



Exploring Spiritual Engagement Among Youth In High-Risk Areas

Nur Hafizah Mohamad Yassin^{1,2}, Amin Al Haadi Bin Shafie^{1,2*}, Anita Priantina⁴, Fatini Kamal^{1,2}, Azwan Fakharuddin^{1,2}, Dini Farhana^{1,2}, Suzaily Wahab³ & Najaa Mokhtar^{1,2}

¹Pusat Penyelidikan Penyalahgunaan Dadah Asian, Fakulti Kepimpinan dan Pengurusan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

²Fakulti Kepimpinan dan Pengurusan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Bandar Baru Nilai, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

³Hospital Canselor Tuanku Muhriz, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan

⁴Islamic Economics Department, Institut Agama Islam Tazkia, Jl Ir. H Djuanda no 78 Sentul City Bogor 16810

Citation: Amin Al Haadi Bin Shafie, et al (2024), Exploring Spiritual Engagement Among Youth In High-Risk Areas, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5), 12084-12097, Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.5065

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines the spiritual and religious engagement of young people in high-risk neighborhoods to uncover their role as internal protective mechanisms against substance abuse. Through qualitative research, the study explores participants' perspectives and practices related to spirituality. The findings reveal a nuanced understanding of spirituality, with religious devotion and internalization emerging as prominent themes for nearly a third of participants (29.35% overall). The importance of connecting with Allah, fostering inner strength, ethical considerations, and the intertwined pursuit of self-knowledge and knowledge of God are emphasized and comprise about one-fifth, nearly one-fifth, about 15%, and nearly 12% of participants, respectively. In addition, religious practices such as obligatory prayer, recitation of ma'thurat, participation in zikir and reading religious texts, especially the Qur'an, are widely practiced among the participants. These practices are practiced by more than 30%, about 22%, over 17% and about 15% of the participants, respectively. These findings highlight the multiple ways in which religious engagement fosters discipline, spiritual empowerment, leadership, community support and personal reflection, and is thus a critical component in promoting healthy lifestyles and resilience to substance abuse among youth in a high-risk environment.

Keywords: Spirituality, High Risk, Youth, Drug Abuse, Malaysia

Introduction

The widespread occurrence of drug abuse is a significant global challenge with far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. The United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime World Drug Report (2020) provides alarming insights into the scale of this problem. It shows that around 284 million people worldwide, mainly men aged 15 to 64, have used drugs in the past year. This staggering statistic emphasizes the ubiquity of the problem, which transcends geographical boundaries and affects different population groups.

In the specific context of Malaysia, the severity of the situation becomes even clearer. In January 2023, 103,760 cases of drug abuse were reported, representing 0.34% of the country's total population (Malaysian Drug Report, 2019). This data emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive strategies and interventions to address the multiple challenges of drug abuse. In addition to the immediate health consequences for those affected, the social and economic impact is also significant, necessitating concerted efforts to curb the prevalence of drug abuse and its associated consequences in the Malaysian context.

The consequences of drug abuse go far beyond individual health, permeate social structures and pose multiple challenges that require differentiated solutions. At the economic level, addiction interventions bring significant benefits by curbing the criminal activities associated with drug abuse (Mccollister and French, 2003). The intricate relationship between economic factors and substance use is demonstrated by the fact that the demand for addictive substances responds to fluctuations in their overall price (Chaloupka et al., 1999). These economic dynamics emphasize the importance of considering financial influences in understanding and treating substance abuse.

The economic impact of substance abuse is of particular concern when examining the effects on the adolescent population. Studies suggest that substance abuse among young people can lead to a shortage of the working-

age group in the labor market, contributing to broader economic challenges (Nyameh et al., 2013). While the global community is grappling with the pervasive problem of substance abuse, Malaysia faces challenges in this area. A striking 59.6% of reported cases involve the youth, a population group that is crucial to the country's economic productivity. This alarming statistic emphasizes the urgency of targeted interventions and comprehensive strategies to ensure the well-being of the youth and mitigate the far-reaching economic consequences of their substance abuse.

The literature identifies several protective factors that are critical to the prevention of substance abuse. Family-related factors such as affection, open communication and shared decision-making have been shown to be important elements in fostering a protective environment against substance abuse (Arias and Ferriani, 2010). Adolescents' intentions to avoid substance abuse, combined with characteristics such as self-control, self-efficacy, and negative attitudes toward substance abuse, are additional protective factors that contribute to a resilient foundation against substance abuse (Allahverdipour et al., 2007). Furthermore, parental control and adherence to norms of risk behaviors have been highlighted as crucial protective factors in curbing alcohol consumption, smoking and drug abuse among Polish adolescents (Bargiel et al., 2010). These family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the behavior and choices of adolescents and underline the essential role of family-oriented protective factors in the prevention of substance abuse.

Religiosity and spirituality also emerges as a notable protective factor, especially among Brazilian adolescents from low-income families (Sanchez, 2008). Religious beliefs and practices in this context provide a source of guidance and moral grounding that influence adolescents' decision-making processes and prevent them from abusing drugs. The multifaceted nature of protective factors emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach to the development of prevention strategies that incorporates family and religious dimensions to provide a comprehensive protective framework against the complex challenges of substance abuse.

Research consistently shows that spirituality commitment can serve as protective factors against substance abuse, especially among adolescents (Felipe et al., 2015; Sanchez et al., 2008). This is attributed to factors such as less interaction with deviant peers, conservative attitudes, and a higher sense of well-being (Felipe et al., 2015). However, the specific mechanisms through which these factors operate are not fully understood (Sanchez et al., 2011). Despite the potential of spiritual understanding and practices in the prevention of substance abuse, there is a need for further research to investigate these relationships (Miller, 1998).

In response to this pervasive problem, engaging in spiritual insights and practices emerges as a potential protective factor against the harmful effects of substance abuse. Given the enormous challenge posed by substance abuse, incorporating spiritual principles into daily life offers a promising avenue of prevention. This study aims to investigate spiritual insights and practices as an internal protective factor to prevent drug abuse.

Research Objective

The global prevalence of substance abuse, particularly in Malaysia, underscores the urgency of addressing the impact of substance abuse on society, especially among young people. Despite the recognition of protective factors, the role of spirituality in mitigating substance abuse has not been adequately explored. This study aims to explore how spiritual beliefs and behaviours function as an internal safeguard against substance abuse.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore spiritual perceptions among youths residing in high-risk areas of Malaysia.
2. To examine the spiritual behaviours and practices adopted by youths living in high-risk areas of Malaysia.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the following research questions can be formulated:

1. What are the spiritual beliefs and perceptions of youths living in high-risk areas in Malaysia?
2. What are the spiritual practices of youths in high-risk areas in Malaysia?

Literature Review

Spirituality and Religiosity

In exploring spiritual therapy based on Islamic principles, Wazir et al. (2020) underscore its significance in addressing mental health concerns. Rahman et al. (2022) highlighted the essence of Islamic spirituality as centered on monotheism, emphasizing the importance of recognizing Allah as the sole deity. Moreover, al-Ghazali's delineation of four key components shaping Muslim spirituality, as delineated by Yatimah & Ninggal (2008), further elucidates the multifaceted nature of spiritual development.

In Western contexts, religiosity is often associated with organized worship, while spirituality is defined as the internalization of positive values (Mattis, 2000). Studies have shown that in Western Christian contexts, there is a clear distinction between religiosity and spirituality (Chen et al., 2022). Religiosity and spirituality in Western cultures are multidimensional, involving various interconnected facets at individual and ecological levels (Hardy et al., 2019). Additionally, research has indicated positive cross-sectional correlations between religiosity and spirituality in Western contexts, with varying effect sizes (Chen et al., 2024).

On the other hand, in Eastern cultures, such as in Islamic contexts, there is a more unified view of religiosity and spirituality, rather than a strict dichotomy between the two (Chen et al., 2022). Eastern religiosity is often

described as introverted, primarily focused on the inner life of individuals, while Western religiosity is seen as more extroverted (Edara, 2017). Studies have also shown that Eastern Europeans and Americans with strong religious and spiritual beliefs tend to adopt higher-level, global patterns of thought more than those with weaker beliefs, a relationship that is not as pronounced in Western Europeans (Michaels et al., 2022).

Understanding the relevance of spirituality in guiding moral conduct and adherence to religious principles, various studies have investigated its implications. Az-Zahrani (2005) delves into the spiritual approach, viewing it as instrumental in helping individuals discern between right and wrong. Additionally, Noor (2012) and Abdullah (2014) draw upon al-Ghazali's framework to develop guidance modules aimed at enhancing religiosity and resilience among teenagers and university students, respectively.

The emphasis on drug prevention within national policies reflects the recognition of its effectiveness in curbing substance abuse. As espoused by Jailani & Osman (2015), Islamic psychospiritual approaches offer a holistic means of addressing drug-related issues by aligning individuals with their inherent purpose as servants of God. Furthermore, Wazir et al. (2019) advocate for the use of Islamic psychospiritual therapy in treating mental health disorders and fostering personal growth, thereby contributing to a comprehensive strategy for drug prevention. The enduring influence of Imam al-Ghazali's teachings underscores the depth and relevance of Islamic psychospiritual principles in addressing contemporary societal challenges (Wazir et al., 2020).

Protective Factors to Avoid Drug Abuse

A diverse array of protective factors has been identified in the literature that contribute significantly to the prevention of drug abuse in adolescents. Allahverdipour et al (2007) conducted a study in which they identified behavioral intentions, the ability to resist peers, a negative attitude towards drugs and self-control as key predictors influencing adolescents' intentions against drug abuse. Strengthening behavioral intentions, particularly in the context of peer interactions, has been shown to be an important protective factor deterring drug abuse and associated risk behaviors. Cultivating intentional behaviors plays a critical role in building a solid foundation for adolescents to resist the lure of substance abuse.

Bargiel et al. (2010) examined the factors that protect young people from risk behaviors such as alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking and drug abuse and created models of protective factors tailored to Polish adolescents. Their findings highlight the crucial role of parental control, adherence to norms and the promotion of positive relationships, particularly with fathers, in reinforcing protective measures against the uptake of risk behaviors. Parental influence and the establishment of clear norms in the family environment prove to be crucial components in protecting adolescents from the temptations of substance abuse. Gerevich and Bácskai (1996) have extended research into the dynamics of vulnerability and protectiveness in social development, particularly regarding substance use. Their comprehensive analysis emphasizes the complicated relationship between protective factors and vulnerability, with certain forms of family escape identified as predictors that counteract the development of drug use. Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of protective factors and emphasize conscious behaviors, family influences and positive relationships as crucial elements in the prevention of drug abuse among adolescents. Religiosity was also identified as a protective factor. For example, Sanchez (2008) found that belief in and practice of religion can prevent drug use, especially among Brazilian adolescents with low incomes.

Spirituality Understanding and Practices as Protective Factors to Avoid Drug Abuse

Ongoing research consistently underscores the pivotal role played by spirituality and religious dedication as protective factors in mitigating substance abuse, particularly among adolescents (Felipe et al., 2015; Sanchez et al., 2008). The study conducted by Felipe et al. (2015) highlights the potential contributions of religiosity and spirituality to professionals working with teenagers, indicating the broader implications of these protective elements. This influence is grounded in various factors, including reduced interaction with delinquent peers, conservative attitudes, and an elevated sense of well-being, forming a comprehensive protective framework (Felipe et al., 2015). Sanchez et al. (2008) further delved into the identification of protective factors crucial for preventing drug use among Brazilian adolescents from low-income families, with family and religiosity emerging as significant protective elements. The study suggests that religion could serve as a relevant protective factor, assisting the family unit in shielding youth from the allure of substance abuse.

However, the precise mechanisms through which these protective factors exert their effects remain not fully comprehended (Sanchez et al., 2011). Despite the acknowledged potential of spiritual understanding and practices in preventing substance abuse, further investigation is imperative to untangle the complexities of these relationships (Miller, 1998). The research emphasizes the necessity for a more holistic understanding of the interplay between spirituality/religious involvement and alcohol/drug abuse, highlighting a conspicuous gap in the existing research domain. Miller (1998) concludes that individuals grappling with substance abuse issues tend to exhibit a lower level of religious involvement, and the process of spiritual (re)engagement appears intricately connected to the journey toward recovery, underscoring the importance of incorporating spiritual aspects into comprehensive addictions research.

Giordano et al. (2015) conducted a study revealing a noteworthy association between positive religious coping, spirituality, and reduced levels of hazardous drinking and marijuana use among college students. Their findings underscored the protective role of positive religious coping and various dimensions of spirituality in mitigating the risks associated with substance abuse. Interestingly, the study did not identify significant

variations in religious coping and spirituality among distinct groups of psychostimulant users, suggesting a potential universality in these protective factors. Concurrently, Kulis et al. (2012) conducted research emphasizing the positive impact of adherence to religious beliefs and active involvement in religious institutions on reducing substance use, particularly among urban American Indian youth.

The discussion section of these studies briefly encapsulates the challenges associated with comprehending spirituality and religion within communities, emphasizing the necessity for collaborative partnerships to formulate effective interventions. Hodge et al. (2001) further substantiated these findings, demonstrating that heightened spirituality and increased engagement in religious activities correlated with a higher likelihood of never using marijuana and hard drugs among rural youths. Specifically, heightened participation in religious activities was associated with a greater likelihood of abstinence from alcohol use. The implications of these collective findings extend to the development of prevention programs, the enhancement of social work education, and the progression of research in this domain. Altogether, these studies underscore the potential of spiritual practices as robust protective factors against the onset of substance abuse.

Method

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research enables a thorough investigation of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, offering detailed insights that quantitative methods might overlook (Pope et al., 2002). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasize the importance of qualitative methods in research, particularly in understanding and describing experiences. They advocate for a basic qualitative design that allows researchers to delve into participants' experiences without necessarily focusing on the essence of a phenomenon. Ensuring alignment between the researcher's belief system, the research question, and the chosen qualitative approach is essential for upholding the rigor and validity of research findings (Teherani et al., 2015).

Moreover, qualitative methods are instrumental in providing detailed contextual information and enhancing comprehension of complex processes and phenomena (Wilkinson et al., 2013; Tarin, 2017). Through the application of qualitative data analysis techniques, researchers can translate data into meaningful explanations and interpretations, shedding light on the complexities of human behaviour and decision-making (Tarin, 2017). Utilizing qualitative research methods can also aid in effectively engaging participants, offering a methodological framework that fosters involvement and active participation in the research process (Tulle & Palmer, 2020).

Data Collection

This study aims to identify understandings about spiritual concepts and spiritual activities practiced by youth living in the hot spot area. Data were collected from participants through focus group discussion (FGD) interview sessions.

Qualitative research, as emphasized by Bloor (2016), tackles social problems affecting practitioners through detailed descriptions, enabling inferences about life experiences. FGD, rooted in respondents' experiences and observations, allows the exploration of people's thoughts or feelings on issues, ideas, products, or services (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Participants engage in discussions and counterarguments akin to informal settings (Lauri, 2019), uncovering a broad range of factors and perspectives within the discussed issue.

The FGD interview, conducted in Malay language with an interview guide, serves to reveal diverse insights. Focus group discussions, defined by Bloor et al. (2000), are a qualitative research method that delves into participants' perspectives and experiences. This proves particularly beneficial in social research, providing access to participants' language and encouraging the production of detailed accounts (Wilkinson, 1998). In the context of medical education, focus groups have been applied to assess both undergraduate education and professional development (Barbour, 2005).

Despite their utility, methodological issues of focus group interviews, such as group size and composition, require careful consideration (McLafferty, 2004). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, focus group discussions remain a valuable tool for collecting diverse and rich data in various research contexts.

A preliminary pilot was conducted before the formal interview to enhance and correct the interview guide. In qualitative research, pilot interviews hold significance as they contribute to refining the main study and improving the interview guide, as emphasized by Majid et al. (2017). Their importance extends to ethnographic studies, where they can anticipate research problems and questions, identify gaps in data collection, and address broader issues such as research validity and ethics, as mentioned by Sampson (2004). Furthermore, pilot studies play a critical role in testing research instruments, offering valuable insights into the research environment, and enabling reflection to inform the main study, as noted by Brooks et al. (2016).

The study encompasses ten Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) representing the relevant districts. Each FGD is overseen by a single moderator who dedicates approximately two hours to each session. Employing a one-off interview protocol, this qualitative research avoids any experimental or intervention aspects, ensuring no direct impact on the participants. Furthermore, ethical approval for this study was obtained from two ethics boards: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2020-174) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM/JKEP/2022/-202).

Sampling Method

The study focuses on youth residing in the identified hot spot area, selected through the purposive sampling method. Consequently, the findings are not applicable to the entire community due to the specific nature of the sampling approach. The use of purposive sampling in this research aims to represent the particular scope of the sample size. In contrast, snowball sampling was later employed to ensure the appropriate selection of genuine participants. Purposive sampling enables researchers to choose individuals for a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon, while snowball sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, involves participants recommending others to sample during the course of the study (Creswell, 2015).

Widely utilized in qualitative research, purposive sampling is preferred for its capacity to align the sample with research objectives, thereby enhancing the study's rigor and trustworthiness (Campbell et al., 2020). Particularly valuable in implementation research, this method can be combined with other sampling strategies to better align with research goals (Palinkas et al., 2013). Nonetheless, ethical considerations and potential biases should be carefully weighed when employing purposive sampling (Denieffe, 2020).

In this study, participation involved five participants in each of the ten groups, representing five states in Malaysia. The study focused on youth residing in hot spot areas with no history of drug substance abuse. The primary criteria for participants were individuals aged 19 to 39, aligning with the National Anti-Drug Agency (NADA) definition in 2019. NADA identified five states with high substance abuse cases in Malaysia, from which two districts were selected in each state. Community leaders were then approached for referrals to suitable participants.

Selection criteria included youth aged 19 to 39, residing in NADA-designated high-risk areas, and not involved in substance abuse. Exclusion criteria consisted of youth engaged in substance abuse and those diagnosed with mental illness. The sampling process involved defining the age range, receiving referrals from NADA for high substance abuse cases, identifying the top five states with drug addiction statistics, obtaining district lists from NADA, obtaining contact information for village leaders in hot spot districts, receiving respondent lists from village leaders, and utilizing the snowball method to acquire additional respondents from the initial referrals.

Interview Protocol

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted through Google Meet. Participants were notified of the FGD sessions, including the date and time, via telephone by the moderator. Online Google Meet sessions grouped together ten respondents from the same district area, all moderated by enumerators previously trained by member researchers. Participants were reminded by the moderator to check internet stability and enter the discussion room fifteen minutes early to ensure smooth operation. Once internet stability was confirmed, the interview session commenced, lasting two hours. Tokens and certificates were subsequently provided to participants as a gesture of appreciation.

The recorded interviews underwent transcription and were subjected to thematic analysis, a widely employed method for qualitatively analyzing interview data. Thematic analysis involves coding the data and building themes accordingly, with various approaches and applications. Jugder (2016) and Evans & Lewis (2018) exemplify the utilization of thematic analysis in exploring specific research questions. Braun et al. (2014) and Lawless and Chen (2019) further elaborate on the method, with Braun emphasizing the fluid nature of research questions and the necessity for open and exploratory approaches, while Lawless introduces a critical thematic analysis method considering power relations and ideologies. Thematic analysis provides both flexibility and in-depth analysis for interpreting interview data.

To assess the reliability of the interview guide, two raters with qualitative research experience were enlisted for evaluation. According to Rau and Shih (2021), involving two raters is sufficient for calculating the coefficient value. Researchers determined the agreement coefficient value using Cohen's (1960, 1968) formula:

$$K = \frac{fa - fc}{N - fc}$$

Here, K represents the coefficient value, fa denotes observed agreement, fc signifies the probability of chance agreement, and N represents the units of the item. Cohen's kappa, a gauge of inter-rater agreement, is a weighted average of kappa values from collapsed tables (Warrens, 2011). It serves as a lower bound of other agreement coefficients and is akin to Gini's coefficients in practice (Warrens, 2013). Despite the introduction of the random error coefficient, Cohen's kappa remains the preferred measure of agreement (Dewey, 1983). The extension of Cohen's weighted kappa to multiple raters and ordered categories is the mean value of unweighted kappa values for embedded 2x2 tables (Mielke and Berry, 2009).

Following the computation of the total Kappa agreement score, the fa values for the two raters were: (1) Rater 1 = 8 and (2) Rater 2 = 9. The probability of chance agreement fc is 50% from the chance agreement ($fc=1$), while N represents the total items evaluated ($N=2$). After calculation, the coefficient value for Rater 1 is 0.7, and for Rater 2, it is 0.8. In accordance with Rau and Shih's (2021) interpretation using the Landis and Koch (1977) scale, a coefficient value between 0.61-0.8 is considered substantial. Thus, the coefficient value for the interview guide is deemed acceptable.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the method for scrutinizing the data, aiming to identify, analyze, and interpret meanings (themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2015). The initiation of the process involved

reading transcribed audio recordings to grasp the data and identify potential emerging codes and themes. Each theme encapsulated crucial information pertinent to the research question, embodying a pattern of response or meaning discerned from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions' dataset. Chua (2020) advocated for coding the data and subsequently grouping it into themes based on the similarity of meanings. Researchers meticulously documented participant excerpts reflecting their comments, thoughts, and responses regarding PF and RF. NVivo 12 software was utilized to facilitate the organization and coding of the data, offering features that align with user instructions in the analytical process (Wolf & Silver, 2017). Widely adopted in qualitative research (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Walsh, 2003; Welsh, 2002), NVivo, as highlighted by Hoover and Koerber (2011), brings efficiency, transparency, multiplicity, the capacity to capture mixed quantitative and qualitative data (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019), and the ability to accommodate rich and extensive datasets (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Walsh, 2003; Welsh, 2002). The themes and categories derived from the transcribed data were organized according to the two main objectives mentioned earlier. Several overarching themes were identified from the transcribed data, with detailed explanations of themes and categories presented in the subsequent section.

Finding and Discussion

Table 1.1 Understanding on Spiritual Concept

Themes	f	%	
Understanding on Spiritual Concept	Religious devotion and internalization	27	29,35%
	Connection with Allah	21	22,83%
	Inner strength	19	20,65%
	Distinguishing between good and bad	14	15,22%
	Knowing oneself and knowing God	11	11,96%
	TOTAL	116	100

The Table 1.1 above summarized participants responses when being asked about understanding on spiritual concept. The highest frequency is attributed to religious devotion and internalization. 27 respondents emphasized its importance, closely followed by 21 participants who emphasized the importance of their connection to Allah. In addition, 19 people emphasized the cultivation of inner strength, while 14 highlighted the distinction between good and evil, indicating their moral considerations. Furthermore, 11 respondents expressed that the pursuit of self-knowledge and God-knowledge are intertwined, illustrating the inseparable link between self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment in their narratives.

Religious Devotion and Internalization

The insights gained from the interviews offer a rich spectrum of perspectives on our respondents' understanding of spiritual concepts. A significant proportion, 23.28%, emphasized the nature of religious devotion as a cornerstone of their spiritual understanding. This emphasizes the importance of committed religious practices in shaping their overall perspective on spirituality. Y-KT-2 said,

"For me, the determinant of understanding lies not in education but in internalization, because religious education alone is not sufficient; we need internalization to comprehend everything"

Y-KT-2 emphasizes the necessity of internalizing religious teachings beyond mere acquisition of knowledge. This sentiment reflects a broader understanding among respondents regarding the essential role of spiritual commitment in shaping perspectives and behavior.

Representing youth leader, YL-J-2 added:

"In terms of spirituality, worldly and hereafter knowledge should ideally be balanced, shouldn't it? Each is necessary. As an example, today, I emphasize once again, it's not lack of religious education that causes social factors and so on. But what is most accurate is the internalization of religion, right? Today, many people achieve straight A's in campus. Many receive certificates up to special degrees. But do they pray regularly every day? That's the question, isn't it? Today, people are intelligent with smartphones and all, but is the internalization of religion instilled in them, in their families, and that's the most important thing, its application. Not just accumulating knowledge in the mind but not practicing it. That's the problem. That's why today the internalization of religion is important. That's why spirituality is important because it truly educates."

The narratives shared by Y-KT-2 and YL-K-2 provide tangible examples of how religious devotion and internalization serve as transformative forces in individuals' lives. Their reflections shed light on the importance of integrating spiritual principles into daily practices and beliefs, especially amidst the complex challenges faced in high-risk environments.

"Religion is the space for us to learn and deepen our understanding of that religion. For what will happen to drug addicts, firstly, they lack knowledge of the religion itself. For example, someone comes to ask the religious scholar, "Can I pray even though I'm involved in adultery, drug addiction, and so on?" And the religious scholar says, "Yes, you can pray. God willing." Even though they engage in vile acts like drug addiction and so on, if they consistently perform the five daily prayers, repent, and do not persist in those

acts, eventually they will abandon those vile deeds altogether. So, I believe it's good for us to practice Islam within ourselves. Hopefully, what we acquire, we can convey to others, and that serves as a form of preaching to control ourselves from wicked actions that can destroy both the individual and the entire community." (YL-K-2)

YL-K-2 illustrates the practical implications of religious dedication in addressing societal issues such as drug addiction. By emphasizing the potential for spiritual guidance to inspire personal transformation and communal well-being, this perspective reinforces the significance of faith-based practices in fostering resilience.

These testimonies underscore the intricate relationship between spiritual engagement and individual resilience, particularly in navigating adversities prevalent in high-risk areas. By acknowledging the transformative power of religious devotion and internalization, communities can work towards creating supportive environments that nurture holistic well-being and empower individuals to lead fulfilling lives.

Connection with Allah

For 18.10% of participants, establishing a profound connection with Allah emerged as a cornerstone of their spiritual understanding. This connection serves as a guiding principle in their daily lives, shaping their decisions and conduct in accordance with their faith. Y-KL-6 articulated this viewpoint, stating,

"When a person realizes their mistakes and endeavours to correct them, whether they like it or not, they are said to be drawing closer to Allah. For non-Muslims, it means they are striving to improve themselves towards a better path."

Furthermore, SL-J-2 emphasized the significance of spirituality, highlighting its role in fostering awareness of Allah and strengthening the bond with Him. The participant remarked,

"Spirituality is very important because when there is a spiritual concept that we practice, when we engage in spiritual programs, it can make us more conscious of Allah and bring us closer to Him." (SL-J-2)

Another participant, elaborated on the distinction between physical and spiritual nourishment, drawing parallels between the care required for the body and the soul, *"And spirituality, if we understand it, is different from the body. If for the body, people say to strengthen it, we need to eat, drink, and get enough sleep, then the body will become strong. Spiritual matters are similar but different. People say that if we don't take care of our spirituality in the sense of obeying what Allah has commanded, because there are spiritual foods too, just like for the body. For the body, people say it's food, drinks, and so on. Spirituality also has its nourishment. Among its nourishments, scholars say, are our relationship with Allah, performing the five daily prayers, reading the Quran, remembrance of Allah, and other religious practices like fasting, giving zakat, and so on. And that will cause our spirituality to draw closer to Allah. And that is very important to take care of compared to what people say about the body."* (RL-S-2)

In conclusion, the testimonies provided by interviewees underscore the pivotal role of spirituality in guiding individuals towards a deeper connection with Allah and fostering a sense of consciousness in their daily lives. These insights highlight the significance of spiritual practices in nurturing the soul and cultivating resilience, offering valuable guidance for individuals seeking spiritual fulfillment in navigating life's challenges.

Inner Strength

The concept of inner strength emerged as a significant theme among 16.38% of respondents, who emphasized the role of spiritual grounding as a source of resilience and fortitude in confronting life's trials. Y-J-4 articulated this sentiment, stating,

"The spiritual concept is very important. Because, whatever situation we're in, even if being prisoned, apart from the punishment they undergo, they will have a slot. Every day they will go through a spiritual slot. It means they remind themselves, like that. And in terms of spirituality, if we look at people who have been involved with drugs, what we strengthen in terms of their spirituality, they are stronger than ordinary people. Because, you know, they have experienced it. And they have felt it. So, they don't want others to become like them. That's why spirituality is important for preventing oneself and others."

SL-S-4 further elaborated on the importance of spiritual practice as a means of self-reflection and inner fortification, remarking,

"This is very important, because spirituality is one of the practices, self-practices, individual practices. Yes, practice. It is a daily practice that we should adhere to. In my opinion, it is. Because without the awareness of our heart, it is difficult. This is where we are easily influenced and fall easily, especially... it is common knowledge that those who take drugs are those who are disappointed, those who are heartbroken, those who have family problems, educational problems, financial and economic problems and many others. So spirituality is important, it is inner strength." (SL-S-4)

Additionally, another participant underscored the foundational significance of spirituality, cautioning against neglecting this aspect as it could lead individuals towards negative influences. NG-K-3 noted,

"It is an important foundation for everyone. If this is neglected, these people are likely to be close to demons and devils, that's what they mean, perhaps among the groups that are easily influenced. However, there are also religious groups involved, but what can they do, it's their sustenance, right? For ourselves, if we can improve our spiritual aspect or inner strength, it's already good enough. When someone's spirituality is

lacking, it means their inner strength is also diminished, and when faced with situations like this, they are sure to fall and easily succumb." (NG-K-3)

In essence, the testimonies provided underscore the indispensable role of spirituality in nurturing inner strength and resilience amidst life's adversities. By emphasizing the significance of spiritual grounding, these insights offer valuable guidance for individuals seeking to navigate challenges and maintain a sense of strength and purpose in their lives.

Distinguishing Between Good and Bad

The moral discernment between good and evil, highlighted by 12.0% of participants, signifies the ethical compass instilled by their spiritual convictions. Y-S-4 articulated this notion, stating,

"How we perceive life around us, like how we see whether something is good or not, and spirituality becomes a guide for us to make decisions in life, like should I take that thing, should I be friends with them, so basically religious beliefs or spirituality-related matters are very important because they help us to see the world and how to continue in life."

These perspectives highlight the pivotal role of spiritual beliefs in guiding moral decision-making and shaping individuals' ethical frameworks. SL-K-5 emphasized the indispensable role of religious education in shaping individuals' understanding of sin and virtue, stating:

"Its importance cannot be denied. Everyone needs proper religious education so that we know what is sinful, what is forbidden, and what merits rewards. So, with religious education, it becomes difficult for us to engage in improper actions. Therefore, religious education is very important to be taught to children, especially at an early stage."

Furthermore, another interviewee underscored the repercussions of spiritual unawareness, cautioning against straying from ethical principles despite knowing the prohibitions. NG-K-4 noted:

"So if we lack awareness within ourselves, that is the destruction within us, even though we know that alcohol is forbidden, drugs are forbidden, and so on, but we still commit those mistakes and drift further away from the mercy of Allah, our spiritual or inner selves are ruined." (NG-K-4)

In essence, the insights provided by respondents underscore the vital importance of spiritual guidance in fostering moral discernment and ethical conduct. By emphasizing the value of religious education and self-awareness, these perspectives offer valuable guidance for individuals striving to maintain integrity and righteousness in their lives.

Knowing Oneself and Knowing God

The concept of self-awareness and divine connection holds significance for 9.48% of respondents, reflecting a belief in the intertwined journey of self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment. Y-KL-4 articulated this perspective, stating,

"To know God, we must know ourselves. So when we don't know ourselves, we won't be able to know God. That's the concept in spirituality."

SL-J-2 further emphasized the importance of spiritual practices in deepening one's connection to Allah, stating, *"For me, it's very important because when we have a spiritual concept that we practice, what I mean is when we engage in spiritual programs, they can make us adhere more to Allah. It can bring us closer to Allah. For example, just like our bodies, when we want to eat, when we want to live, we need food, right? So when our hearts are like that, our selves are like that, our inner selves are like that. When we feel lost, we need spiritual nourishment, that's what I mean. Like programs such as celebrating the birth of the Prophet (Maulid), those things can bring us closer to Allah, introduce ourselves to who our creator is."* (SL-J-2)

Additionally, another participant underscored the significance of acknowledging Allah as the Creator and seeking closeness to Him through various spiritual means. NG-K-4 remarked,

"This spirituality or inner spiritual aspect, in Islam, it means that as humans who have been born by Allah on this earth, there is our Creator, and we must acknowledge Him. So, to get to know Him, Allah has given us several ways to get closer to Him." (NG-K-4)

Table 1.2 **Religious Practices**

	Themes	f	%
Religious practices	Maintaining obligatory prayers	80	31,13%
	Reciting <i>ma'thurat</i>	56	21,79%
	Reciting <i>zikir</i> / religious chants	44	17,12%
	Reading the Quran / Reading religious scriptures	39	15,18%
	Performing congregational prayers	19	7,39%
	<i>Muhasabah</i> / Self-reflection	19	7,39%
	Total	324	100

Table 1.2 provided outlines religious practices reported by the interviewees. Obligatory prayers emerged as the most prevalent, with 80 participants emphasizing their significance in cultivating discipline. Furthermore, 56

Muslim respondents mentioned reciting *ma'thurat*, while 44 individuals, regardless of religious affiliation, mentioned engaging in *zikir* or other religious chants for spiritual fortification. Reading religious texts, notably the Quran, was highlighted by 39 participants as a source of guidance. Interestingly, 19 individuals each cited both congregational prayers and *muhasabah*, or self-reflection, underscoring the importance of communal support and personal introspection in bolstering resilience against substance abuse. These findings emphasize the diverse ways in which religious engagement contributes to promoting healthy lifestyles.

Maintaining Obligatory Prayers

The interviews provided valuable insights into the diverse spiritual practices of participants, revealing a mosaic of rituals and behaviors that nurture their spiritual well-being. Chief among these practices is the steadfast commitment to observing obligatory prayers, with 24.69% of respondents highlighting their pivotal role in daily spiritual life.

Y-J-4 eloquently encapsulated the significance of sharing spiritual practices, emphasizing the foundational importance of performing the five daily prayers. Y-J-4 remarked, *"To share these spiritual practices, for me, how do I share this? Okay, let's start with the first one, the five daily prayers. When one completes these five daily prayers, God willing, it serves as the main pillar. Because when we perform our prayers, that's why people say prayers are the mainstay. It softens the heart and makes us reflect on ourselves."*

Furthermore, YL-J-1 underscored the non-negotiable nature of practicing obligatory acts, specifically citing the importance of performing the five daily prayers. They stated, *"When it comes to practicing the obligatory acts (fardhu ain), there's no need to discuss it. It means performing the five obligatory prayers, which we should all do."* (YL-J-1)

Similarly, another participant emphasized the fundamental nature of performing the five daily prayers as a basic spiritual practice. SL-S-2 remarked, *"The most basic spiritual practice is for us to perform the five daily prayers. That's the least"*

In essence, the insights gleaned from the interviews underscore the central role of performing obligatory prayers as a cornerstone of spiritual practice. By emphasizing the shared commitment to observing these prayers, participants demonstrate a collective dedication to nurturing their spiritual well-being through daily rituals.

Reciting Ma'thurat

For 17.28% of participants, reciting the Ma'thurat holds significant importance, highlighting the value of engaging in specific supplications and invocations to foster spiritual connection. One interviewee emphasizes the efficacy of reciting al-Ma'thurat in the morning and evening for divine protection, stating:

"When we recite the 'mathurat' in the morning, Allah will protect us until the evening, and when we recite it after the afternoon prayer, Allah will safeguard us until the night. It means until the next morning." (Y-J-3).

YL-J-2 suggests incorporating the practice of reciting al-Ma'thurat in the morning and evening as a form of spiritual protection and enrichment, alongside reading the Quran, to draw closer to divine guidance and maintain focus on the hereafter:

"We can also try to practice reciting Al-Mathurat in the morning and evening as a form of protection for us. Besides that, as we read the Quran and so on, we can also do it as a form of spiritual enrichment so that inspiration or divine guidance comes closer to us, so that we always remember the hereafter." (YL-J-2)

Additionally, NG-KT-1 emphasizes the enduring significance of reciting al-Ma'thurat as a form of spiritual remembrance that provides continuous safeguarding,

"One practice that has been consistent from the past until now is the practice of reciting Al-Mathurat; it's our remembrance. It's the common remembrance that safeguards us." (NG-KT-1)

Reciting Zikir / Religious Chants

Religious chanting, commonly known as *zikir*, constitutes a vital aspect of the spiritual practices of 13.58% of respondents, providing them with a rhythmic and repetitive avenue for expressing devotion. Engaging in religious chanting, particularly through practices like *zikir*, is perceived as a significant protective measure against drug abuse, reflecting its role in fortifying individuals spiritually.

Y-J-3 underscores the importance of integrating spiritual routines into daily life, highlighting the practice of reciting protective phrases before stepping out, emphasizing reliance on divine guidance for safeguarding against external influences,

"For spiritual activities, for me, it's a routine that I practice before leaving the house. Inside the house, everything is fine by the grace of Allah. However, when we step outside, we encounter many people and various influences, which may pose risks. So, I recite phrases like 'bismillahitawakkaltu 'alallah.' Insha-Allah, as soon as we step out, Allah sends angels to protect us. That's what I always do" (Y-J-3).

Furthermore, the discussion on the significance of vocalized remembrance and familial teachings elucidates the multifaceted nature of spiritual armor, emphasizing its cleansing and purifying effects on individuals' hearts and minds. SL-K-4 stated,

"Personally, when I see things like this (drug abuse), the first thing I do is ask Allah not to turn my heart away because I left my job 8 years ago solely to serve with NGOs, to witness the destruction of Malay and Muslim"

children. When facing all of this, I need to be strong for myself, so I cleanse myself with voluntary prayers, never neglect remembrance (zikir), read the Quran even if it's just a line. These are the things I hold onto: remembrance, the beautiful names of Allah, reading the stories of the prophets. I use examples like these as sources of strength. In times like this, as leaders, we need that, one for ourselves and another for others to see. Perhaps we don't realize it, but people notice what we do every day because these inner things reflect our character outwardly." (SL-K-4)

Another participant also shared,

"And in our remembrance, with the phrase "LA ILAHA ILLALLAH," our remembrance must be vocalized or intensified because it is to soften our hard, or stubborn hearts that cause us to harden our voices a bit on the phrase "LA ILAHA ILLALLAH" so that our hearts can hear. So, if we engage in this remembrance, according to Prophet Muhammad, it is a purification of ourselves, meaning the cleanser for our hearts is through the remembrance of Allah. So, just as outwardly if our clothes are dirty, we wash them with water and soap, or if our faces and bodies are dirty, we wash them with water." (NG-K-4)

Reading The Quran / Reading Religious Scriptures

A remarkable 12.04% of respondents value reading the Quran and other religious scriptures, emphasizing the importance of engaging with sacred texts for spiritual enrichment.

"Okay, my usual practice is reading the Quran. I diligently read the Quran because when we read and understand its translation, there are many good things that lead us to become better people. We won't get trapped in things that are not beneficial and can harm us. Even in the Quran, it's said to be our guide in life. Because in this world, what is the real purpose of our life? Everything is narrated in the Quran. So, for me, the most frequent practice that could be a shield for myself, and maybe for others too, is to diligently read the Quran. Don't be lazy. By regularly reading, God willing, when we read the Quran, it shapes our hearts to become useful and successful individuals. God willing, in this world and the hereafter." (YL-S-2)

Another participant underscored the importance of consistency in religious practices, "It's like in (our community) in Johor, Surah Al-Fath is a favorite. If someone feels comfortable and joyful when reciting Surah Al-Fath, then they should continue. But do it consistently. When all deeds are done consistently, God willing, the blessings will eventually come" (NG-J-3)

Y-J-8 shared the family tradition of reciting specific chapters of the Quran, "Among other practices, between Maghrib and Isha, usually my family and I gather to recite Quran, especially we read Surah Ar-Rahman and Surah Al-Waqiah. And before sleeping, one of our practices is that I must listen to Surah Al-Mulk before I can sleep soundly." (Y-J-8)

Performing congregational prayers

Among the participants, 7.39% highlighted the significance of performing congregational prayers as part of their routine spiritual practices.

NG-J-2 emphasizes the importance of consistency in performing the five daily prayers,

"The five daily prayers that we aim to be consistent in, especially for men, are the first prayer of the day and also praying in congregation. If we can be consistent in that, God willing, there will be prayers within those prayers. That's when we pray."

SL-K-3 reflects on the obligatory nature of congregational prayer in Islam,

"For me, we were born with the Islamic faith, so what's obligatory must be done. Like, I may not be able to go to the mosque regularly, but if possible, I try to go to the mosque for congregational prayers whenever I have spare time." (SL-K-3)

Additionally, RL-S-2 acknowledges the importance of observing congregational prayer, particularly highlighting its significance for men in Islam,

"Okay, as for our spiritual practices, among the things we need to observe are the five daily prayers, congregational prayer for men, and for women, they pray at home." (RL-S-2)

Muhasabah / Self-reflection

7.39% of the participants acknowledged engaging in congregational prayers as a component of their regular spiritual routines,

Y-KL-3 describes a nightly practice of self-reflection, highlighting the importance of introspection to assess personal achievements and spiritual growth,

"Well, not necessarily frequent, but I'm quite accustomed to it. What I usually do is every night around midnight, I'll reflect on myself. Like today, what have I accomplished? I'll self-reflect."

Another participant emphasizes the individual aspect of spiritual practice, illustrating the significance of personal reflection as a means of fostering spiritual development,

"Perhaps sometimes we're too busy, but that's just how it is. We need to reflect on ourselves. Even though it's not necessarily leading towards getting involved with drugs or anything, it's just for our own sake." (YL-S-4)

NG-S-2 underscores the importance of drawing closer to the Divine through self-reflection,

"We need to frequently self-reflect, draw closer to the Almighty Creator. That's how it is, to distance ourselves from prohibitions and enhance our deeds."

In summary, the amalgamation of these various spiritual practices among respondents emphasizes the richness and depth of their commitment to cultivating a robust spiritual life.

Discussion

The global problem of drug abuse, which is particularly pronounced in Malaysia, underscores the urgent need to address its impact on society, especially on the youth. Although various protective factors are known, the potential influence of spirituality in reducing substance abuse remains largely unexplored. This study aims to investigate the role of spiritual beliefs and behaviors as internal protective measures against substance abuse among youth in high-risk areas in Malaysia. Through qualitative research, the study aims to explore the spiritual beliefs, behaviors and practices of adolescents in these regions and to shed light on their potential protective effects against drug abuse.

The concept of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, the advocacy of good and the prohibition of evil, is of particular importance for the treatment of drug problems in the context of Islamic spirituality, as explained in the previous narrative. In the context of drug prevention, the concept of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* becomes an effective tool in the fight against drug abuse. In essence, the principles of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, which are deeply rooted in Islamic spirituality, provide a framework for addressing drug problems by promoting righteousness and discouraging destructive behaviors.

The article addresses the importance of spirituality and spiritual practices within the framework of Islamic principles, highlighting their role in addressing mental health issues and guiding moral judgment. Scholars such as Wazir et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of spirituality in addressing mental health issues, while Rahman et al. (2022) highlight the core of Islamic spirituality that focuses on the recognition of Allah as the only deity. Furthermore, the framework of al-Ghazali presented by Yatimah & Ninggal (2008) elaborates on the components that characterize Muslim spirituality and provides insights into its multifaceted nature. Studies by Az-Zahrani (2005), Noor (2012) and Abdullah (2014) explore the importance of spirituality in moral judgment and resilience, contributing to a broader understanding of its importance in guiding behavior. Jailani & Osman (2015) argue for Islamic psychospiritual approaches to curb substance abuse that align individuals with their destiny as servants of God. Furthermore, Wazir et al. (2019) propose the use of Islamic psychospiritual therapy to treat mental disorders and promote personal growth, providing a comprehensive approach to drug prevention. The enduring influence of Imam al-Ghazali's teachings underscores the depth and relevance of Islamic psychospiritual principles in addressing contemporary societal challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the paramount importance of spirituality among youth, serving not only as a protective factor but also as a vital coping mechanism. The exploration of spiritual insights and practices among youth in high-risk areas reveals the depth of their spiritual engagement, offering a profound glimpse into how spirituality can serve as a guiding light amidst adversity. By embracing spiritual values and practices, youths are equipped with the inner strength and resilience needed to withstand external pressures, including the allure of drug abuse. Through the cultivation of a robust spiritual foundation, individuals are empowered to navigate life's challenges with clarity and purpose, thereby reducing their susceptibility to drug-related issues.

Moreover, this study elucidates the transformative power of spirituality in addressing drug-related concerns among youth. By emphasizing the importance of internalizing religious beliefs and engaging in spiritual practices, the research underscores the role of spirituality in shaping individuals' moral compass and decision-making processes. Through spiritual enlightenment and adherence to religious teachings, youths are encouraged to lead virtuous lives and uphold moral values, thereby deterring them from engaging in drug abuse. Consequently, fostering a culture of spirituality among youth not only fosters personal growth and well-being but also serves as a formidable deterrent against the prevalence of drug-related problems in communities, ultimately contributing to the creation of a healthier and more resilient society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study is financially supported by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia under the Long-Term Research Grant Scheme (LRGS) – Project Group 6 titled 'Development of Psychospiritual Based Prevention Module for Drug-Free Community' Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) grant code number: USIM/LRGS/FKP/50119. The research is part of the LRGS project titled 'Fostering Long-term Change to Create Drug-Free community in Malaysian Youth: Understanding the Trajectories and Genetics in the Development of Effective Prevention and Intervention Model with Smart Geo-Spatial Apps monitoring' (JPT grant code number: LRGS/1/2019/UKM-USIM/02/2/6). This collaboration involves researchers from the Asian Centre for Research on Drug Abuse, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, and a team of researchers from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu.

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