of purpose, integrity, and empathy (Maranges et al., 2024; Sakti et al., 2024).

Religiosity has also shown significant influence on student character, particularly in national and civic dimensions. Studies have linked religiosity with national pride and civic engagement, although it requires balancing with empathy to avoid exclusivism (Chrostowski, 2022; Verkuyten, 2018). Religious literacy and interfaith learning enhance tolerance (Wielzen et al., 2017), yet few studies have structurally explored how religious character shapes social and national identity in an integrated model.

Based on the description of previous studies, this research offers a theoretical development model by structurally measuring the influence of religious character on various social character dimensions, namely tolerant, patriotic, and polite traits, as well as its indirect influence on nationalistic and culturally respectful character through mediation paths. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative structural model, which places religiosity as the core exogenous construct and tests its influence empirically using PLS-SEM among 1,025 university students from three public institutions in West Java who have taken Islamic Religious Education (PAI) courses. This conceptual model is theoretically grounded in civic character theory and moral development models that link spiritual values to national identity through intermediary social traits.

Conversely, numerous studies have underscored the phenomenon of a decline in national pride among students and the pervasive influence of foreign cultures. Emilia's observations indicate a prevalent issue among students concerning their comprehension of the significance of state symbols, which is a crucial aspect in fostering robust national identification (Emillia, 2019). Concurrently, the study by Kustoyo and Aris reveals that students demonstrate a greater familiarity with foreign popular culture than with their own national cultural heritage (Aris et al., 2023; Kustoyo & Zunariyah, 2019). This condition is indicative of the contemporary challenges in shaping students' national character, while emphasizing the importance of a character education model rooted in religious values and contextualized to Indonesian culture.

To address this gap, this study examines the influence of religious character, both directly and indirectly, on tolerant, patriotic, polite, nationalistic, and culturally respectful character. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was used to test the strength of the relationships between variables in this model. This study is expected to provide conceptual contributions to the development of an integrative and empirical character education model, as well as serve as a reference in the formulation of policies and the development of character education curricula in higher education. By prioritizing a quantitative approach based on field data and the latest theories, this study has the potential to answer practical and theoretical challenges in shaping student character.

Based on the theoretical framework and identified research gaps, this study primarily focuses on examining how religious character influences the formation of students' social and national character. Specifically, it investigates the influence of religious character on students' tolerant, patriotic, and polite traits. The study also explores how patriotic character contributes to the development of nationalist attitudes

and functions as a mediating variable between religiosity and nationalism. Additionally, it examines the extent to which nationalist character affects students' tolerance, politeness, and openness to cultural diversity. Furthermore, the model investigates whether patriotic and polite characters influence culturally respectful behavior, and whether religious character indirectly shapes cultural openness through the sequential mediation of patriotic and nationalistic character.

With this approach, this study aims to build a more integrative understanding of the relationship between student characters and to address the need for a conceptual model of character education based on spirituality and nationalism. Therefore, several hypotheses are proposed, including the direct influence of religious character on social character, the influence of patriotic character on nationalism, and the influence of nationalism on the dimensions of tolerant, polite, and culturally respectful character. This model also anticipates the indirect influence of religious character on nationalistic and culturally respectful character through the aforementioned mediating pathways.

Hypothesis Development

Building upon the conceptual framework and empirical literature previously outlined, the following section elaborates on the theoretical rationale for each proposed hypothesis, systematically linking religious character with the development of social and national character traits among students.

Religious and Social Characteristics of Students

Religious character plays an important role in shaping the social character of students, such as tolerance, patriotism, and politeness. Several studies show that high levels of religiosity can strengthen character in various demographic groups, including students and adolescents (Ashfaq, 2022). In addition, religiosity is also associated with an increase in perceived social support, which in turn contributes to overall life satisfaction through the formation of a sense of belonging and community (Wong & Gan, 2022). However, religiosity can also give rise to negative social attitudes, such as increased stigma towards certain individuals, indicating that strong religious beliefs are not always directly proportional to social openness. (Wilandika et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, Islamic boarding school education, which internalizes multicultural values, has proven to foster tolerance among students (Maarif, 2019). In addition, local wisdom from ethnic groups also contributes to strengthening religious values that encourage the formation of patriotic and polite character. (Zahra & Al-Qadri, 2022). Overall, religiosity serves as a spiritual foundation that fosters social sensitivity and interpersonal ethics among students. Based on these findings, the hypotheses proposed are:

H1: Religious character has a positive and significant influence on tolerant character.

H2: Religious character has a positive and significant influence on patriotic character.

H3: Religious character has a positive and significant influence on polite character.

Patriotic Character as a Mediator of Nationalist Character

Patriotic character, which reflects love and commitment to the nation, can serve as a bridge between religious values and nationalism. Research shows that education emphasizing patriotic values can strengthen national identity and guide individuals toward stronger nationalistic attitudes (Zhai & Yan, 2022). The internalization of basic values such as cooperation and mutual respect has also been shown to encourage the simultaneous growth of patriotic and nationalistic character (Marzęcki, 2020). In the context of media, previous research has shown that animated films with themes of

struggle can foster nationalism and patriotism among young audiences (Dewi & Fathoni, 2023). However, it is important to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism: patriotism emphasizes positive and critical attachment to the state, while nationalism often carries connotations of superiority or exclusivity (Molina & Preddie, 2020). In fact, patriotic expressions in times of crisis or external threats can develop into nationalistic responses aimed at defending the nation's identity from perceived dangers (Zhai et al., 2023). Thus, patriotic characters reflect loyalty and serve as an important foundation for the formation of nationalism rooted in values, emotional experiences, and collective consciousness. The hypotheses proposed are as follows:

H4: Patriotic character has a positive and significant effect on nationalistic character.

H5: Religious character has an indirect effect on nationalistic character through patriotic character.

Nationalism as a Guide for Social Character

Nationalism is not only a reflection of pride in national identity, but also encourages tolerance, politeness, and respect for cultural diversity. In the context of multicultural education, inclusively instilled nationalism has proven capable of shaping open-mindedness and respect for differences, as demonstrated in research conducted in Islamic boarding schools (Maarif, 2019). The integration of nationalist values into the educational curriculum also plays an important role in enhancing students' sense of citizenship and social engagement. Schools or educational institutions that teach national identity help create a culture of discipline, respect for others, and concern for the environment – all of which form the foundation of strong social character (Lestari, 2022; Mahmud et al., 2022; Maulana et al., 2024). Other studies also indicate that character education aligned with national values significantly shapes students into socially responsible individuals who contribute positively to society (Retnasari et al., 2021; Widiatmaka et al., 2023). Thus, nationalistic character functions as a symbol of identity and as a driving force in the formation of social ethics and civility in a multicultural environment. Therefore, the hypotheses proposed are:

H6: Nationalistic character has a positive and significant effect on tolerant character.

H7: Nationalistic character has a positive and significant effect on polite character.

H8: Nationalistic character has a positive and significant effect on culturally respectful character.

Additional Pathways Based on Structural Models

Patriotic character has an important influence in shaping tolerant and culturally respectful character. Patriotic education has been identified as a key factor in shaping positive attitudes toward diversity and tolerance, where individuals with a strong sense of love for their country tend to have more open views toward multiculturalism and coexistence among ethnic groups. Patriotism instilled through education not only encourages collective spirit but also fosters social awareness and the ability to adapt in diverse social contexts (FAİZ & AVCI, 2020). Furthermore, cultural exchange that grows from patriotic sentiment has been shown to strengthen pride in one's nation and improve understanding between groups, thereby encouraging a friendly attitude toward other cultures. In the context of education, an emphasis on national identity can also foster positive perceptions of other cultures, which ultimately encourages the formation of a culturally respectful character that upholds the value of inclusivity (Vasileva & Miklyeva, 2024). Thus, patriotic character not only reflects loyalty to the nation but also

serves as an important foundation for building tolerant and appreciative attitudes toward cultural diversity.

H9: Patriotic character has a positive and significant influence on tolerant character.

H10: Patriotic character has a positive and significant influence on culturally respectful character.

H11: Polite character has a positive influence on culturally respectful character.

The Indirect Influence of Religious Character on Culturally respectful character

Religious character can influence culturally respectful character through the mediating role of patriotic and nationalistic character. Internalized religious values can foster a sense of love for one's country, which in turn strengthens national identity and an attitude of respect for cultural diversity. Individuals with strong religious character tend to exhibit moderate and tolerant attitudes, which in turn support the strengthening of national identity and appreciation of differences (Khalilurrahman et al., 2023; Munawir et al., 2023). In this context, religious character becomes the foundation that fosters patriotism, which further strengthens national identity and openness to other cultures. Research by Ma'arif emphasizes that multicultural education in a religious context can increase tolerance and appreciation for cultural diversity (Maarif, 2019). Similarly, Mawadda asserts that religious education that emphasizes values of appreciation for differences is essential for building harmonious and mutually respectful communities (Mawadda et al., 2024). A holistic educational framework – which combines religious teachings with national values – has proven effective in instilling a sense of belonging while encouraging acceptance of cultural differences (Daud et al., 2021; Nurlaili, 2023). Furthermore, social interactions rooted in religious character also contribute to strengthening intergroup relationships and reducing prejudice, thereby promoting the creation of a more tolerant and culturally friendly society (Retnasari et al., 2023). Thus, the final hypothesis proposed is:

H12: Religious character has an indirect effect on culturally respectful character through patriotic character and nationalistic character.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey method. Data collection techniques were carried out through the distribution of online questionnaires to active students from three state universities in West Java, namely the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), the Bandung State Polytechnic (POLBAN), and the Indonesia University of Education (UPI). A total of 1,025 students participated in the survey, with the following breakdown: 167 respondents from ITB, 639 respondents from POLBAN, and 219 respondents from UPI. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with the inclusion criteria being active students who were at least in their second semester and had taken or were currently taking Islamic Education (PAI) courses.

The research instrument was developed in the form of a closed-ended questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 5 means “strongly agree.” The questionnaire covered six main constructs: religious character, tolerant character, patriotic character, polite character, nationalistic character, and culturally respectful character. Each construct is measured using 4 to 10 indicators developed based on previous literature reviews and adapted to the context of student character in a university setting. Before being distributed widely, the instrument was first pilot-tested on 30 students to evaluate the clarity of the wording, content validity, and practicality of the questionnaire.

The data in this study were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach with the assistance of SmartPLS software version 3.2.9. The selection of the PLS-SEM method was based on several academic and technical considerations. First, the research model is complex, consisting of six latent constructs and more than ten causal relationships between variables, requiring an analysis technique capable of handling multiple paths simultaneously (J. Hair & Alamer, 2022; J. F. Hair et al., 2021). Second, PLS-SEM is more flexible with data that is not normally distributed, which is a common characteristic of perception-based survey data (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Third, this method is suitable for handling exploratory models aimed at developing or testing new conceptual frameworks, as in this study, which places religious character as the core construct in the formation of students' social and national character. Fourth, a large sample size (>500 respondents) is highly suitable for PLS-based modeling as it enhances the stability of estimates and the predictive power of the model (J. Hair & Alamer, 2022).

The analysis process was conducted in two main stages. The first stage was the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model), which aimed to test the validity and reliability of the constructs through a number of indicators, namely outer loading values (≥ 0.70), Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70), rho_A (≥ 0.70), Composite Reliability (CR ≥ 0.70), Average Variance Extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50), and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT ≤ 0.90). The second stage is the evaluation of the structural model (inner model), which aims to test the strength and significance of the relationships between constructs through indicators such as the Coefficient of Determination (R^2), Predictive Relevance (Q^2), Effect Size (f^2), and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF ≤ 5). Additionally, path significance tests were conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples and a significance level of 95% ($p < 0.05$). With this stepwise approach and strong justification, the use of PLS-SEM is deemed capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of the structure of relationships among variables and ensuring the validity and replicability of the developed model.

RESULTS

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated using outer loading, reliability, and validity criteria. All constructs showed strong convergent validity, with outer loadings exceeding the 0.7 threshold, and AVE values above 0.50. Reliability was confirmed by high Cronbach's Alpha, rho_A, and Composite Reliability (CR) values, all surpassing the 0.70 minimum standard. These results indicate that the indicators consistently and accurately reflect their respective latent constructs. Discriminant validity was also confirmed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), with all construct pairs showing values below the 0.90 threshold. This indicates that each latent construct is empirically distinct from others in the model. Overall, the measurement model meets all criteria for validity and reliability and is suitable for use in further structural modeling.

Table 1. Construct validity and reliability

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Religious character	0.881	0.887	0.919	0.739
Tolerant character	0.923	0.924	0.935	0.591
Patriotic character	0.932	0.936	0.944	0.680
Polite character	0.942	0.942	0.951	0.682

Nationalistic character	0.946	0.947	0.954	0.699
Culturally respectful character	0.946	0.948	0.954	0.675

The constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency and convergent validity, as indicated by Cronbach’s Alpha, rho_A, Composite Reliability (CR), and AVE values – all of which exceeded recommended thresholds (J. Hair & Alamer, 2022). These results confirm that the latent constructs are measured reliably and are appropriate for inclusion in the structural model.

Table 2. Discriminant validity

Construct	01_KR	02_KT	03_KP	04_KS	05_KN	06_KRB
01_KR						
02_KT	0.720					
03_KP	0.719	0.739				
04_KS	0.683	0.843	0.724			
05_KN	0.664	0.745	0.893	0.722		
06_KRB	0.611	0.725	0.796	0.679	0.862	

Note: KR = Religious character; KT = Tolerant character; KP = Patriotic character; KS = Polite character; KN = Nationalistic character; KRB = Culturally respectful character.

Based on the results of discriminant validity testing using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) value, all constructs in the model showed adequate discriminant validity, with HTMT values below the conservative threshold of 0.90. The HTMT values between constructs ranged from 0.611 to 0.893, which means that each construct was able to distinguish itself from other constructs empirically. According to Hair et al. (2022), an HTMT value below 0.90 indicates that each construct has good discriminant validity and there is no conceptual overlap between constructs.

Although there are several construct pairs with HTMT values close to the maximum limit – such as between patriotic character and nationalistic character (0.893), and between nationalistic character and culturally respectful character (0.862) – these values are still within the acceptable range, so the overall model is still considered to meet the discriminant validity criteria.

Structural Model

The structural model showed no issues of multicollinearity, with all VIF values falling below the threshold of 5 (J. Hair & Alamer, 2022). The R² values indicate moderate to strong explanatory power, particularly for nationalistic character (R² = 0.708), culturally respectful character (0.697), and politeness (0.664). Furthermore, all Q² values were above zero, confirming the model’s predictive relevance for out-of-sample estimation. These results collectively suggest that the structural model has both statistical adequacy and practical significance in explaining the development of students’ national and social character traits.

Table 3. F square

Effect	Original Sample (O)	P Values
Religious character -> Tolerant character	0.134	0.000
Religious character -> Patriotic character	0.744	0.000
Religious character -> Polite character	0.028	0.047
Tolerant character -> Polite character	0.386	0.000
Tolerant character -> Culturally respectful character	0.028	0.102
Patriotic character -> Tolerant character	0.024	0.071
Patriotic character -> Nationalistic character	2.426	0.000
Patriotic character -> Culturally respectful character	0.017	0.108
Polite character -> Culturally respectful character	0.002	0.685
Nationalistic character -> Tolerant character	0.078	0.003
Nationalistic character -> Polite character	0.067	0.003
Nationalistic character -> Culturally respectful character	0.269	0.000

In terms of the influence between constructs, the f^2 test (effect size) shows that the influence of patriotic character on nationalistic character is the most dominant with a value of $f^2 = 2.426$, which is categorized as a large effect. According to Hair et al. (2022), an f^2 value of 0.02 is considered small, 0.15 is moderate, and 0.35 is large. Additionally, the influence of religious character on patriotic character ($f^2 = 0.744$) and tolerant character on polite character ($f^2 = 0.386$) also indicate large effects, signifying a strong structural relationship. Conversely, some relationships, such as from polite character to culturally respectful character ($f^2 = 0.002$) and from patriotic character to culturally respectful character ($f^2 = 0.017$), have very small and insignificant effects, indicating a weak contribution to the construct. Overall, this structural model is considered good because it has significant relationships between variables, adequate predictive values, and no multicollinearity issues.

Table 4. Path coefficient

	Original Sample	T Statistics	P Values
Religious character -> Tolerant character	0.317	8.318	0.000
Religious character -> Patriotic character	0.653	28.906	0.000
Religious character -> Polite character	0.132	4.070	0.000
Tolerant character -> Polite character	0.549	13.687	0.000
Tolerant character -> Culturally respectful character	0.163	3.616	0.000
Patriotic character -> Tolerant character	0.197	3.822	0.000
Patriotic character -> Nationalistic character	0.841	64.959	0.000
Patriotic character -> Culturally respectful character	0.140	3.469	0.001
Polite character -> Culturally respectful character	0.039	1.051	0.294
Nationalistic character -> Tolerant character	0.338	6.305	0.000
Nationalistic character -> Polite character	0.219	6.265	0.000
Nationalistic character -> Culturally respectful character	0.558	13.117	0.000

Based on the results of the path coefficient test, all hypotheses in the model show a significant relationship except for one. The first to third hypotheses indicate that religious character significantly influences tolerant character ($\beta = 0.317$; $p = 0.000$), patriotic character ($\beta = 0.653$; $p = 0.000$), and polite character ($\beta = 0.132$; $p = 0.000$). The fourth and fifth hypotheses indicate that tolerant character significantly influences polite character ($\beta = 0.549$; $p = 0.000$) and culturally respectful character ($\beta = 0.163$; $p = 0.000$). Furthermore, patriotic character significantly influences tolerant character (H6; $\beta = 0.197$; $p = 0.000$), nationalistic character (H7; $\beta = 0.841$; $p = 0.000$), and culturally respectful character (H8; $\beta = 0.140$; $p = 0.001$). However, in Hypothesis 9, the influence of polite character on culturally respectful character was not significant ($\beta = 0.039$; $p = 0.294$). The last three hypotheses indicate that nationalistic character significantly influences tolerant character (H10; $\beta = 0.338$; $p = 0.000$), polite character (H11; $\beta = 0.219$; $p = 0.000$), and culturally respectful character (H12; $\beta = 0.558$; $p = 0.000$). These findings indicate that most of the paths in the model have strong and statistically significant relationships.

To support the interpretation of the path analysis, Figure 1 visually illustrates the full structural model and the hypothesized relationships between latent variables, as estimated using PLS-SEM.

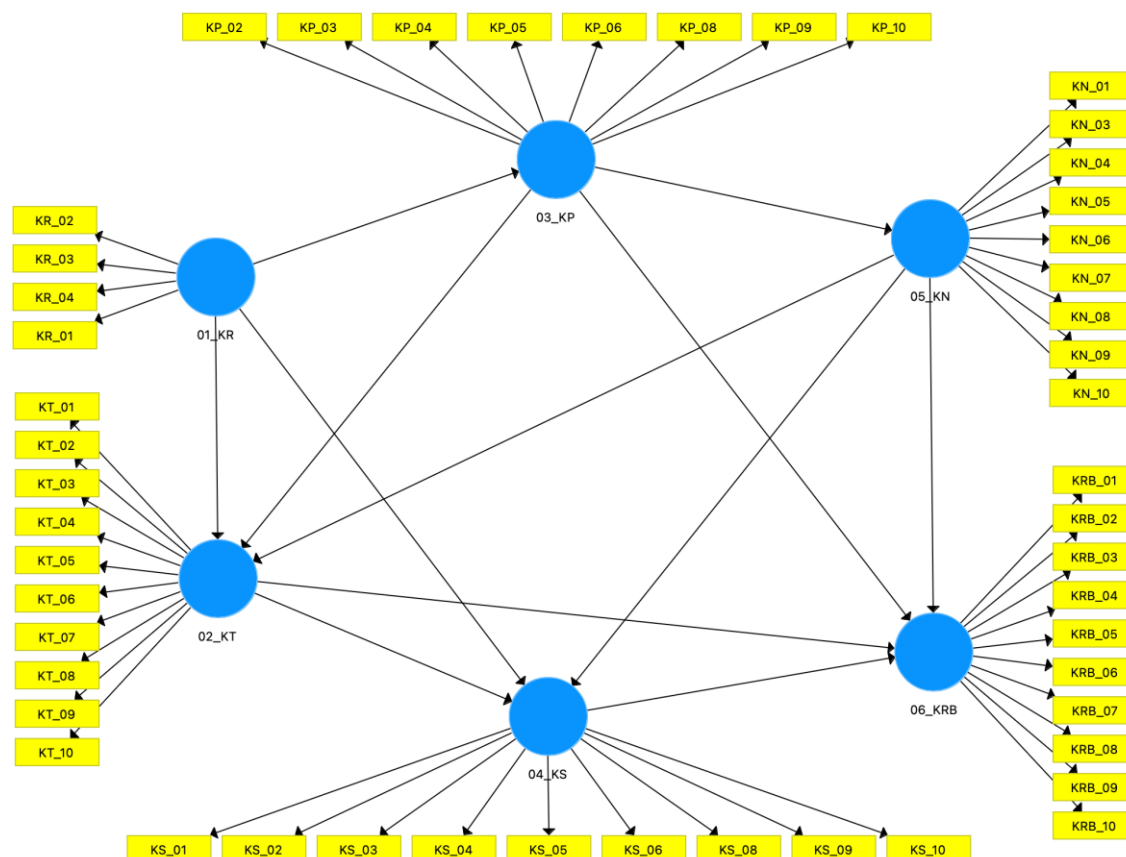


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model Depicting Hypothesized Relationships between Constructs
The diagram visualizes the path relationships tested via PLS-SEM, including religious character (KR), patriotic (KP), tolerant (KT), polite (KS), nationalistic (KN), and culturally respectful character (KRB)

Performance and Importance Map Visualization (IPMA)

In order to fortify the quantitative analysis, an additional procedure was implemented: the execution of an Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) on two primary target constructs, namely nationalistic character and culturally respectful character. The results of the IPMA visualization are shown in Figure 1 below:

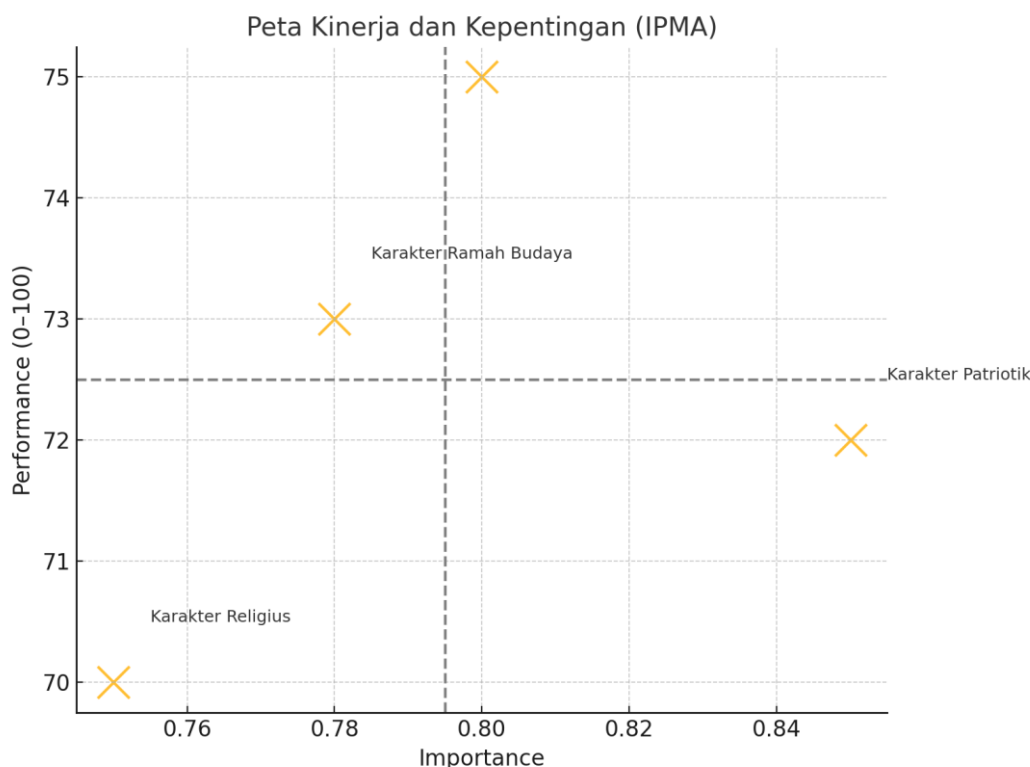


Figure 1. Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) of nationalism and culturally respectful character. The IPMA visualization indicates that patriotic character is of significant importance and performance values, suggesting its strategic role in shaping students' national character. Conversely, religious character exhibited a high level of importance but concomitant lower performance. This finding suggests the presence of an opportunity to enhance the integration of spiritual values in higher education practices.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the relationship between student character constructs using the PLS-SEM approach, focusing on the influence of religious character on five other main characters, namely tolerant, patriotic, polite, nationalistic, and culturally friendly. Empirical findings indicate that most of the relationships in this model are statistically significant, suggesting that the formation of student character is not partial or separate, but occurs within an interconnected system of values that influence each other simultaneously.

Specifically, religious character was found to have the strongest influence on patriotic character ($f^2 = 0.744$), indicating that the internalization of spiritual values significantly promotes a sense of love for the homeland and commitment to the nation. This finding is in line with previous literature that places religion as one of the moral foundations in fostering nationalism, defense of the country, and loyalty to national symbols. In addition, religious character also has a significant influence on tolerant character ($f^2 = 0.134$) and polite character ($f^2 = 0.028$), albeit to a more moderate extent. This shows that religiosity also shapes attitudes of openness to diversity and social ethics in interpersonal interactions, supporting the role of religiosity as a source of moral values that are not only private but also contribute to social harmony.

Interestingly, no direct influence of religious character on nationalistic character and culturally respectful character was found. However, through mediation analysis, it

was found that patriotic character and nationalistic character play an important role in bridging this influence. This indicates that religious values first shape loyalty to the nation (patriotism), which then strengthens national identity (nationalism), and ultimately encourages appreciation of cultural diversity (culturally respectful character). This model reflects a complex but logical dynamic, where spiritual character serves as the starting point for the formation of inclusive citizenship character.

Furthermore, the influence of patriotic character on nationalistic character is the most dominant in the entire model ($\beta = 0.841$; $f^2 = 2.426$), emphasizing the close relationship between love for the homeland and national identity. Patriotism is not only an emotional expression toward the nation but also a cognitive and affective foundation for the development of healthy nationalism. In this context, nationalism serves as an important predictor of culturally respectful character, where a strong national identity becomes a driving force for appreciation of other cultures – not as a tool of exclusivity but as a bridge toward openness and tolerance.

These findings highlight that nationalism, when rooted in inclusive values, does not lead to chauvinism or exclusivist attitudes, but rather strengthens cultural openness. In this study, nationalistic character significantly influences culturally respectful character ($\beta = 0.558$; $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that a sense of national pride can serve as a foundation for respecting cultural diversity. Instead of resisting external cultural elements, students with strong national identity appear to approach differences with a spirit of dialogue and coexistence. This suggests that national identity, when built on shared values and collective memory, facilitates mutual respect rather than cultural segregation.

In the Indonesian context, where ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity are deeply embedded in society, such a model of inclusive nationalism is particularly relevant. Nationalism should be understood not as an assertion of cultural superiority, but as a civic commitment to unity within diversity. Educational institutions, therefore, play a strategic role in shaping a version of nationalism that promotes empathy, intergroup understanding, and intercultural engagement. By situating nationalism as a cultural bridge rather than a boundary, this study offers an important perspective on how higher education can foster tolerant and culturally respectful graduates through national character formation.

Overall, this model supports the importance of an integrative approach in character education for students, where religiosity does not stand alone but serves as an initial force that permeates other dimensions of character. This reinforces the argument that character education must be grounded in spiritual values as the foundation for the formation of national and social character.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study provide significant theoretical contributions to the development of literature on character education in higher education, particularly in explaining how religious character can function as an exogenous construct that influences the development of other character dimensions. The finding that religious character has a strong influence on patriotic character, as well as a moderate influence on tolerant and polite character, reinforces previous theories that position religiosity as the primary foundation in the formation of national and social character identity.

Previous studies have confirmed that religiosity is not only related to personal dimensions but also influences social attitudes and national spirit. Several studies indicate that Islamic religious education plays a significant role in shaping students'

religious character, which in turn impacts the emergence of patriotism and social responsibility (Astuti et al., 2024; Djollong & Rasyid, 2018; Suhendar et al., 2022). This is in line with other studies that state that religious values are closely related to the strengthening of patriotic character among the younger generation (Puspitasari, 2016; Rizkiyah & Fatonah, 2024).

Additionally, the relationship between religious character and tolerant character found in this study is consistent with Putra's findings, which indicate that high levels of religiosity encourage tolerant attitudes toward differences, including religious, cultural, and political views (Putra & Rohmatika, 2021). However, although religiosity can encourage positive attitudes toward other groups, its effects are complex and influenced by other variables such as age and city size (Polak & Schuster, 2023). In the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, the relationship between religiosity and tolerance is crucial in supporting social integration and preventing intergroup conflict.

The influence of religious character on polite character also reinforces the argument that religious values can shape students' social ethics. Polite character is a manifestation of religious values embedded in individuals, especially when these values are applied in campus social life and in the digital environment. All religions teach politeness, compassion, and love for others, so that a person's piety is reflected in their social behavior that mirrors religious values (As'at Patilima et al., 2023). This finding affirms that character impressions are not only formed through external social norms but also by spiritual values that are consciously internalized.

Interestingly, this study did not find a direct influence of religious character on nationalistic character and culturally respectful character. However, these results do not necessarily negate the relationship between religiosity and the two constructs. Rather, this opens up room for interpretation that nationalistic and culturally respectful character can be formed through indirect channels, such as through the strengthening of patriotic or tolerant character first. Instilling positive and inclusive religious attitudes can shape students' behavior to be more open to differences, especially in terms of religion and culture (Anandari, 2024; Ledang, 2016). Instilling religious understanding with an emphasis on differences helps students develop an inclusive character that supports openness to cultural diversity.

From a developmental theory perspective, these findings also indicate that religiosity can function as a background variable that influences a number of other aspects across constructions. In a social psychology perspective, this leads to an understanding that spiritual values can shape students' frameworks of thinking, social perceptions, and prosocial behavior. Various recent studies have found that religiosity has a negative relationship with academic anxiety, meaning that students with higher levels of religiosity tend to experience lower academic anxiety (Rohmadani & Winarsih, 2019; Roy Madoni & Mardiyah, 2021; Ukhtia et al., 2016). This suggests that religiosity can play a role in improving students' psychological well-being, which in turn can support their academic achievement. Thus, religiosity not only influences social behavior but also has a positive impact on intellectual ability and academic achievement. Students with higher levels of religiosity tend to have better academic achievement (Marliani, 2016).

More broadly, this study underscores the importance of a holistic approach in character education at higher education institutions. Character is not a partially formed or instant entity but the result of interactions between internal values (such as religiosity) and the social environment. Therefore, an integrative and contextual character education model is essential to produce graduates with strong, resilient, and relevant character to meet the challenges of the times.

Consequently, this study contributes to the theoretical framework of character education research by proposing a novel conceptual model in which religiosity is situated as a foundational element that influences other dimensions of students' character development. These findings underscore the significance of religiosity not only as a moral value but also as a social and cultural force that mediates the formation of a holistic and multidimensional character identity in higher education.

Practical Implication

The results of the importance-performance map analysis (IPMA) in this study indicate that the two main target constructs, namely nationalistic character and culturally respectful character, have high importance and performance values. These values are primarily influenced by patriotic and religious characters. These findings have strategic application value and can be used as a basis for developing policies and programs for character building among university students.

For curriculum developers, these results indicate the urgency of designing learning programs that not only teach religious values normatively, but also integrate them transdisciplinarily with national and local cultural values. This integrative model aligns with Arthur's proposition that character education in universities should cultivate moral, civic, and intellectual virtues concurrently to produce graduates who are proficient in their academic disciplines and possess social and national responsibility (Arthur, 2024). The implementation of such a curriculum model has the potential to enhance social cohesion among students from diverse backgrounds.

For lecturers and educators, the results of this study emphasize the need for a pedagogical approach based on experience, dialogue, and reflection on values. Learning is not enough to be merely cognitive; it must also touch on the affective and conative domains through the exploration of religious and national values in the context of real life. The findings of Metcalfe et al. indicate that the contribution of religious studies to character formation becomes significant when delivered in a reflective and applicable manner (Metcalfe et al., 2024). Therefore, lecturers need to create inclusive discussion spaces, facilitate encounters across values, and provide opportunities for students to internalize the meaning of spirituality and nationalism in contexts relevant to their reality.

In the context of student activities, the results of the IPMA emphasize the importance of transforming spirituality from mere ritual practices into concrete social attitudes and actions. Character building through mentoring, religious studies, and leadership training should be directed toward strengthening nationalism and appreciation for cultural diversity. Tanz's findings show that when spiritual values are integrated into the institutional culture of education, a learning environment is created that encourages holistic character growth (Tanzi, 2024). In the Indonesian context, it is important for religious student organizations to become inclusive and dialogical forums for development, which not only strengthen religious identity but also encourage tolerance and cultural openness.

For policymakers at the institutional and national levels, the results of this study support the need to develop character education policies that emphasize cross-value learning within a framework of religious moderation. A study by Mukhibat et al. (2024) suggests that higher education must become a forum for dialogue between groups and cultures in order to promote inclusive and tolerant attitudes. In this context, culturally respectful character cannot be separated from the strengthening of basic values such as empathy, respect for differences and a spirit of togetherness. In addition, institutional

policies are needed to promote reflective and personalized religious education practices, as suggested by Dzofir and Mediawati, who state that intensive and personalized approaches to religious education have proven to be more effective in shaping sustainable moral values (Dzofir, 2020; Mediawati, 2023).

Thus, the results of the IPMA, which place religious character as a construct of high importance for patriotic and tolerant character, indicate that spiritual values have great transformative power in shaping the national and social character of students. Therefore, character education in higher education needs to position religiosity not only as a normative identity, but also as a social capital that shapes students' responses to diversity, conflict, and the dynamics of national life. These findings provide strategic directions that efforts to strengthen students' character in higher education should focus on developing religious and patriotic values as a foundation for a strong nationalistic and culturally respectful character. This is not only relevant to the local context in Indonesia, but can also be used as a reference in the development of global character education based on spiritual values and universal humanity.

Based on the results of this study, it is important for higher education institutions to formulate policies for students' character development based on the integration of religious and national values. One strategic step is to develop an integrated character education module that combines PAI, Pancasila education, and co-curricular activities with a transdisciplinary approach. These modules can be used as a reference for lectures, mentoring, and student leadership training that emphasize the values of tolerance, patriotism, and cultural appreciation.

In addition, institutions need to develop guidelines for evaluating student character based on narrative and reflective assessments, not just cognitive ones. To support this, training programs should be developed for faculty members and student affairs advisors to enhance their ability to integrate religious-national values into the learning and mentoring process. At the national level, these findings underscore the urgency of developing character education policies that position religiosity as a cultural and social strength, not just a personal identity. Thus, character education in higher education can serve as a vanguard in nurturing national identity and addressing value fragmentation in the era of globalization.

This study offers a theoretical novelty by structurally linking religious character to national identity through intermediary constructs such as patriotism and tolerance. Unlike previous studies that often treat these elements in isolation, the model proposed in this study presents a sequential and integrated framework that reflects the layered formation of character—starting from internalized spiritual values and extending toward civic and intercultural attitudes.

Similar concerns over national identity and civic character have been reported in various countries. In Poland, religious education has been found to shape civic participation and attitudes toward pluralism (Chrostowski, 2022). In the United Kingdom, reflective and values-based character education is promoted to counteract cultural fragmentation and disaffection among youth (Metcalf et al., 2024). These insights support the global relevance of the present model, particularly in multicultural societies facing identity fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a critical finding that could not have been assumed before the empirical test: religious character has the most decisive influence on patriotic character ($\beta = 0.653$; $f^2 = 0.744$), which in turn becomes the most dominant predictor of nationalistic character ($\beta = 0.841$; $f^2 = 2.426$). This sequential linkage underscores that religious values, when internalized, provide a solid foundation for love of country and civic responsibility. Surprisingly, the effect of religiosity on national identity is not direct, but mediated powerfully through patriotism. Moreover, nationalistic character significantly shapes students' culturally respectful behavior ($\beta = 0.558$), showing that national pride enhances, rather than restricts, openness to cultural diversity.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the discourse on character education by offering a structural, integrative model that connects internal spiritual values to national identity through intermediary social characters. Unlike previous studies that treat religiosity, patriotism, or tolerance in isolation, this study proposes a comprehensive framework rooted in civic character theory and supported by structural equation modeling. The model affirms some earlier findings (e.g., the role of religiosity in prosociality) but also challenges the assumption that nationalism is exclusivist. Instead, it reframes nationalism as a driver for intercultural appreciation in plural societies, providing a fresh perspective in the global discussion on inclusive citizenship.

Despite its theoretical contribution, this study has several limitations. The sample is limited to 1,025 students from three public universities in West Java, which may not reflect the full diversity of Indonesia's socio-cultural landscape. The cross-sectional design and use of self-report surveys may introduce self-selection bias, particularly among more religiously engaged students. Future research should consider expanding the sample to include individuals from diverse educational levels, regions, and cultural backgrounds, and adopt mixed-methods approaches to enhance the interpretation. Such developments would help policymakers formulate more context-sensitive strategies for fostering national character and cultural openness through education.

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