



Moral Emotion and Moral Identity on Moral Judgement Maturity Among Malaysian Secondary School Students

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Abstrak

Dalam persiapan menghadapi tantangan dunia nyata dan kehidupan setelah sekolah, penilaian moral merupakan keterampilan penting di kalangan siswa sekolah menengah Malaysia. Memahami faktor-faktor pendorong moral yang berkontribusi terhadap pengembangan kematangan penilaian moral sangatlah penting. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara komponen motivasi moral—khususnya, emosi moral (rasa bersalah dan malu) dan identitas moral—dan penilaian moral di kalangan siswa sekolah menengah Malaysia. Sampel dari 393 siswa (170 laki-laki, 223 perempuan; M usia = 16 tahun) dari negara bagian Selangor berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Pemodelan persamaan struktural (SEM) digunakan untuk menganalisis hubungan prediktif antara konstruksi ini. Temuan ini mengungkapkan korelasi positif antara emosi moral, identitas moral, dan penilaian moral. Khususnya, rasa bersalah dan malu, serta identitas moral, ditemukan berhubungan secara signifikan dengan kematangan penilaian moral siswa. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa kecenderungan untuk mengalami rasa bersalah dan malu, serta meningkatnya identitas moral, memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk kematangan penilaian moral siswa sekolah menengah, yang berpotensi mendorong perkembangan moral mereka. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi wawasan berharga ke dalam mekanisme yang menghubungkan emosi dan identitas dengan kematangan penilaian moral, menawarkan implikasi yang signifikan bagi bidang psikologi moral.

Kata kunci: Penilaian Moral, Penalaran Moral, Emosi Moral, Identitas Moral, Siswa Sekolah Menengah

Abstract

In preparation for the challenges of the real world and life after school, moral judgement stands as a pivotal skill among Malaysian secondary school students. Understanding the moral motivating factors contributing to the development of moral judgement maturity is imperative. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the relationships between moral motivation components—specifically, moral emotion (guilt and shame) and moral identity—and moral judgement among Malaysian secondary school students. A sample of 393 students (170 males, 223 females; M age = 16 years) from Selangor state participated in the study. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was utilised to analyse the predictive associations between these constructs. The findings revealed positive correlations among moral emotion, moral identity, and moral judgement. Notably, both guilt and shame, as well as moral identity, were found to be significantly related to students' moral judgement maturity. These results suggest that the tendency for experiencing guilt and shame, along with a heightened moral identity, play pivotal roles in shaping the moral judgement maturity of secondary school students, potentially fostering their moral development. This study contributes valuable insights into the mechanisms linking emotions and identity to moral judgement maturity, offering significant implications for the field of moral psychology.

Keywords: Moral Judgement, Moral Reasoning, Moral Emotion, Moral Identity, Secondary School Students

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moral judgement in adolescence is regarded as an important period to develop moral maturity in facing social challenges (Escorza & Ornelas, 2018; Schipper & Koglin, 2021). Particularly for secondary school students, moral judgement serves as a pivotal indicator of their moral development. As elucidated by previous study formal operations of moral judgement and analytical thinking only emerge during adolescence (Piaget, 1965), a high level of moral judgement predominantly arises during this developmental. Adolescents begin to cultivate abstract thinking abilities, including generating assumptions or expectations on any moral dilemmas (Archer et al., 2013; Ariffin, 2019). They gain proficiency in perceiving the world abstractly, logically, and hypothetically, along with the capacity for

metacognition—reflecting on their thought processes, which manifests in their behaviour. As moral judgement evolves alongside age, individuals' moral principles also develop. Given the diverse values prevalent in contemporary society, secondary schools place great emphasis on nurturing students' moral development.

Therefore, to prepare adolescents to face real-world challenges and life after school, moral judgement is upheld as a crucial skill for adolescent students in Malaysia. The Malaysian education system integrates moral judgement skills from preschool through higher education. Initiatives such as the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025 and curriculum reformation emphasise moral development and 21st-century skills to nurture students' moral judgement, critical thinking, and reasoning abilities (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Kossen & Ooi, 2021; Wong et al., 2013). This integration signifies a transformative shift in education, as moral judgement skills afford students the opportunity to practically explore and resolve issues or problems, anticipate future consequences of their decisions, and exhibit behaviour as required. In the pursuit of cultivating secondary school students with balanced moral judgement, it is imperative to consider other moral motivating factors.

Moral emotion of shame and guilt play crucial roles in shaping moral judgement among adolescents, encouraging adherence to societal norms (Kaplan & Tivnan, 2014; Tangney et al., 2002). Shame, involving negative self-evaluation, and guilt, tied to remorse and the desire for amends, prompt reflection and serve as prevention mechanisms in decision-making (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017; Tangney & Dearing, 2007). However, the Malaysian education system often overlooks the regulatory function of negative emotions, focusing predominantly on positive ones. To foster balanced emotional development, both positive and negative emotions must be acknowledged, as experiences with both significantly impact an individual's moral judgement process which leads to a moral behaviour (McAuliffe, 2019; Rincón-Flores et al., 2020).

The theoretical framework offers insights into the relationship between guilt, shame, and moral judgement (Lewis, 1971; Tangney et al., 2002). While guilt holds greater moral significance and predicts moral sensitivity more positively, shame also guides evaluations and judgements regarding moral decisions (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017; Tangney & Dearing, 2007). Previous study revealed that the proneness of guilt rather than shame exhibits a more positive inclination in predicting moral sensitivity - an integral facet in the construction of moral judgement (Zhou & Xiang, 2022). However, other study deduced that a heightened proneness of shame also plays a pivotal role in guiding individuals' evaluations and judgements regarding moral decisions (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017). This is attributed to the notion that experiencing shame renders individuals more attuned to both their own self-perception and others' perceptions of them.

On the other hand, moral identity emerges as a significant motivational force in moral judgement, serving as a mechanism for self-regulation. As adolescents mature, they integrate moral norms into their identity, merging morality with their sense of self. This developmental process, influenced by changes in moral identity, impacts how adolescents structure their moral judgement, reflecting a shift towards increased responsibility and a willingness to act as moral agents for themselves and others (Baker et al., 2020; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). This emphasis is indirectly echoed in the Malaysian Ministry of Education's delineated Student Profiles, aimed at cultivating well-rounded secondary school students equipped with 21st-century skills (Schlenker et al., 2009; Tepe & Karakulak, 2023). Theoretically, moral identity encompasses elements of the ideal self and serves as a guiding principle for ideal judgements and behaviour. Individuals with a robust moral identity tend to act in accordance with their sense of what is right and make sound moral decisions (Ding et al., 2010; Schlenker et al., 2009). As moral identity develops moral judgement, it also reinforces one's inclination act morally.

Numerous empirical studies have explored the predictive power of the moral identity construct in understanding the development of moral judgement (Ding et al., 2010; Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016; Patrick et al., 2018). For example, previous study found that a strong moral identity facilitates rational decision-making among adolescents, fostering a propensity to act in accordance with moral principles (Patrick et al., 2018). Adolescents who possess a robust moral identity demonstrate heightened sensitivity to societal norms and moral values. Additionally, the robust association between moral identity and moral responsibility reinforces individuals' moral judgement, guiding them towards decisions that align with prevailing societal norms (Schipper et al., 2023; Xu & Ma, 2016). Hence, we hypothesised that high levels of moral identity are significantly correlated with increased moral judgement and significantly associated with moral judgement among secondary school students.

While prior literature has established a positive relationship between guilt, shame, and moral behaviour, the role of these emotions in moral judgement remains debated (Roos et al., 2014). Similarly, the precise mechanism by which moral identity associates with moral judgement requires further elucidation. Given these gaps in understanding, further examination of moral judgement maturity among secondary school students is warranted. Thus, this study aims to explore the underlying mechanisms of moral emotion (guilt and shame) and moral identity on the moral judgement of secondary school students, shedding light on the self-regulatory and self-control functions in the formation and development of moral judgements.

2. METHODS

This study utilised a quantitative approach to investigate the relationships among moral judgement, moral emotion (specifically guilt and shame proneness), and moral identity among secondary school students. The research design involved correlational and causal effect (ex post facto) designs (Hair et al., 2019).

Participants were recruited using a multistage cluster sampling method from secondary schools in Selangor State, Malaysia. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Educational Planning and Policy Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education (MoE) Malaysia, the Selangor State Education Department (JPN), and respective school managements. The final sample included 170 males and 223 females (Mage = 16.0 years). The sample represented various ethnicities, predominantly Malay (81.2%), followed by Indian (15.3%), Chinese (2.0%), native people of Sabah and Sarawak (1.3%), and Indonesian (0.3%). These instruments were used in this study to measure each construct.

Descriptive analyses were used to analyse the level of moral judgement, moral emotion of shame and guilt and moral identity along with collinearity diagnostics. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used in this study to enable the examination of correlation and path analysis. The analytical procedures were executed using SPSS version 28 (IBM Corporation, 2019) and AMOS application version 28 (Arbuckle, 2013). The goodness of the model fit was examined by using the Chi-Square statistic index (χ^2 or CMIN; $p < 0.05$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.08), Relative Chi-Square and degrees of freedom ($\chi^2 / df < 5.0$), Standardised Root Mean Residual (SRMR < 0.08), Comparative Fit Index (CFI ≥ 0.90), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI ≥ 0.90), and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) (Hair et al., 2022). All possible direct paths in the model were estimated.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The examination of the normality of the study variables revealed that all followed a normal distribution. To assess the relationship between the individual constructs, the validity and reliability of the constructs were first evaluated. To establish convergent validity and construct reliability, we examined the standardised factor loadings, construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct. Factor loadings were higher than 0.5 and not exceeding 1.0. The results presented in [Table 1](#) corroborate the adequate validity and reliability of the constructs within the model, thereby establishing the structural model.

Table 1. Diagonal Matrix of Research Model's Validity and Reliability

Construct	Squared correlation (r^2) between constructs			
	CR	ME	MI	MJ
Moral Emotion (ME)	0.793	0.491		
Moral Identity (MI)	0.701	0.181	0.548	
Moral Judgement (MJ)	0.883	0.074	0.152	0.432

Note: CR = Construct Reliability; Average Variance Extracted (AVE) in the diagonal (highlighted); Squared correlation coefficients are presented below the diagonal.

As shown in [Table 1](#), CR for each construct was above 0.7, and the AVE is above 0.4. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining inter-construct correlations and it does not exceed 0.90 and the value of AVEs were greater than squared correlation (r^2) value. According to the criteria outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981), an AVE value surpassing 0.4 is deemed acceptable if the CR value for that specific construct exceeds 0.7. Hence, all constructs exhibit adequate convergent validity.

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among the primary study variables are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

Construct	M	SD	1	2
1 Moral Emotion	5.27	0.87		
2 Moral Identity	4.32	0.87	0.43**	
3 Moral Judgement	67.51	13.73	0.36**	0.42**

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; $n = 393$; ** = $p < 0.01$

As shown in [Table 2](#), secondary school students showed higher levels of guilt and shame proneness, moral identity and moral judgement maturity. Bivariate correlations demonstrated significant associations among both the observed and latent variables, indicating their interrelatedness. Specifically moral emotion of guilt and shame and moral identity were positively correlated with moral judgement. Thus, Hypothesis 1 and 3 were supported.

The hypothesised model demonstrated a good fit with the data: $n = 393$, χ^2 (df, p) = 13.399(11, 0.00), χ^2 /df = 1.218, RMSEA = 0.024, SRMR = 0.023, CFI = 0.997, TLI = 0.993, and AIC = 47.399. As indicated in [Table 3](#) and [Figure 1](#).

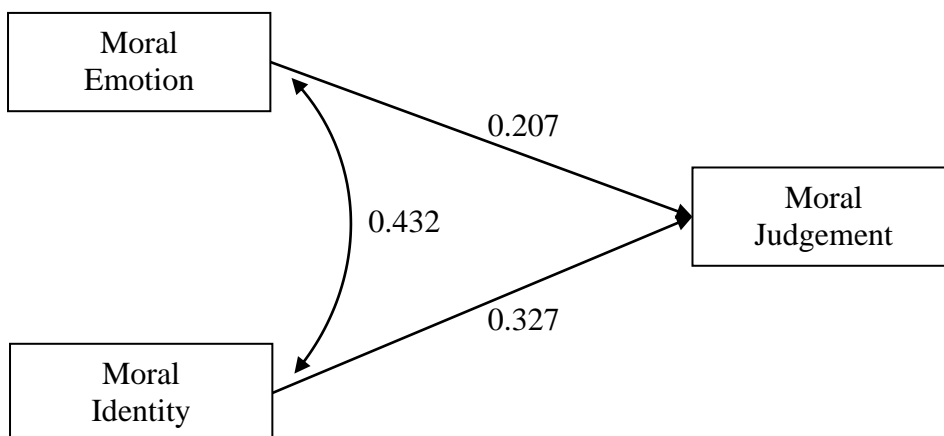


Figure 1. Output of the Research Model

Table 3. Direct Pathways from Moral Emotion and Moral Identity to Moral Judgement

Construct	B	SE	Beta	CR	p
Outcome = Moral Judgement					
Moral emotion	3.825	1.204	0.207	3.176	0.001
Moral Identity	7.885	1.999	0.327	3.944	0.000
$R = 0.458$ $R^2 = 0.21$					

Note: $n = 393$; Outcome = outcome measure; B = Unstandardised Estimates; SE = Standard Error; Beta = Standardised Estimates; CR = Coefficient Ratio; p = significant value ($p < 0.05$).

Base on Figure 1 and Table 3, the findings revealed a significant and positive relationship between moral emotions of guilt and shame and moral judgement ($\beta = 0.207$, $SE = 1.204$, $p = 0.001$). Similarly, moral identity also exhibited a significant and positive association with moral judgement ($\beta = 0.327$, $SE = 1.999$, $p = 0.000$). These outcomes suggest that both moral emotions and moral identity directly impact the maturity of moral judgement among secondary school students. Consequently, Hypotheses 2 and 4 received support in this study. Through the incorporation of moral emotions and moral identity in the model, the explained variance for moral judgement accounted for 21%.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the morally significant factors contributing to the development of moral judgement maturity among secondary school students. The study findings reveal that moral emotion of guilt and shame and moral identity, are positively related to secondary school students’ moral judgement. It is also proven that both constructs showed some degree of predictive power on students’ moral judgements. Subsequently, all four hypotheses tested in this received support. The theory-based hypothesised model tested and showed that the incorporation of moral emotions and moral identity in the model explained the variance for moral judgement for 21%.

One notable aspect of this research is the exploration of the relationship between moral emotions, specifically guilt and shame proneness, and moral judgement among secondary school students. While prior research has suggested negative associations between these emotions and moral judgement (Blythin et al., 2020; Kernan & Sullins, 2014), our results reveal positive correlations, highlighting a previously underexplored aspect of moral development. These results align with other studies demonstrating positive correlations between the moral emotions of guilt and shame and moral judgement (Han et al., 2019; Zhou

& Xiang, 2022). For instance, previous study found that experiences of guilt among secondary school students in China prompted efforts at redemption, fostering intentions to cooperate, heightened sensitivity to moral situations and increased willingness to make decisions conducive to self-improvement (Zhou & Xiang, 2022). Similarly, other study found that elevated levels of shame among high school students associated with their ethical decision-making and predicted moral judgements, serving as an internal check mechanism that facilitates reflection and prompts corrective actions in line with societal norms (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017). This feedback mechanism encourages reflective moral judgement and facilitates corrective actions in line with societal norms, emphasizing the importance of balanced self-regulation in ensuring that guilt and shame lead to constructive outcomes. Aligned with theoretical frameworks, these emotions not only foster self-awareness and reflection but also act as deterrents against immoral decisions, motivating individuals to align their judgements with ethical standards (Hooge et al., 2010). Consequently, this study offers valuable insights into how the self-regulatory functions of guilt and shame empower secondary school students to engage in balanced moral decision-making.

Moreover, moral identity is significantly related and directly associated with secondary school students' moral judgement. Adolescent students who were more likely to have a strong moral identity showed high levels of moral judgement maturity. These results were also in line with previous findings (Paramita et al., 2022; Schipper et al., 2023; Schipper & Koglin, 2021; Xu & Ma, 2016). This shows that moral identity emerges as another key factor that contributes to filling this gap and enhancing students' moral judgement maturity. For example, previous study found that adolescents with a strong moral identity can consider moral dimensions in moral situations and prioritise moral issues over other issues (Schipper & Koglin, 2021). Later, other study also found that Germany high school students' moral judgement was more rational and mature in dangerous situations with a strong moral identity drive in them (Schipper et al., 2023). Another study suggests that moral identity had a positive relationship on young adults' ethical judgement (Paramita et al., 2022). These results suggest that the sense of responsibility increases in line with the student's moral identity, which in turn morality becomes an important oneself and identity. Thus, it increases students' sense of responsibility to make moral judgements in the decision-making process. This study implies that a strong moral identity in students enables them to control and guide themselves towards moral goals consistently and try to maintain their identity as moral individuals in their moral judgements.

The current study offers several distinct advantages over prior research on moral emotion (specifically guilt and shame), moral identity, and moral judgement. Firstly, it integrates three moral domains: cognitive, emotional, and identity within a single model, providing a comprehensive framework for examining moral development. Secondly, it employs a robust measure of moral judgement, the SRM-SFO, known for its strong psychometric properties. Lastly, while previous studies predominantly focused on the negative impacts of guilt and shame on moral development, this research contributes by elucidating their potential positive association on moral judgement.

However, despite the contributions of this study, several limitations necessitate consideration. Firstly, the sample is limited to 16-year-old secondary school students from a single state in Malaysia, thus restricting the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. Secondly, the absence of demographic variables in the analysis limits the exploration of potential moderating effects. Future research could benefit from examining variations in moral emotion, identity, and judgement across different age groups, genders, and ethnicities. Lastly, the cross-sectional design precludes establishing causal relationships among the constructs. To address this limitation, future studies should employ longitudinal

designs to elucidate the directional pathways between moral emotion, moral identity, and moral judgement.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of moral judgement as crucial skill for secondary school students and can be improved through moral motivating factors such as the moral emotions of guilt and shame, and moral identity, in enhancing the development of moral judgement maturity among secondary school students within the Malaysian educational context. Despite the negative valence associated with these emotions, empirical evidence highlights their influential role in shaping students' moral judgement. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the propensity towards experiencing guilt and shame, as they contribute positively to moral judgement, ensuring a comprehensive approach to moral development that considers both positive and negative facets. Furthermore, to optimise moral judgement maturity among secondary school students, emphasis should be placed on fostering moral identity traits such as compassion, honesty, kindness, and friendliness, both within the educational environment and at home. These values play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' moral identity and should be prioritised to foster balanced moral judgement.

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