

From Within: Catalysts of Volunteering Self-identity in Malaysian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer self-identity cultivation is of tremendous significance to Malaysian youths. As inheritors of the country, they must have a strong volunteer self-identity to contribute spiritually or physically to the development of society and the nation. In addition, having a solid volunteer self-identity can foster a productive generation that thinks positively, practices a healthy lifestyle, and avoids social problems. Examining internal factors is crucial for shaping the volunteer's self-identity. These factors can influence a person's desire to get involved in volunteer activities or vice versa. However, a previous study indicates that the youth's desire to internalise the spirit of volunteering remains fragile. Thus, this study will examine the internal factors that can encourage the formation and nurturing of a volunteering self-identity among Malaysian youth. Ten volunteer organisation activists from five Malaysian zones (north, south, central, east coast, and east) participated in this qualitative study through in-depth interviews. The interview data were thematically analysed. The findings indicated four factors that encourage the formation and nurturing of youth volunteer self-identity: internal values, self-awareness, religious beliefs, and self-motivation. The study's novelty lies in its holistic framework, which integrates all research findings to foster volunteer self-identity among Malaysian youth. It emphasises the central role of values like empathy, the impact of self-awareness and long-term perspective, and the influence of Islamic teachings while highlighting practical strategies for enhancing youth volunteerism.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 28 March 2025

Accepted: 10 April 2026

Published: 30 April 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.34.2.17>

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Keywords: Nation-building, self-identity, volunteerism, volunteering self-identity, youth studies

INTRODUCTION

As a developing nation, there is an urgent need for a younger generation with a strong sense of volunteerism to assist in

areas such as community development, knowledge advancement, and the promotion of unity among citizens. The presence of a volunteering self-identity reflects the youth's patriotism toward their country. Generally, their profound love for the nation and its elements, such as society, peace, ethnic diversity, religion, and culture, can be a primary catalyst for fostering a volunteering self-identity. In this context, cultivating a robust volunteer self-identity becomes crucial, as it demonstrates individuals' commitment to actively contributing to their country's and community's well-being (Ismail, 2021). However, developing this volunteering self-identity in today's increasingly complex world is challenging.

The rapid pace of technological change in today's borderless world has brought significant changes to society and the country. These changes have shifted society's values towards individualism and materialism (Oesterle et al., 2004) and led to a lack of concern for environmental conditions (Mohd Yusof, 2013). Such a situation can cause the tradition of volunteering to fade away (Abdullah, 2001). In this regard, Clary and Snyder (1999) also asserted that a person's involvement in volunteering activities and helping practices fades when society is individualistic. This can be proven by the Malaysian Youth Index (IBM) study by the Malaysian Youth Development Research Institute (IPPBM), which showed a decrease from 67.4 per cent in 2008 to 65.4 per cent in 2011. This study has served as a benchmark for measuring nine youth well-being domains using volunteer indicators

(Mohd Yusof, 2013). In the meantime, the 2019 Malaysian Youth Index Outcome Evaluation study, released by the Malaysian Youth Development Research Institute under the Identity domain, shows that the volunteer indicator remains at a moderate level, with a score of 60.93 per cent. In addition, the evaluation of the volunteering program, especially from the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), is at a level of 60 per cent, which is in the satisfactory category. Next, Syed Hussai and Yasin's (2016) study also showed that the youth's appreciation of the spirit of volunteerism is satisfactory. Regardless of the concept of feeling, their study reveals that the spirit of youth volunteering remains fragile.

Various efforts have been made by government agencies at both the federal and state levels, as well as NGOs to encourage community involvement in volunteering activities, especially among the youth, for example, through volunteer activity programmes organised by the Malaysian Association of Youth Clubs (MAYC), and the Malaysian Youth Council (MBM), Yayasan Salam, the Malaysian Relief Agency, and various other NGOs. The government also implements various other initiatives through the Community Service Module, such as *Rakan Muda* Volunteers, Young Volunteer Squad, Crime Awareness Team (CAT), *Anugerah Remaja Perdana*, MyCorps, Impact Malaysia, and the National Service Training Program (PLKN). Despite implementing numerous programmes and volunteering activities, the youth's involvement remains moderate

and satisfactory. The Malaysian Youth Development Institute (2020) has issued a report demonstrating that the Malaysian community has an adequate level of involvement in volunteering. Citizens who love their country should exhibit a high level of volunteerism, not just a satisfactory one. The report stated that 62.9 per cent of the 527 respondents were unaware of the volunteering activities around them, and 58.3 per cent needed to learn about the Malaysian Volunteer Day celebration. The youth's lack of sensitivity towards volunteering activities indicates a weak volunteer spirit. Therefore, as a strong volunteer spirit is crucial to the country's development and progress, this study aims to explore internal factors that can stimulate the cultivation and formation of a volunteering identity among Malaysian youth. In this scenario, internal factors are the foundation for igniting and shaping a person's values. This fact is consistent with Plato (2008), who asserts that examining our internal factors provides insight into our true nature, desires, and beliefs. This self-awareness allows us to align our values with our actions, promoting integrity and ethical conduct.

Conceptualising Volunteering Self-identity

Volunteering activity entails voluntary work, where individuals dedicate themselves or provide services and contributions to assist others, primarily without coercion and with sincere intentions (Bahari, 2003; Che Nawati & Asmuni, 2013), without anticipating any return or material reward,

and completely independent of any external influence (Musick & Wilson, 2003). Wilson (2000) defines volunteering as the act of individuals willingly and selflessly offering their time, skills, and services to various organisations, causes, or communities without expecting monetary compensation in return. It is a voluntary, altruistic activity aimed at improving society, addressing social issues, and building social capital. In this regard, Traeger et al. (2022) emphasise that volunteering is a form of societal engagement, where individuals or groups actively participate in activities that serve the common good, promote social cohesion, and build social capital. It embodies an altruistic commitment to society's welfare, often driven by a sense of social responsibility. Therefore, their involvement in volunteer activities typically lacks a selfish element because the service is provided solely for the good of all parties, thereby improving the quality of human life (Eyeler, 1999; Geiser et al., 2014).

According to Roberts (2006), volunteering is more about sharpening skills, socialising, and having fun with someone else. Meanwhile, Xu and Ngai (2011) noted that actual volunteers should be willing to help, contribute, and extend assistance to others without receiving tangible or intangible rewards. In this case, Musick and Wilson (2003) and Wilson (2000) define a volunteer as an individual or group of individuals who demonstrate exceptional personal characteristics and a sincere commitment to voluntary service, community work, or humanitarian

efforts. They engage in activities such as mutual aid, helping others, and relieving others' burdens.

Volunteering activities are critical to community development because volunteers can contribute expertise, skills, knowledge, and energy to the common good (Putnam, 2000). Without volunteer services, many activities in society and various other sectors cannot operate smoothly (Wu et al., 2009). In this context, such activity can encourage youth development and alleviate the burden on disaster victims. Moreover, it promotes healthy activities and prevents youth involvement in social problems. Many studies have confirmed that participation in volunteer activities has a positive effect on many aspects of youth development, such as social, cognitive, and psychological development (Kuperminc et al., 2001), the development of identity and political awareness (Youniss et al., 2001), the reduction of risk factors (Allen et al., 1994), and the development of autonomy and a sense of belonging together (Allen et al., 1994; McKinney, 2002). In addition, volunteering is also an opportunity for skill and curriculum development (Jardim & Da Silva, 2018).

In fostering the spirit of volunteerism, the element of individual identity is crucial in influencing a person's involvement in this community service activity. Self-identity is defined as unique and special traits or characteristics representing an individual's or a nation's personality (Mohamad et al., 2019). From there, the basis of identity encompasses an individual's personality or

character and self-identification. The essence of a person or a nation is shaped by the appreciation of values, viewpoints, thoughts, attitudes, lifestyles, and beliefs or principles, which, in turn, form its foundation. The self-identity that permeates the human self is a comprehensive formation, shaped by a person's life experiences and facts within the framework of their worldview. Individuals undergo a dynamic process of personality and identity formation, characterised by a structural aspect. The application of self-identity in humans demonstrates self-resilience in physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and values domains (Mohd Yassin & Ahmad, 2018). These identity elements are believed to significantly influence individuals' participation in volunteer activities. In other words, when an individual regularly engages in volunteering activities, it gradually becomes a routine for them. As a result, virtuous practice will be assimilated within individuals and integrated into their core values and self-identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have conducted numerous studies on volunteer activities. Among them is a study by Mohd Yasin (2005) on student volunteering, which examined the relationship between students' levels of knowledge and their levels of involvement in community-level volunteer work. The findings showed that students' involvement in community volunteering activities is relatively low. She found that course load,

cumulative grade point average (CGPA), household income, and knowledge level are not determining factors for the level of student involvement in volunteer work.

Ahmad Salim's (2005) examined student involvement in volunteer activities through various organisations. The results showed that students' level of involvement and their awareness of making contributions to community service remain low. Meanwhile, Isak (2007) examined the influence of prosocial personality traits and motivation on students' current volunteering activities. It revealed a significant difference between involvement in volunteering activities and pro-social personality traits, as well as the influence of motivation. Some other evidence suggests that volunteering may reinforce a prosocial self-identity. He et al. (2023), who conducted a study among Chinese college volunteers, found that positive feedback and ethical reflection in service contribute to internalising moral content and enhancing moral identity. To put it another way, committed volunteers begin to view helping others as part of "who I am". This moral-identity boost is also reciprocal: those with high moral identity are more likely to maintain their volunteering, and volunteering, in turn, strengthens their moral self-concept. In this regard, volunteering appears to be an integral part of adolescent identity development. Service participation contributes to shaping individuals' life goals and self-concepts, according to empirical investigations. For example, in the Hong Kong context, Xu and Liu (2021) reported that secondary students

who participated more in the CS program showed better identity statuses (i.e., from "diffusion" to "achievement"), with this result being more pronounced for domains of occupation and lifestyle. They also found that longer duration of community services was associated with advanced identity statuses, particularly in occupational and lifestyle categories. Interviews from the project participants discovered that service experiences that were impactful and transformative were likely to have assisted students in forming career or self-goals, resulting in the ability to internalise a sense of service. Thus, one could contend that these studies support the notion that youth volunteering facilitates civic and moral identity, offering young people a sense of purpose in life, a sense of belonging to a community, and ethical values. However, in the international setting, more research across different domains is needed.

Apart from that, Mohd Kasim's study (2008) focused on students' levels of knowledge, types of volunteer work, and level of involvement in community volunteer work. He indicated that students have a high level of knowledge about volunteering activities; however, their level of involvement is low. In addition, his research also revealed that many students are involved in various types of volunteer work through special programmes such as Bakti Siswa, Adopted Village Program, Recycling Campaign, Donation Collection, and Blood Donation Campaign. Next, Johar's (2008) study examined the relationship between self-motivation and the level of involvement

in volunteering among students. Her research revealed a significant relationship between factors influencing volunteering activities, the type of activity, self-motivation, and student involvement levels. Meanwhile, current studies indicate that a combination of intrinsic and instrumental motivation underpins youth volunteerism. Nevertheless, recent syntheses stress the prevalence of internal (self-determined) determinants in maintaining engagement. Studies based on Self-Determination Theory show that while young people also often report making rational calculations (skills, career) of the natural goods of intrinsic motives, such as meaning, moral values and personal growth, better predict sustained participation (e.g., employability research urges that meaning and development of skills work in concert). Empirical studies and policy syntheses since 2020 also strengthen our conclusion that volunteering's motivational architecture is multidimensional: values and purpose ignite initial engagement, and tangible gains (skills, social capital) help keep the flames alight. This joint pattern also means that one-sided analyses restricted to "functionalistic" gains or to the pure altruistic dimension would not capture how motives intertwine when a sustainable volunteering orientation is created (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021; IAVE, 2022).

In addition, Mohamed Alauddin and Muhamad (2013) studied the motives of volunteer involvement in sports-related activities. They discovered that understanding and moral values are the most motivating factors in sports volunteers' participation. Their study also revealed that

gender factors do not affect the motivation for sports volunteer involvement. There is a significant difference between male and female volunteers regarding value-motivated participation and understanding. Meanwhile, Che Nawi and Asmuni (2013) focused on studying volunteers' motivation for involvement in voluntary work. They found that volunteers are highly motivated by values, understanding, protection, career, social connections, and self-improvement (self-esteem). Similarly, Sharififar et al.'s (2011) research found a relationship between motivational factors and volunteers' interest and commitment. Motivational factors play an essential role in fostering a volunteer's interest and commitment. A sense of responsibility closely relates to commitment. Thus, volunteers often engage in charitable activities due to a sense of social responsibility and a desire to positively impact their communities. In the meantime, Lee Abdullah et al. (2006) found that male trainees showed higher values of patriotism, unity, and volunteering than female trainees. His study focused on the values of nationhood among the National Service Training Program (PLKN) trainees. Similarly, Ahmad Ibrahim (2004), who conducted a study on the recruitment of trainees for PLKN volunteering, found that participants' problems and personal development significantly affect the success of the volunteer spirit. Most 18-year-old trainees are still emotionally and intellectually immature, lead an independent social lifestyle, and prioritise fun over volunteer work.

A study by Caldwell et al. (2008) further substantiated this point, demonstrating that individuals are often too young to overlook the genuine significance of volunteering. Therefore, Schlegelmilch and Tynan (1989) believed that young people need to enhance their knowledge, as it forms the basis for self-development and social work potential.

In this regard, Syed Hussai and Yasin (2016) focused on studying volunteerism in the context of youth appreciation levels, based on six perceptions of appreciation: understanding, feeling, belief, practice, attitude, and motivation. The findings showed that the youth's appreciation of the spirit of volunteering is satisfactory, except for the feelings and motivation construct. Their study revealed that the spirit of volunteerism remains fragile in terms of the emotional construct. This is because the youth are unwilling to volunteer in areas that are diseased, dirty, and lack public facilities. Abdul Rahman's (2018) study found that a moderately high level of involvement among early adults in volunteering activities could affect their well-being. His study also proved that there is a significant relationship between the level of participation in voluntary activities and personal factors (religious beliefs, altruism, and compassion), social influence factors (parents and family influence, peer influence, and mass media influence), as well as characteristic factors of voluntary organisations (volunteer leadership and management, incentives, and reputation). Indeed, volunteering is only one facet of broader youth civic engagement, which includes community engagement, social

action, and democratic participation. Researchers stress the importance of civic engagement (including service) for a healthy democracy and for personal development among young people. Some research findings also established that civic and political engagement helped youth fulfil a “need to belong”, learn civic skills, and work on social issues in their communities (Biolik et al., 2025; Ku Samsu, 2022). The OECD (2024) has also observed that programmes of youth volunteering can facilitate the development of “confidence in other forms of civic engagement, skills building as well as identification with democratic institutions” as well as fostering solidarity, inclusion and societal resilience. In fact, engaging in volunteer service can assist young people in developing social capital and social trust, as well as cultivating a civic identity and practising being active citizens in the future. Thus, the literature treats youth volunteerism both as a product of civic-minded values and as a potential catalyst that enhances civic knowledge, engagement, empowerment and community connectedness (Mohd Nizah et al., 2015). Applying the value of volunteering awareness to individuals is one way to improve the sustained involvement of youth in volunteering activities. Their involvement must be appreciated (Tessier et al., 2006). Applying volunteer values will make a person more positive and help the youth develop leadership and decision-making skills. Their role is also crucial in helping prepare youth for future careers (Grant et al., 2020). In this regard,

volunteering has been associated with increased social capital, improved mental health, and enhanced overall well-being. Whether planned by the government, voluntary organisations, or NGOs, a country's successful implementation of youth development policies and agendas depends on volunteers at various levels (Bang & Ross, 2009). The activities of youth organisations are also challenging to move forward without volunteerism and support among these young people (Syed Hussai & Yasin, 2016). Furthermore, many recent studies have proven that individual willingness to volunteer depends more on personal interests and needs than traditional values such as serving others and a sense of responsibility to the local community (Jardim & Da Silva, 2018). As such, by using a qualitative design, this paper will explore factors within the individual that may promote, precipitate, or foster volunteer activity among youth. The qualitative method was considered a suitable method for enhancing insight into how internal values, self-reflection, religious belief, and individual motivation influence the volunteering self-identity of Malaysian youth. Qualitative in-depth interviews offer the depth and context sensitivity essential to uncover participants' subjective meanings and the subtle interaction of insight from internal factors that are hard to capture using standardised quantitative surveys.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism posits that there

are “multiple subjective realities, each of which is socially constructed by and between individuals” (Brown & Dueñas, 2019). In this view, volunteering self-identity is co-constructed through individual experiences and social context rather than a single objective trait. Knowledge is regarded as subjective and negotiated between people, so the study attempts to understand how participants make meaning of their own values, beliefs, and motivations. This research employed a qualitative design, drawing on both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary information was obtained through a review of relevant literature, including books and scholarly journals, while primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 selected informants. Before beginning the data collection, the study protocol was submitted to and approved by the Universiti Putra Malaysia Institutional Review Board. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured that their identities and responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. Purposive sampling techniques have been used to select informants who are the leading activists in volunteer organisations. The informants were selected from five zones in Malaysia, namely the central zone (Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor, and Perak), the eastern zone (Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang), the northern zone (Perlis, Kedah, and Penang), the southern zone (Negeri Sembilan, Johor, and Melaka), and the east Malaysia zone (Sabah and Sarawak). Each zone involves as many as two informants,

especially among the leaders of voluntary organisations, such as the president or chairman of the organisation. Determining the number of informants depends on the level of data saturation achieved (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, data saturation was reached by the tenth interview, when no new themes emerged in subsequent interviews, indicating that additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights.

An interview protocol was prepared as a guide before each interview to ensure it was focused and systematic. Krueger (1994) suggested five parts of the protocol: opening, introductory, transition, key, and closing questions. The interview questions were constructed as semi-structured items, allowing the researcher to add questions as needed while addressing the research objectives. Experts in the field reviewed and validated the interview protocol. All interviews were audio-recorded.

After completing the interviews, the researcher reviewed the recordings by playing back the conversations. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The coding process was then carried out, which sought to establish the main themes and sub-themes to answer the research question (what are the internal factors that can stimulate the cultivation and formation of a volunteering identity among Malaysian youth?). Coding was performed manually by the researcher, without the use of qualitative software, to maintain close contact with the data. The author read the transcripts by herself and coded the texts. These codes were subsequently grouped

into higher-order themes for abstraction. Four internal factors have been successfully identified: internal values, self-concept, religious beliefs, and self-motivation, which contribute to the cultivation of a volunteering self-identity among Malaysian youth. The sub-themes identified include love, sacrifice, empathy, interest, and self-satisfaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the research findings, four internal factors contribute to the formation and nurturing of volunteer self-identity among Malaysian youth. Figure 1 integrates these four factors into a unified framework, showing how internal values, self-awareness, religious beliefs, and self-motivation interact to strengthen volunteering self-identity.

Internal Values

The good values in everyone are the main force that encourages them to help others in need voluntarily. Socialisation agents such as family, environment, peers, and educational institutions can nurture and instil these values from a young age. In this regard, the informants have listed values that can foster volunteerism among youth. Informant A explained that:

...love for community members is a great value that must be in us... We don't want them to be in trouble, so we need to help. With the help given, the love between the giver and recipient will create a good relationship in the community...

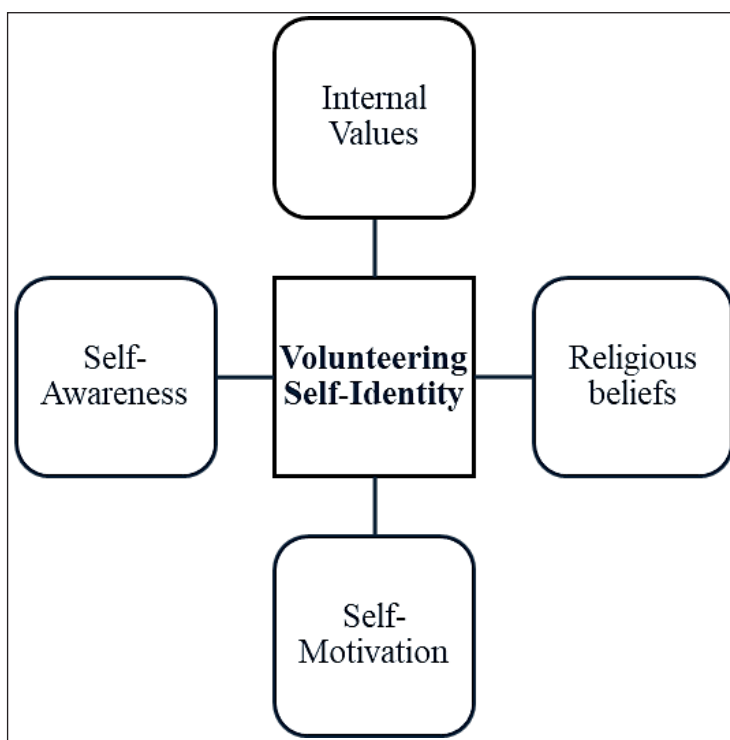


Figure 1. Internal factors contributing to the formation of volunteer self-identity

Informant A emphasised the value of love, which is necessary in a society. Practising these values will also positively affect long-term relationships among community members. This assertion aligns with Putnam’s explanation (2000).

Love, particularly within families and communities, creates strong social bonds and a sense of belonging. These bonds foster cooperation and mutual support, essential for building harmonious societies.

When this value of love exists, other related values, such as empathy, will also appear. Decety (2011) confirms this by explaining that love can foster empathy and

enable individuals to connect emotionally with others. This empathy can reduce prejudice and promote tolerance, crucial elements for peaceful coexistence (Batson et al., 2007; Mohd Nizah et al., 2015). In this regard, Informant A added:

...there needs to be empathy and sympathy...it starts with a feeling of love for the people around us. We watch through social media (other people's suffering), we feel sad and want to help and listen to their expressions.

The love factor also encourages youth to sacrifice time, energy, and money to participate in volunteer organisations.

Informant B's statement clearly illustrates this:

...yes, sacrifice, but not everyone is willing to do all that (volunteer activities), the willingness to sacrifice comes from oneself. After graduating, my first post was at the state youth council, especially at the Peninsular Malay Students Association (GPMS). People often say that knowledge is the foundation of love. When we get to know this youth organisation, we will start to like it, and at the same time, we will be willing to work together regardless of any situation... and face all the obstacles together...

This indicates that the value of love is a driving force that also brings to light other internal values, such as empathy and a willingness to sacrifice. Therefore, this factor plays a significant role in shaping the identity of youth volunteering, as these internal values stem directly from their hearts and manifest themselves through their involvement in volunteer organisations.

Volunteering awareness is fundamentally connected to one's internal values, and among Malaysian youth, these values are pivotal in shaping a robust volunteering self-identity. Internal values, including deep-seated principles and moral beliefs, serve as the cornerstone for youths' decisions about whether to engage in volunteer activities. The study reveals various facets of life, such as family upbringing, educational environments, cultural influences, and peer interaction. Youth are more likely to

volunteer if they are instilled with values that emphasise community, empathy, and helping others. These values are nurtured from early ages and can shape young people's continued engagement in civic life, such as promoting empathy. We are not suggesting that empathy can automatically lead to positive outcomes. However, understanding and sharing expressions and emotions among young people may foster an intention to take positive actions that improve conditions for oneself and others. Similarly, a spirit of sacrifice can lead the young to expend their time and talent for the community.

Essentially, it is the core values that guide decision-making processes to encourage volunteering among young people. Mokhzan et al. (2023) posit that internal values are important in encouraging youth volunteerism. Those values provide a robust framework for youth to evaluate their actions and potential contributions to society. The study concludes that nurturing positive internal values in youth is critical to developing a strong volunteer self-identity. This is instrumental not only in fostering a generation that actively contributes to society's betterment but also in encapsulating a collective spirit of volunteerism that transcends individual actions and shapes the nation's social fabric. In fact, a phenomenological study in Saudi Arabia reveals that internal values, such as love for their country, as reflected in university students' participation in voluntary activities (e.g., national service programmes), reinforce young people's civic

and national identity. Respondents felt that volunteering promoted a stronger sense of citizenship and patriotism and greater pride towards their nation, aligning personal engagement with Saudi societal goals. In practice, students viewed their service as contributions to the country's Vision 2030 agenda; thus, it reinforced their sense of belonging to the country (Alotaibi, 2025). This indicates that in specific situations, youth volunteerism is explicitly linked to the construction of national/cultural identity, and that the learning of service serves as a vehicle through which youth are enabled to internalise and verbalise collective values and patriotism.

By internalising these values in their behaviour, youth can construct a robust volunteering self-identity and express their community service as a commitment. In this way, when young people engage in volunteer work motivated by internal values, they feel a sense of responsibility and a spirit of goodwill. These values could, in turn, translate their sentiment into durable action and traction for building the nation through social trust, cross-group cohesion, civic networks, and leadership pipelines. In practice, these values may be fostered via service-learning, facilitated reflection, value-based recognition, and partnerships with a religious or cultural institution. It is a positive manifestation that investing in these self-internal values not only boosts volunteer numbers but can also produce sustainable citizens who would promote the long-term growth and expansion of the nation.

Self-awareness

If individuals are self-aware of the importance of engaging in voluntary activities, they will quickly form their volunteering self-identity. In this context, informant A made the following assertion:

...when we are at home, we don't see this thing, but when we join them, we can see people's hardships... we will feel sad and think of helping them...

Informant A noted that participating in volunteer activities allows individuals to witness hardships firsthand, fostering empathy and a desire to help. This self-awareness motivates youths to contribute to societal welfare to help those in need. Informant C added:

I want to do something for my generation and society. I don't want to see the mess happening in my old age in the future generation, and I regret that I didn't do anything then. At least I can tell my grandchildren later, "I've done this, I've done that." Therefore, now is the time to take your management skills to the next level.

He envisions a future where a lack of effort to assist the community today will disappoint him. For him, the current generation determines the future of the next generation. Therefore, this self-awareness will motivate him to volunteer to help the community. Self-awareness significantly contributes to the development of volunteer self-identity among youths by enabling

them to recognise the importance of their actions within the broader context of society and the future. Through self-awareness, young individuals recognise their capacity to contribute to societal welfare and development (Grönlund, 2011). They become aware of the potential long-term effects of their current actions, instilling a sense of responsibility to act in the present to ensure a more positive outcome for the community. This self-awareness transcends immediate gratification, directing youth towards actions that may require personal sacrifice but contribute to the greater good. An increased understanding of the community's needs and a vision for its future motivates youth to volunteer time, effort, and resources, framing their voluntary contributions as investments in societal well-being.

The study highlights how individual reflections on the self and the community motivate volunteers. Youths' awareness of their influence and role within their community reinforces their identity as volunteers, grounding their commitment to voluntary service in a strong sense of self and communal agency. The result is often a readiness to engage more deeply and meaningfully with volunteer opportunities, driven by an understanding that their actions are integral to the collective effort to foster a robust, thriving community for current and future generations. In this context, self-awareness allows individuals to perceive their role within the broader societal context. By recognising the long-term effects of their actions, youths develop a sense of agency

and moral responsibility, which shapes their identity as volunteers. This process involves reflecting on personal values and societal needs, leading to a deeper integration of volunteerism into their self-concept. Indeed, this can prevent volunteers' involvement from being episodic. This can be observed through a longitudinal study by Wakefield et al. (2022), which demonstrated that reflection and moral reasoning play a role in changing episodic participation into a sustained donor role identity. Results indicated that having been exposed to suffering, considering future commitments, and perceiving volunteering as an investment in a stable future role (as opposed to a transient behaviour) are associated with volunteering.

Moreover, self-knowledge could make a strategic contribution to nation-building through volunteering. When young people take time to consider their values, future impact, and civic roles, episodic helping is transformed into sustained civic engagement, resulting in leaders, problem solvers, and accountable citizens. In communities of high self-awareness, volunteers were more likely to pursue service for conscientious rather than egoistic reasons, to persist in long-term roles and to apply their service experiences to public problems, such as public policies, social entrepreneurship, local relationships and community institutions. These efforts might help develop social capital, civic capacity, and resilient leadership pipelines for the country. Policymakers and educators can hasten this outcome by integrating guided reflection, mentorship and civic

framing into volunteer programmes, so that service becomes not simply an activity but a conscious investment in national coherence and advancement.

Religious Beliefs

Religion has also been found to be a catalyst for the formation of youth volunteering identities. This is because religion teaches its followers to do good. Informant C asserted that:

...the religious factor is the main factor in how we are taught in Islam so that we are always virtuous and devoted to others, especially our parents and society. And the Prophet's hadith said that the best human beings are those who benefit others.

Informant D added:

...we have to think that this voluntary work is a form of worship ... Make it a form of worship where when we do it, we want good for those who are helped and for ourselves...

Since religious teachings are beneficial, they can even serve as a form of worship, and both informants agree they can play an essential role in fostering the spirit of volunteering among youth. Religious beliefs significantly influence Malaysian youth's volunteering activities because they are framed within the context of faith and spiritual fulfilment. The study emphasises how religion, particularly Islam in the Malaysian context, encourages a philosophy of benevolence and contribution to

community well-being. The teachings of the religion, which underscore the importance of virtue and devotion to others, resonate with young people, often motivating them to volunteer as an expression of their religious convictions. For many youths, aligning volunteer activities with religious teachings becomes a compelling aspect of their identity. Volunteering is not only a social or altruistic endeavour, but also a spiritual one, as individuals perceive their acts of service as extensions of their religious life. In this light, volunteering is perceived as a form of worship, an avenue through which they can practice their faith's principles, such as compassion and service to others, creating a strong link between their voluntary actions and their religious self-identity.

Given this, religious beliefs provide a potent impetus for volunteering among youth, shaping their motivations and reinforcing their commitment to service. Imbuing volunteer work with religious significance fulfils a social purpose and spiritual duty, enriching the volunteer experience. This integration of volunteering into the spiritual lives of individuals fosters a holistic approach to volunteerism, where helping others transcends the physical act and becomes part of a larger, divine narrative of living one's faith through service.

Substantially, religious beliefs play a crucial role in defining an individual's moral and spiritual identity. By aligning volunteer activities with religious teachings, youths could integrate their faith into their actions, creating a holistic approach to volunteerism that transcends physical acts and becomes

part of a larger, divine narrative. This integration enhances their sense of purpose and commitment, reinforcing their identity as volunteers who serve both societal and spiritual goals.

In this regard, religious convictions can be a powerful motivator for volunteerism that contributes to the nation's development. When service is defined as a spiritual act, it is experienced as a form of worship, compassion and ethical responsibility. It thus shifts from an optional civic activity to an act of identity and conscience. Because religious beliefs generally promote the values of generosity, caring for the needy, and collective responsibility, volunteers with a strong faith commitment can be expected to sustain long-term commitment and model prosocial norms that strengthen social ties and trust between neighbourhoods.

Self-motivation

Self-motivation also plays a vital role in encouraging youth to participate in volunteer activities, allowing them to shape their volunteering self-identity. This can be traced through informant E's statement:

...I am really interested in participating in volunteering activities....my soul is really in that direction. If I want to say that I'm chasing money, I will not participate in this activity...

In this regard, certain elements can increase their motivation to participate in volunteering activities, such as self-satisfaction. Informant A explained:

...satisfaction. I don't know about other people, but for me when I participated in volunteering work, I feel satisfied, and I want to do it again and feel satisfied again.

The next step is appreciation. Giving them gifts, praise, or money will encourage them to engage in voluntary work. The statements made by informants B and A illustrate this:

Next is the recognition, indeed, the Ministry of Youth and Sports holds the State and National Youth Premier Awards (APN) every year. Three categories are contested: men, women, and youth organisations. Today's young generation wants to be appreciated. I always praise the volunteers of my organisation excessively for all their efforts...they also expect tokens. Usually, if the area is far away, there must be a token of RM50 to RM100 for them to fill up with car fuel and food.

Thus, the elements of self-motivation that can form the identity of youth volunteering can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations, rooted in personal values, altruism, and a sense of purpose, are pivotal in propelling individuals toward engaging in volunteer activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When volunteering aligns with an individual's core values, it fosters a stronger sense of identity and commitment. In this sense, it leads individuals to engage in volunteer activities that resonate deeply with their

personal beliefs and a desire to fulfil a felt sense of responsibility towards others. This is often the most potent source of motivation, because it is based on the individual's personal values and the reward of helping themselves. External motivation is associated with extrinsic factors, such as recognition, rewards, and opportunities for skill development, that support the volunteer's continued survival (David et al., 2016). While this type of external reward may reinforce people's initial motivation to volunteer, it can complement other motivators to enhance the volunteer experience and ultimately sustain volunteer engagement.

Self-motivation is a complex interplay between the internal fulfilment that comes from contributing to a cause one values and the external recognition that reinforces one's social standing and sense of contribution. Intrinsic and extrinsic motives are both necessary for cultivating a volunteering self-identity among Malaysian youth. Programmes and policies that recognise and draw upon both types of motivation may be more successful in motivating youth to volunteer, not only as a single event but as a lifelong habit. By acknowledging the many reasons young people volunteer, campaigns to promote volunteering can help build a committed, sustainable generation of youth volunteers. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations could contribute to the development of self-identity through volunteering, as individuals engage in activities that align with their personal values and receive social recognition. Additionally,

internally driven volunteering motivations, such as enjoyment, skill development, and recognition, can be seen as sources of self-motivation. They could contribute to nation-building by converting personal development into collective resources. This approach enables young people to acquire employable skills, engage in active citizenship, and develop leadership abilities.

In this sense, internal drives described in the theme of self-motivation are distinct from those related to internal values. Internal values are deeply rooted altruistic normative beliefs, such as empathy, compassion, love, and a sense of social duty, that underpin the moral basis of volunteering. On the other hand, self-motivation consists of the volunteer's objectives and motivations (i.e., development, self-improvement, and satisfaction) that force them into action. In this analysis, internal values were articulated by participants as love, sacrifice, and empathy for others. In contrast, self-motivation was characterised by the internal satisfaction and self-actualisation gained from helping. By separating these, it is highlighted that values give rise to the volunteer's sense of purpose, while self-motivation captures the drive to act on those values.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the development of a holistic framework that integrates internal factors to shape volunteering self-identity among Malaysian youth. The development of a framework that incorporates internal values, self-awareness, religious beliefs, and self-motivation is seen as improving

existing theories and addressing critical gaps in research on volunteering self-identity. In this context, this framework refines Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) by identifying internal mechanisms that can set standards for volunteering self-identity. Identity Theory emphasises the process of identity validation. However, role identity, one of the main foundations of shaping one's identity, is not linked to internal factors that sustain one's self-identity. Therefore, this framework is seen to fill this gap and thus expands identity theory beyond its mostly secular Western applications, especially those related to religious beliefs. In addition, this framework extends Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) by showing how internal values and religious beliefs provide the basis for autonomous motivation. It shows that both intrinsic motivation (inner satisfaction, genuine interest) and extrinsic motivation (recognition, appreciation) contribute to the development of volunteering self-identity. In fact, this framework also shows how volunteering fulfils the three basic needs of Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

CONCLUSION

In the end, developing volunteer self-identity among Malaysian youth is a more holistic process that includes internal values, impact of self-awareness, religious perceptions and internal motivation. The interplay of these different determinants appears to shape young people's volunteer self-identity and, through this, lay the foundation for

their inclination towards volunteering and active community contribution. Intrinsic values, such as love, empathy, and sacrifice, are considered primary motivators for volunteering. Young people who care about their communities and their fellow citizens are more likely to volunteer. These intrinsic values need to be nurtured, as does the intrinsic sense of self in society and in relation to family, peer group, and school. Realising the deep connection between these values and volunteering behaviours is crucial for the instillation of social responsibility among the youth of Malaysia. Self-awareness and concern for the impact of one's behaviour on society, especially, are crucial. Youth who understand that they can contribute to their communities are more likely to volunteer. This awareness is also a prospect-oriented one, as young people consider their actions in the present and shape future generations. Ensuring young people understand the lifelong impact of their participation in volunteering can help them feel more purposeful and engaged.

The power of religious doctrine cannot be underestimated. Islam, the main religion in Malaysia, preaches kindness, compassion and helping people. These lessons in an educational and community setting can help to create an ethical culture of volunteering. Religious figures and institutions can also play a significant role in fostering volunteering as a religious obligation and encouraging active participation among young people. Both internal and external motivation contribute to volunteering engagement. Internal motivations, such as

personal values and the meaning of one's life, promote a strong sense of identity as a volunteer. External motivations, such as acknowledgement and incentives, act together as a reinforcement tool, recognising the commitment to volunteerism and encouraging volunteers to continue. Introducing reward systems for volunteer **programmes** can motivate volunteers, retain them over time, and motivate others to get involved in volunteering.

Policy makers, schools and NGOs also have to work together so that a positive environment for voluntary action can emerge. Through education, curricula that promote empathy, compassion, and taking responsibility for society can be introduced early in life to develop generations that will be responsible for others. In addition, NGO- and government-funded community projects can create opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful volunteer experiences. To complement these endeavours, future research should adopt a quantitative approach using a more representative sample to isolate the specific factors that promote volunteer self-identity among Malaysian youth. Hence, it could contribute to more focused and successful interventions to promote continued volunteer engagement.

To sum up, developing the volunteer self-identity among Malaysian youth requires a comprehensive strategy that incorporates their inner values, self-identification, and religious motivation. By establishing an ecosystem that supports these initiatives, Malaysia can proactively empower its young

generation to contribute to the community's overall development and, consequently, society's well-being, ultimately forming a more caring and understanding nation for the next generation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Highly appreciated and grateful to Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) for sponsoring this research through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) for the Formation of Malaysian Youth Volunteerism Self-Identity Model (FRGS/1/2021/SS0/UPM/02/6).

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