



Religious Literacy, Moral Reasoning, and Civic Engagement among Malaysian University Students: A Qualitative PRISMA Review

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Abstract

This review synthesized evidence on how religious literacy shapes moral reasoning and how both relate to civic engagement among university students in Malaysia. A qualitative systematic review was designed using PRISMA 2020 reporting logic. Searches were conducted across major academic databases and complementary sources using combinations of terms related to religious literacy, moral reasoning, civic engagement, higher education, and Malaysia. Peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026 were screened against inclusion criteria focused on university and youth populations, explicit conceptual relevance, and sufficient methodological detail. The final corpus comprised 38 studies, which were coded thematically. The literature converged on three patterns. First, religious literacy was consistently framed as comparative, critical, and dialogic competence rather than mere doctrinal recall. Second, moral reasoning appeared as the mediating mechanism that translated religious understanding into ethical judgment. Third, civic engagement emerged most strongly where institutions created deliberative spaces, community partnerships, and digitally literate participation channels. Malaysian studies emphasized ethnic unity, civic participation, and ethical formation in multicultural higher education settings. Religious literacy does not operate as a purely private religious trait; it functions as civic infrastructure when it cultivates perspective taking, moral deliberation, and public responsibility. Universities in Malaysia can strengthen this pathway by embedding comparative religious literacy, reflective ethics, and service-oriented civic learning into general education curricula.

Keywords: *Religious Competence; Ethical Judgment; Public Responsibility; Higher Education; Interfaith Learning; Youth Citizenship.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Religious life remains socially consequential in higher education because universities do not merely transmit credentials, they also shape interpretive habits, civic dispositions, and moral vocabularies. In plural settings, students encounter competing truth claims, religious symbols in public life, and emotionally charged disputes over identity, belonging, and social responsibility. Religious literacy has therefore moved beyond a narrow information model toward a broader public competency that supports dialogue, reflexivity, and civic coexistence (Walker et al., 2021; Soules & Jafralie, 2021; Imamah & Lee, 2024). At the same time, civic engagement research has shown that universities influence not only voting or volunteering, but also students' willingness to deliberate, cooperate, and act on behalf of the common good (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Gómez & Suárez, 2023; Fenn et al., 2024). These trajectories matter in Malaysia, where higher education institutions operate within a multiethnic and multireligious environment and where public discourse increasingly links civic cohesion to ethical formation and social trust (Wan Husin et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022; Razak et al., 2023).

The concept of religious literacy has become more expansive in recent scholarship. It now includes comparative understanding of traditions, recognition of intra-religious diversity, critical reading of religion in media and policy, and dialogic awareness of how belief shapes social action (von Brömssen et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021; Mason, 2021; Ubani, 2025). This expansion is important because doctrinal recall alone rarely equips students to navigate moral disagreement or public controversy. Religious literacy becomes socially meaningful when it helps learners distinguish between identity assertion and ethical reasoning, between inherited norm and reflective judgment, and between private conviction and public responsibility (Soules & Jafralie, 2021; Eric et al., 2024; Singsuriya & Rimpeng, 2025). In digital environments, this competence is even more consequential. Students are exposed to fragmented religious information, algorithmic amplification, and simplified moral narratives, which can narrow rather than deepen understanding unless literacy is paired with critical evaluation skills (Ashari et al., 2023; Rolando et al., 2024; Japar et al., 2024).



Moral reasoning occupies the middle ground between internal religious understanding and outward civic action. The reviewed literature treats it as a deliberative process through which students weigh rules, consequences, care, fairness, and social obligations when facing competing claims (Chen & Chen, 2022; Kumnuanek et al., 2022; Fung & Chung, 2024). Higher education can strengthen this process when it creates pedagogical conditions that require reflection, perspective taking, and structured dialogue rather than passive absorption of norms (Evans et al., 2020; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Van Matre et al., 2026). Within religious and civic education, moral reasoning is especially relevant because students often need to translate inherited religious values into judgments about pluralism, digital conduct, public trust, corruption, and social justice. Malaysian studies on university students point in this direction. Research on civic engagement, ethnic unity, and religious domains shows that values education is associated with more responsible public orientation, while qualitative work on academic dishonesty indicates that moral reasoning can support resistance to norm violations even under peer pressure (Wan Husin et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022; Esmaeil et al., 2024).

Civic engagement is the visible social outcome most often linked to educational and ethical formation. It includes participation in community service, student organizations, deliberation on public issues, digital activism, volunteerism, and broader orientations toward democratic responsibility (Evans et al., 2020; Gómez & Suárez, 2023; Japar et al., 2024). In Malaysia, the topic has received growing attention because universities are expected to produce graduates who can handle diversity without collapsing into sectarian closure. Recent studies on university students in Malaysia report that civic engagement is shaped by institutional support, social networks, educational experiences, and normative frameworks that connect religion, ethics, and civic identity (Ahmad et al., 2022; Razak et al., 2023; Yusof et al., 2025). This literature suggests a plausible pathway, yet the pathway has not been assembled into a single synthesis centered on religious literacy and moral reasoning.

However, existing studies have not integrated these three constructs into one coherent review for Malaysian higher education. The literature is fragmented across religious education, ethics education, digital citizenship, and civic participation, and many studies examine only one link in the chain. Some focus on religious literacy without tracing downstream civic effects. Others examine civic engagement without specifying the religious and moral mechanisms that may sustain it. Still others discuss moral reasoning as an educational outcome but do not connect it to religious literacy or public participation. The result is a conceptual gap that limits theory building and policy design. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing studies on religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic engagement among university students, with Malaysia as the contextual anchor and with attention to digitally mediated public life, interfaith learning, and ethical formation. The contribution is twofold. First, it clarifies the conceptual pathway from religious literacy to moral reasoning and then to civic engagement. Second, it identifies the institutional conditions under which that pathway becomes visible in Malaysian higher education.

Section 2 presents the thematic literature review and the conceptual rationale for the synthesis. Section 3 details the PRISMA-informed review design, search strategy, screening procedure, coding workflow, and validation approach. Section 4 reports the results of the qualitative synthesis, including corpus characteristics, thematic clusters, and the proposed interpretive pathway. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to prior studies and the Malaysian higher education context, while Section 6 concludes with practical implications and future research directions.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious literacy is no longer framed as a specialist competence reserved for theology or religious studies classrooms. The contemporary literature treats it as a transversal literacy that enables students to read religion in institutions, media, interpersonal settings, and policy discourse. This shift is visible in work that links religious literacy to civic education, teacher education, and the management of pluralism in schools and universities (Walker et al., 2021; Soules & Jafralie, 2021; von Brömssen et al., 2020; Mason, 2021). Recent conceptual work adds that religious literacy involves not only knowledge of beliefs and practices but also the capacity to compare traditions, recognize internal diversity, and evaluate claims critically within a learning framework suited to the twenty-first century (Eric et al., 2024; Ubani, 2025; Singsuriya & Rimpeng, 2025). Studies from Southeast Asia sharpen this point by showing that religious literacy in Indonesia and Malaysia often functions as a bridge between doctrinal education and social trust, especially where students must manage religious difference without erasing identity (Ashari et al., 2023; Imamah & Lee, 2024; Reid, 2024).

Moral reasoning serves as the bridge between interpretation and action. Across the reviewed studies, it is presented as a mode of judgment that helps learners decide what ought to be done when norms conflict, when authority is ambiguous, or when public responsibility requires more than private piety. In higher education research, students exposed to ethical dialogue, reflective discussion, or problem-based



learning demonstrate stronger reasoning about fairness, responsibility, and social consequence (Chen & Chen, 2022; Kumnuanek et al., 2022). In civic education and moral education research, institutional climate matters because student engagement increases when courses invite deliberation rather than obedience and when pedagogical design encourages agency, not only compliance (Evans et al., 2020; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Van Matre et al., 2026). The Malaysian literature adds a specific social dimension. Studies on academic dishonesty, ethnic unity, and civic participation suggest that moral reasoning is not an abstract cognitive skill alone. It is a socially embedded capacity that shapes whether students translate values into trustworthy conduct, inclusive attitudes, and public participation (Ahmad et al., 2022; Wan Husin et al., 2022; Esmaeil et al., 2024).

Civic engagement is usually treated as the outward expression of ethical formation. The recent literature is broader than voter turnout or formal volunteering. It includes student partnerships, digital participation, intercultural dialogue, civic discourse, and community problem-solving. Research in Latin America and Europe shows that pedagogical practices, classroom climate, and opportunities for participation are strongly associated with civic knowledge and engagement (Gómez & Suárez, 2023; Evans et al., 2020; Fenn et al., 2024). Digital studies show that civic engagement also develops through online spaces where students learn to evaluate information, produce public arguments, and perform citizenship in networked contexts (Japar et al., 2024; Prasetyo et al., 2022). In Malaysia, civic engagement is discussed as a youth development issue, a university responsibility, and a national cohesion concern. The literature on Malaysian university students points to institutional support, educational experiences, and religion-linked domains as important influences on civic participation and ethnic unity (Ahmad et al., 2022; Razak et al., 2023; Wan Husin et al., 2022).

A fourth thematic thread concerns digital and interfaith complexity. The reviewed studies repeatedly show that religious understanding now unfolds in algorithmic and platform-mediated environments where misinformation, simplification, and polarization are common. Religious digital literacy studies argue that students need to assess online religious claims, differentiate credible sources from manipulative content, and preserve ethical judgment under conditions of informational overload (Ashari et al., 2023; Rolando et al., 2024; Japar et al., 2024). Interfaith studies add that religious literacy also promotes social trust when it supports shared moral spaces and respectful encounter across difference (Imamah & Lee, 2024; Kusuma & Susilo, 2020; Lessy & Rohman, 2022). The implication for Malaysia is direct. A higher education system that serves a multireligious society cannot rely on doctrinal transmission alone. It must cultivate interpretive competence, moral judgment, and civic participation as linked capacities. The gap is that scholarship has not yet assembled these strands into one integrated account for Malaysian university students. That gap motivates the present review.

C. METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative systematic literature review design guided by PRISMA 2020 reporting principles. The aim was not to estimate an effect size but to synthesize interpretive patterns across studies that connected religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic engagement in university or youth populations. A thematic synthesis approach was used because the target literature included conceptual articles, qualitative studies, descriptive reviews, and mixed-methods studies whose findings could not be reduced to a single metric. PRISMA 2020 provided the reporting scaffold for transparent search description, eligibility logic, and traceability of included sources (Page et al., 2021a; Page et al., 2021b).

The analytic model was deliberately conceptual. The review treated religious literacy as the upstream interpretive capacity, moral reasoning as the mediating ethical process, and civic engagement as the downstream public outcome. Figure 1 maps this logic. The figure shows a three-stage pathway, beginning with exposure to comparative and critical religious knowledge, moving through reflective ethical judgment, and ending in civic participation. Two contextual moderators are placed around the pathway: digital media ecology, which shapes the quality of information and interaction, and institutional climate, which shapes whether students are encouraged to deliberate, collaborate, and act. This model reflects the dominant pattern across the reviewed literature rather than a causal estimate from a single dataset.

Data / Dataset

The review corpus comprised 38 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026. The search strategy targeted articles that explicitly addressed religious literacy, moral reasoning, civic engagement, higher education, youth participation, interfaith learning, ethical formation, or related terms in Malaysia, Southeast Asia, or comparable plural societies. Search terms were combined in English and Malay variants, including “religious literacy,” “critical religious literacy,” “interreligious literacy,” “moral



reasoning,” “ethical reasoning,” “civic engagement,” “civic participation,” “university students,” “higher education,” “Malaysia,” and “young people.” Source discovery relied on Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, journal hand searches, and backward citation tracing from key articles on religious literacy and civic education. The corpus was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, edited book chapters with ISBN or DOI, and open-access policy or research reports with direct relevance to the conceptual pathway. Theses, editorials, news pieces, and uncitable web material were excluded.

The inclusion criteria required each source to satisfy three conditions. First, it had to address at least one of the three focal constructs in a substantive way. Second, it had to include a population of university students, higher education learners, youth, or a closely related educational sample whose findings were transferable to university settings. Third, it had to provide enough methodological detail for coding of design, context, and findings. Exclusion criteria removed sources that discussed religion, morality, or citizenship only rhetorically without analytic substance, sources focused exclusively on primary or secondary schooling without any implication for higher education, and sources that lacked full-text access. The final sample was not used to calculate statistical generalization. It served as a structured interpretive dataset for thematic synthesis.

Model or System Design

The review’s coding architecture followed a three-layer structure. The first layer captured descriptive metadata: year, country or region, discipline, and research design. The second layer captured conceptual emphasis: religious literacy, moral reasoning, civic engagement, digital literacy, interfaith learning, ethical formation, or institutional support. The third layer captured directional claims: literacy enabling judgment, judgment enabling engagement, institutions strengthening or weakening the pathway, and digital environments amplifying or constraining the process. This structure was used because the literature did not share a single theory. Some studies framed the relationship through civic education, some through moral education, some through religious moderation, and some through digital citizenship. A layered codebook made it possible to compare studies across those adjacent vocabularies without flattening their differences.

A two-pass coding procedure was used. In the first pass, texts were read for descriptive and conceptual markers and coded line by line. In the second pass, the initial codes were collapsed into higher-order themes and checked against disconfirming cases. This approach was chosen because qualitative review evidence often contains overlapping constructs rather than discrete variables. The goal was therefore thematic coherence, not exhaustive quantification of every statement. Disagreements in theme placement were resolved by recoding the source against the full pathway rather than against an isolated quote. That procedure preserved conceptual continuity between religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic engagement.

Experimental Setup

Because this was a qualitative review rather than a laboratory experiment, the “setup” referred to the document and coding environment. Sources were managed in Zotero, screened in a spreadsheet-based extraction matrix, and coded in a qualitative annotation workflow that supported thematic grouping. The work was completed on a standard Windows 11 workstation with sufficient memory for multi-document annotation and reference management. Search logs, inclusion notes, and coding memos were stored in dated folders to preserve an audit trail. This workflow was selected because the corpus spanned education, religious studies, sociology, and civic engagement research, which required stable document handling more than specialized statistical software.

Evaluation Metrics

The review did not use inferential statistics. Instead, it used four qualitative evaluation metrics: conceptual recurrence, contextual transferability, analytic depth, and pathway consistency. Conceptual recurrence measured how often a source substantively addressed one of the three main constructs. Contextual transferability assessed whether findings from other countries or educational settings could reasonably inform Malaysian higher education. Analytic depth captured whether the source offered a mechanism, a pedagogical logic, or a policy implication rather than a descriptive remark. Pathway consistency evaluated whether the source strengthened, weakened, or complicated the religious literacy to moral reasoning to civic engagement chain. These metrics are appropriate for synthesis because the literature includes conceptual articles, qualitative interviews, and educational analyses that are not reducible to a common effect size.



Validation Approach

Validation relied on transparency rather than statistical significance testing. The search terms were piloted and expanded when adjacent vocabulary appeared in the literature, such as “religious moderation,” “civic spirituality,” “digital citizenship,” and “ethical formation.” A negative-case check was then applied to studies that reported religious commitment without increased civic openness or those that reported civic participation without ethical reflection. Those cases were retained as boundary conditions rather than ignored. The synthesis also compared Malaysian studies with comparative studies from Indonesia, Taiwan, Europe, and Latin America to assess whether the proposed pathway was context-specific or broader than one country. This triangulation reduced the risk of overfitting the interpretation to one national setting.

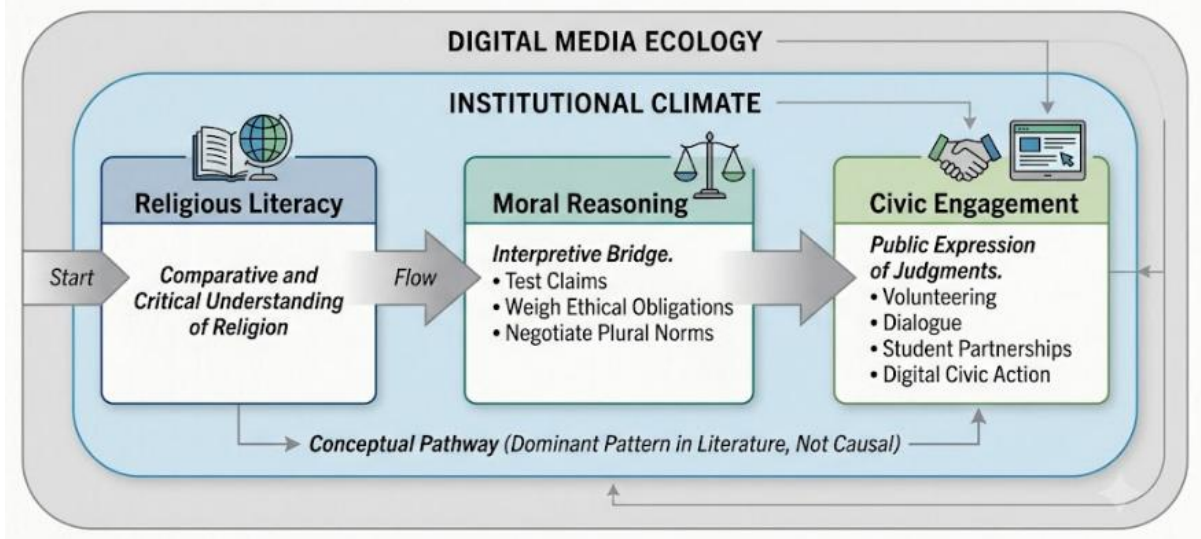


Figure 1. Conceptual Synthesis of The Review

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual synthesis of the review. The left side of the figure begins with religious literacy as comparative and critical understanding of religion. The center position shows moral reasoning as the interpretive bridge through which students test claims, weigh ethical obligations, and negotiate plural norms. The right side shows civic engagement as the public expression of those judgments in volunteering, dialogue, student partnerships, and digital civic action. Two contextual layers surround the pathway: institutional climate and digital media ecology. The figure is intended to summarize the dominant pattern in the reviewed literature, not to estimate a causal model.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 38 included studies. The corpus was weighted toward post-2023 publications, with 24 studies published between 2023 and 2026 and 14 published between 2020 and 2022. Sixteen studies centered on Malaysia or Southeast Asia, while 22 were comparative or globally framed. Fifteen studies used qualitative designs, 13 used quantitative designs, and 10 used mixed-method or theory-building approaches. This distribution is important because it shows that the reviewed literature already contains enough methodological variety to support thematic synthesis, but not enough standardized measurement to justify a meta-analytic model. The corpus therefore fits a qualitative review design better than a quantitative effect synthesis.

Table 1. Corpus characteristics of the reviewed studies (N = 38)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Publication period	2020–2022	14	36.8
Publication period	2023–2026	24	63.2
Geographic emphasis	Malaysia or Southeast Asia	16	42.1
Geographic emphasis	Comparative or global	22	57.9
Methodological design	Qualitative	15	39.5
Methodological design	Quantitative	13	34.2
Methodological design	Mixed-method or conceptual	10	26.3



The first thematic pattern was the reconceptualization of religious literacy. Across the corpus, religious literacy was not treated as memorized doctrine. It was treated as comparative understanding, critical reading of texts and contexts, and dialogic sensitivity to religious difference. Studies from teacher education, curriculum analysis, and media literacy consistently described religious literacy as a competence that enables learners to interpret religion in society rather than simply recite it. This pattern appeared strongly in the work of Walker et al. (2021), Soules and Jafralie (2021), Eric et al. (2024), Ubani (2025), Singsuriya and Rimpeng (2025), and Imamah and Lee (2024). Southeast Asian studies added that religious literacy becomes socially valuable when it supports moderation, social trust, and interfaith understanding in educational settings.

The second pattern was the mediating position of moral reasoning. The literature consistently placed moral reasoning between knowledge and behavior. Religious literacy could expose students to plural interpretations, but moral reasoning determined whether they translated that exposure into fair judgment, honest conduct, or inclusive civic action. Studies on higher education, biotechnology ethics, and academic dishonesty indicated that students reason more carefully when they are required to deliberate about consequences, rights, responsibility, and the social meaning of their choices (Chen & Chen, 2022; Kumnuanek et al., 2022; Esmaeil et al., 2024). In civic and moral education research, this bridging role was reinforced by classroom dialogue, partner-based learning, and reflective problem solving. The pattern was visible in the Malaysian literature on moral reasoning and civic participation, which showed that ethical awareness is not detached from public conduct but conditions it.

The third pattern concerned civic engagement as a public enactment of values. The corpus showed that civic engagement appears in several forms, including student partnerships, digital activism, volunteerism, ethnic unity work, social trust building, and participation in deliberative classroom climates. The literature repeatedly linked these forms to educational environments that invited students to speak, judge, and cooperate. Studies from Malaysia were especially useful because they connected civic engagement to youth development, ethnic unity, and the institutional role of universities in socially plural societies (Ahmad et al., 2022; Razak et al., 2023; Wan Husin et al., 2022; Yusof et al., 2025). Comparative studies strengthened the same conclusion by showing that civic engagement grows where pedagogical practices, classroom climate, and student agency are structurally supported. The result is a strong interpretive pattern: religious literacy and moral reasoning matter only when they are converted into public action.

Table 2. Thematic synthesis of the reviewed studies

Theme	Studies contributing (n)	Dominant evidence type	Interpretive strength (1–5)
Religious literacy as comparative and critical competence	18	Conceptual and qualitative	5
Moral reasoning as the ethical bridge	14	Qualitative and survey	4
Civic engagement as public enactment	16	Quantitative and qualitative	5
Institutional climate and curriculum mediation	12	Policy and educational analysis	5
Digital and interfaith complexity	11	Qualitative and mixed-method	4

The fourth pattern involved institutional mediation. The reviewed sources repeatedly showed that universities are not neutral containers of individual traits. Institutional design shapes whether religious literacy becomes civic openness or remains private identity. Studies on student partnerships, civic discourse, and learning environments show that civic and moral outcomes strengthen when students experience respectful dialogue, participatory governance, and curriculum space for contested issues (Evans et al., 2020; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Gómez & Suárez, 2023). Malaysian studies on religious coping, civic engagement, and ethnic unity similarly point to institutional support as a decisive factor. Where curriculum and co-curricular structures aligned with ethical reflection, students were more likely to report public responsibility and intergroup sensitivity. Where these supports were absent, religious belief remained inward-facing and civic effects were weaker.

The fifth pattern concerned digital mediation and the problem of fragmented moral information. Several studies noted that digital environments can deepen religious understanding, but they can also accelerate simplification, polarization, and moral confusion. Religious digital literacy studies from Indonesia and Malaysia emphasized the need for source evaluation, contextual reading, and ethical reflection in online spaces. Digital citizenship studies showed a similar logic in civic education: when students learn to judge online content, protect privacy, and communicate responsibly, civic engagement becomes more deliberative and less reactive. The reviewed literature therefore treats digital literacy not



as a separate topic, but as an enabling condition for religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic participation in contemporary university life.

The corpus also contained boundary cases that sharpened the analysis. Some studies suggested that religious commitment alone does not guarantee social trust or civic openness. Imamah and Lee (2024) reported that individual belief can coexist with lower generalized trust when religious learning remains inward or boundary-focused. This finding matters because it shows that the pathway is not linear in a simplistic sense. Religious values may support civic engagement only when they are interpreted through literacy and moral reasoning rather than through exclusionary certainty. The review therefore rejects a direct equivalence between religiosity and civic virtue. It instead supports a mediated model in which interpretation and judgment determine whether religious resources become civic assets.

Discussion

The synthesis shows that religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic engagement form a linked educational sequence rather than isolated constructs. Religious literacy contributes most effectively when it is understood as interpretive competence that helps students compare traditions, read difference, and identify the social consequences of religious language. This interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship that frames religious literacy as civic education, teacher education, and public understanding rather than as doctrinal recall (Walker et al., 2021; Soules & Jafralie, 2021; Ubani, 2025). The Malaysian relevance is clear. In a plural national context, university students need more than information about religion. They need the capacity to interpret public religious claims, detect exclusionary narratives, and engage difference without treating it as threat. The reviewed studies suggest that religious literacy provides that cognitive and relational starting point.

Moral reasoning emerges in the review as the mechanism that converts literacy into ethical orientation. This is the strongest theoretical contribution of the corpus. Religious literacy may broaden the horizon of interpretation, but moral reasoning decides whether students use that horizon to justify exclusion or to sustain fairness, care, and social responsibility. This interpretation aligns with evidence from higher education ethics studies showing that student engagement improves moral reasoning when learning environments require active deliberation (Chen & Chen, 2022). It also matches experimental and qualitative work on moral dilemmas, academic dishonesty, and biotechnology decision making, where reflection and structured reasoning alter how students judge contested issues (Kumnuanek et al., 2022; Esmail et al., 2024). The mechanism is not mystical or purely internal. It is educational. Students move from exposure to evaluation, then from evaluation to action when institutions give them enough cognitive and social space to reason in public.

The civic engagement literature adds the public dimension that makes the pathway consequential. Student partnerships, civic discourse, and pedagogy studies show that engagement deepens when students feel that their judgments matter in real settings (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Evans et al., 2020; Gómez & Suárez, 2023). Malaysian studies are particularly persuasive because they connect university experiences to civic engagement, youth unity, and public responsibility. Ahmad et al. (2022) and Razak et al. (2023) both show that Malaysian students' engagement is shaped by educational and social factors, while Wan Husin et al. (2022) demonstrate that education and religious domains can support ethnic unity. These findings imply that religious literacy becomes socially visible only when universities translate it into co-curricular practice, dialogue, and community connection. Without that translation, literacy remains cognitive and civic engagement remains episodic.

A useful surprise in the corpus is the ambivalent role of religiosity. Some studies imply that religious attachment can support social responsibility, but other studies show that belief without literacy can reinforce bounded trust or narrow moral horizons (Imamah & Lee, 2024; Eric et al., 2024). This tension is mechanistically important. It suggests that religious values are not automatically civic-friendly. They need interpretive mediation. That mediation appears when learners compare traditions, encounter difference, and discuss moral ambiguity. This is why studies on interreligious literacy, religious moderation, and teacher education matter for university contexts. They show that civic openness grows when students are taught how to think about religion, not only what to believe about it (Ali et al., 2021; Kusuma & Susilo, 2020; Lessy & Rohman, 2022; Mukhibat et al., 2024). The review therefore rejects a linear moralizing model and supports a literacy-based model of civic formation.

Digital environments amplify the need for this model. Several studies show that students learn religion and citizenship through social media, platform discourse, and online information streams that can strengthen or weaken ethical judgment depending on how they are used (Ashari et al., 2023; Rolando et al., 2024; Japar et al., 2024). The digital context changes the educational problem. Students do not only need to understand religion and civics in classrooms. They need to filter claims, resist manipulation, and communicate responsibly in networked public spaces. This is especially relevant in Malaysia, where



university students participate in political, ethnic, and religious debates that often extend beyond campus and into digital publics. The implication is practical. A higher education curriculum that omits digital religious literacy and digital citizenship leaves students underprepared for the real environments in which moral and civic decisions are made.

The review has several limitations that should be stated explicitly. First, the corpus is dominated by Southeast Asian and education-focused studies, which strengthens relevance for Malaysia but narrows transferability to non-educational adult populations. Second, English-language and accessible open-text sources were easier to retrieve, which likely underrepresents local Malay-language publications and less visible regional outlets. Third, many included studies are cross-sectional, descriptive, or conceptual, so the evidence supports pathway plausibility more than causal certainty. Fourth, the literature rarely measures the three constructs with aligned instruments, which limits direct comparison across studies. Fifth, the synthesis is conceptually rich but institutionally uneven, because Malaysian public universities appear more often than private institutions and East Malaysian settings remain underrepresented. These are not generic caveats. They identify exactly where the literature is thin and where future empirical work should concentrate.

The practical implication for Malaysian higher education is straightforward. Universities should not isolate religious literacy in theology courses or moral reasoning in abstract ethics modules. They should embed comparative religious literacy, reflective discussion of public dilemmas, and service-oriented civic learning across general education and co-curricular life. That recommendation follows directly from the reviewed evidence on student partnerships, ethical deliberation, civic discourse, and digital citizenship (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021; Van Matre et al., 2026; Japar et al., 2024). In Malaysia, such an approach would also support ethnic unity, public trust, and responsible participation in a plural society. The strongest interpretation of the corpus is therefore not that religion should be privatized or politicized. It is that religious literacy should be educationally organized so that moral reasoning and civic engagement can develop together.

E. CONCLUSION

This review shows that religious literacy, moral reasoning, and civic engagement are tightly connected in the higher education literature, especially when the focus shifts from belief alone to interpretive competence, ethical judgment, and public responsibility. Across the reviewed studies, religious literacy worked best as a civic resource when it helped students compare traditions, read complexity, and resist simplified identity narratives. Moral reasoning emerged as the bridge that converted understanding into judgment, while civic engagement represented the public expression of that judgment in dialogue, participation, and community action. The Malaysian literature reinforced this pathway by showing that universities operate as sites of ethnic unity, ethical formation, and civic preparation. The most useful policy implication is that Malaysian universities should integrate comparative religious literacy, reflective ethics, and community-based civic learning into compulsory general education and co-curricular programming. Future research should test the pathway with longitudinal designs, compare public and private universities, and include stronger representation of East Malaysian and multilingual contexts. A mixed-method regional study would be especially valuable because it could examine how the pathway operates under different institutional climates and digital environments.

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