

Religiosity and Student Character Formation in Vocational Education: A Mediated Model of Motivation and Literacy in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of religiosity in student character formation within vocational education by analyzing the mediating effects of learning motivation and literacy. Employing a quantitative correlational design with an ex post facto approach, the study analyzes survey data collected from 381 students enrolled in public vocational secondary schools in Indonesia (N = 381). Religiosity is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing belief, practice, experience, and social consequences, while student character is defined as an integrated set of cognitive, moral, and socio-emotional dispositions. Data were analyzed using regression-based mediation analysis within a structural equation modeling framework, indicating that religiosity has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on student character. In addition, learning motivation and literacy function as significant mediating variables, demonstrating partial mediation in the relationship between religiosity and character formation. These findings suggest that religious values influence character development not only through direct moral orientation, but also indirectly by strengthening students' motivational engagement and interpretive capacities. By empirically testing a mediated model of character formation, this study advances a mechanism-oriented understanding of how values, motivation, and literacy interact in vocational education. The findings contribute theoretically to research on character education and religious education, while practically underscoring the importance of integrating ethical values, motivational support, and literacy development in holistic vocational education models.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, character education has re-emerged as a central concern in global educational discourse, particularly in response to growing anxieties over moral disengagement, declining civic responsibility, and the dominance of instrumental rationality in schooling systems (Duck, 1993; Hu, 2024) (Lickona, 2013; Biesta, 2015). Education is increasingly expected not only to transmit knowledge and technical skills, but also to cultivate ethical dispositions, self-regulation, and socially responsible behavior. This expectation becomes even more pressing in vocational education, where students are prepared to enter the workforce at an early stage and are required to demonstrate not only competence, but also integrity, discipline, and adaptability (G. J. J. Biesta, 2015; UNESCO, 2024).

Vocational education has often been framed primarily in terms of skills training and employability outcomes. However, such a technocratic orientation risks marginalizing the formative dimensions of education that shape students' character and moral orientation (Aydarova, 2021). Recent scholarship has therefore called for a more holistic understanding of vocational education, one that integrates technical competence with character formation and ethical development (Pavlova, 2008). Within this broader framework, the question of how character is formed, sustained, and mediated through educational processes becomes a critical area of inquiry.

One factor that has received sustained attention in character formation research is religiosity. Religiosity, understood as the internalization and enactment of religious beliefs, practices, and values, has been widely associated with moral development, prosocial behavior, and self-regulation (Glock, 1965; Schütz & Koglin, 2023). In educational contexts, religiosity has been shown to contribute to honesty, responsibility, discipline, and ethical sensitivity among students (Guna et al., 2024). From a developmental perspective, religious values often provide a coherent moral framework that guides decision-making and behavior, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by identity exploration and value negotiation (Offer, 1969).

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature treats religiosity as a direct predictor of moral or character outcomes. Such an approach, while valuable, risks oversimplifying the complex mechanisms through which religiosity operates in educational settings. Character formation is not a linear process; rather, it is shaped by multiple interacting psychological, cognitive, and social factors (Kozlova et al., 2024). Consequently, there is a growing need to move beyond direct-effect models and examine the mediating pathways that translate religious values into observable character traits.

Two mediating factors that warrant particular attention in this regard are learning motivation and literacy. Learning motivation represents the internal and external forces that initiate, direct, and sustain students' engagement in learning activities (Zainudin, 2024). Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which is driven by interest and personal meaning, and extrinsic motivation, which is shaped by external rewards and pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A substantial body of research indicates that motivated students are more persistent, responsible, and self-regulated, characteristics that are closely aligned with positive character development (Miruna, 2025).

Religious values may play an important role in shaping learning motivation by providing students with a sense of purpose, moral obligation, and meaning in educational pursuits. When learning is perceived not merely as an instrumental task but as a morally meaningful activity, students may exhibit greater commitment, discipline, and perseverance (Almazroui, 2023). Empirical studies have suggested that religiosity can enhance intrinsic motivation by aligning educational efforts with deeply held values

and beliefs (Ebstyne King & Furrow, 2008). However, the mediating role of motivation in linking religiosity to character outcomes remains underexplored, particularly in vocational education contexts.

In parallel, literacy has emerged as a foundational competence for both academic success and character development in the twenty-first century. Contemporary conceptions of literacy extend beyond basic reading and writing to include critical literacy, digital literacy, and the ability to evaluate and synthesize information across contexts (OECD, 2022). Literacy enables students to engage critically with texts, reflect on values, and make informed judgments, capacities that are essential for ethical reasoning and responsible action (Freire, 2021). In vocational education, literacy is increasingly recognized as a key enabler of professional competence, adaptability, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2024).

Religiosity may influence literacy development indirectly by encouraging reflective practices, ethical reasoning, and engagement with meaningful texts. Religious traditions often emphasize reading, interpretation, and reflection, which can foster habits of critical engagement and moral deliberation (Sahin, 2018). Moreover, students with higher literacy skills are better equipped to internalize values, evaluate moral dilemmas, and translate abstract principles into concrete behavior. Despite these theoretical linkages, empirical research examining literacy as a mediating pathway between religiosity and character formation remains limited.

The present study addresses these gaps by proposing and empirically testing a mediated model of student character formation within vocational education. Rather than assuming a direct and linear relationship between religiosity and character outcomes, this study seeks to explain how learning motivation and literacy operate as mediating mechanisms through which religiosity influences student character. By integrating insights from character education, motivational psychology, and literacy studies, the research moves beyond simplified causal claims and offers a mechanism-oriented explanation of how religious values are translated into concrete character outcomes within educational institutions.

This study is situated in the context of vocational secondary education, a setting that provides a particularly relevant yet underexplored empirical site for examining character formation. Vocational students occupy a transitional position between formal schooling and the labor market, where character traits such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, and adaptability are not merely normative ideals but functional requirements for employability and professional integration. This empirical focus distinguishes the present study from prior mediation research conducted largely in general secondary or higher education settings, where character development is often conceptualized in more abstract civic or moral terms. By foregrounding vocational education, this study positions character formation as a practical and outcome-oriented educational concern rather than a purely normative aspiration.

Within this framework, the primary objective of the study is to examine whether religiosity has a significant direct effect on student character in vocational education. Beyond this direct relationship, the study also aims to investigate whether religiosity significantly influences learning motivation and literacy among vocational students, recognizing these variables as key psychological and cognitive resources in the learning process. Building on these objectives, the study further seeks to test whether learning motivation and literacy function as mediating mechanisms that partially explain the relationship between religiosity and student character. Together, these objectives are designed to move the analysis from a direct-effect perspective toward a more integrated explanatory model that captures both motivational and literacy-based pathways.

The contribution of this study lies in its integrative and empirically grounded approach. It advances the literature on religiosity and education by conceptualizing religiosity not as an isolated moral attribute, but as part of a dynamic system operating through motivational and cognitive processes. At the same time, it contributes to character education research by empirically validating a

mediated model that links religious values with psychological engagement and literacy-related competencies, dimensions that have rarely been examined simultaneously. Furthermore, the study enriches vocational education scholarship by foregrounding character formation as a central educational outcome alongside technical and occupational competence, thereby challenging technocratic models that prioritize skill acquisition at the expense of moral and personal development.

By grounding its analysis in a rigorous empirical framework while maintaining theoretical coherence, this study responds directly to calls for more integrative and mechanism-oriented research in education. Rather than asking whether religiosity matters for character formation, it explicitly examines how and through what pathways religious values shape student character within vocational education. In doing so, the study offers insights that are relevant not only to scholars of religious education, character education, and vocational studies, but also to policymakers and educators concerned with fostering ethically grounded, motivated, and socially responsible graduates in an increasingly complex world.

2. METHODS

This study adopted a quantitative approach with a correlational, ex post facto design to examine the relationships among religiosity, learning motivation, literacy, and student character in vocational education. A correlational design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to investigate naturally occurring relationships among variables without experimental manipulation or treatment. In line with ex post facto research principles, the analysis focused on identifying patterns of influence based on existing conditions within the educational setting (Creswell, 2013; de Gayardon, 2017).

The research was conducted in public vocational secondary schools located in Metro City, Lampung, Indonesia. Vocational education was selected as the research context because it represents an educational environment where character formation is closely linked to students' preparation for professional life, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. The population of the study consisted of vocational secondary school students enrolled during the 2024/2025 academic year. A proportional sampling technique was employed to ensure that students from different schools and grade levels were adequately represented, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the sample and reducing sampling bias.

Data were collected using structured self-report questionnaires designed to measure the four main variables of the study: religiosity, learning motivation, literacy, and student character. Religiosity was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing religious belief, religious practice, religious experience, and the influence of religious values on social behavior. This conceptualization was informed by the classic framework proposed by Glock and Stark, which views religiosity as an integrated system of belief, practice, experience, knowledge, and moral consequence (Glock, 1965). Learning motivation was defined as the internal and external forces that initiate, sustain, and direct students' engagement in learning activities. The measurement of motivation was grounded in Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the fulfillment of basic psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundations of motivated behavior (Alsbou & Alsaraireh, 2024; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Literacy was operationalized as a comprehensive competence that extends beyond basic reading and writing skills to include digital literacy, numeracy literacy, and critical literacy. This conceptualization aligns with contemporary literacy frameworks that emphasize the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, and use information effectively in diverse contexts (OECD, 2022). Student character was defined as an integrated set of cognitive, moral, and socio-emotional dispositions that shape students' behavior, decision-making, and interactions within educational and social environments. The

measurement of character incorporated dimensions related to cognitive development, identity and personality formation, social-emotional development, and moral development, reflecting a holistic understanding of character education (Safutra, 2019).

All instruments employed Likert-type scales to measure students' perceptions of religiosity, learning motivation, literacy, and character. The study involved 381 vocational secondary school students in public schools in Metro City, Indonesia, who participated voluntarily. Prior to analysis, the data were screened for completeness and consistency, and descriptive statistics were used to summarize each variable. Instrument reliability and validity were established through construct reliability and confirmatory factor analysis. Hypothesis testing was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine direct effects and mediation pathways. The indirect effects of religiosity on student character through learning motivation and literacy were tested using bootstrapped mediation procedures, indicating partial mediation. All research procedures adhered to ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured, and ethical approval was granted by the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. (Hayes & จันทร์ไชย, 2024).

This analytical strategy allowed the study to examine not only whether religiosity was associated with student character, but also how this relationship operated through motivational and literacy-related mechanisms. By maintaining methodological rigor and theoretical alignment, the study sought to provide a robust empirical test of the proposed mediated model of student character formation in vocational education.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Direct Influence of Religiosity on Student Character in Vocational Education

The findings of this study demonstrate that religiosity has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on student character in vocational education. This result indicates that students with higher levels of religiosity tend to exhibit stronger character traits, including responsibility, discipline, honesty, self-regulation, and ethical sensitivity (Sibarani, 2024). The statistical analysis confirms that religiosity functions as a foundational variable in shaping student character, even before accounting for the mediating effects of learning motivation and literacy.

This finding is consistent with the conceptualization of religiosity as a multidimensional construct that integrates belief, practice, experience, and moral consequence (Glock, 1965). In the context of vocational education, religiosity does not merely operate as a private belief system but manifests as a guiding framework that shapes students' daily behavior, social interactions, and learning attitudes (Vermeer, 2010). The results suggest that religious values are internalized by students and translated into character-related dispositions that are highly relevant to vocational settings, where ethical conduct and professional responsibility are essential.

From a theoretical perspective, the direct influence of religiosity on character supports the view that moral and character development is deeply rooted in value-based frameworks. Lickona emphasizes that character education is most effective when moral values are consistently reinforced through belief systems, habituation, and social practice (Lickona, 1999; Safutra, 2019). Religiosity, in this sense, provides a coherent moral narrative that helps students distinguish right from wrong, regulate behavior, and develop a sense of accountability. The findings of this study reinforce the argument that religious values can function as a stable moral anchor, particularly during adolescence, a developmental stage marked by identity formation and moral exploration (Barrett, 2010).

In vocational education, the relevance of this finding becomes even more pronounced. Vocational students are prepared not only for academic achievement but also for direct participation in the labor market, where character-related attributes such as honesty, discipline, perseverance, and respect for others are critical determinants of employability and professional success (Aryani et al., 2025; Finck et al., 2003). The positive relationship between religiosity and character suggests that religious values may contribute to the formation of ethical work attitudes, such as commitment to duty, respect for rules, and social responsibility (Ratnawati et al., 2024). This aligns with previous studies indicating that religiosity is associated with prosocial behavior, reduced engagement in risky behavior, and stronger moral self-regulation among adolescents.

Importantly, the findings of this study challenge reductionist views that frame vocational education solely as technical skills training. By demonstrating the direct role of religiosity in character formation, the study highlights the necessity of recognizing vocational education as a formative space where moral and ethical dimensions of student development are actively shaped. This perspective resonates with critiques of technocratic education models that marginalize value formation in favor of narrow employability outcomes (Adangabe et al., 2021; Alamsyah et al., 2023). Instead, the findings support a more holistic understanding of vocational education, where character formation is viewed as an integral outcome alongside technical competence.

The direct effect of religiosity on character can also be interpreted through a socio-ecological lens. According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, individual development is influenced by interactions across multiple environmental systems, including family, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Tudge et al., 2022). Religiosity often operates across these systems, reinforcing moral norms and expectations through family practices, school activities, and community engagement. In this context, vocational schools that accommodate or support religious expression may inadvertently strengthen character development by aligning institutional norms with students' internal value systems.

The empirical findings of this study further indicate that religiosity influences multiple dimensions of student character simultaneously, encompassing cognitive, moral, and socio-emotional aspects. Students with higher religiosity levels tend to demonstrate greater reflective capacity, ethical awareness, and emotional regulation. These characteristics are particularly relevant in vocational environments that demand collaboration, problem-solving, and adherence to professional standards. Thus, religiosity appears to function not merely as an abstract belief system but as a lived orientation that shapes students' dispositions toward learning, work, and social interaction.

Table 1. Summary of the Direct Effect of Religiosity on Student Character

Relationship Examined	Direction of Effect	Statistical Significance	Substantive Interpretation
Religiosity, Student Character	Positive	Significant	Higher religiosity is associated with stronger character traits among vocational students

As shown in Table 1, religiosity has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on student character in vocational education. The structural model indicates that religiosity significantly predicts student character with a standardized path coefficient of $\beta = 0.256$, $SE = 0.067$, $t = 3.798$, and $p < 0.001$. This result demonstrates that higher levels of religiosity are associated with higher levels of student character, independent of other variables included in the model.

The significance of this direct path remains stable when learning motivation and literacy are incorporated into the structural model. The persistence of the direct effect indicates that religiosity

contributes uniquely to student character formation and is not fully accounted for by the inclusion of mediating variables. This finding supports the specification of religiosity as an exogenous predictor with a direct pathway to character outcomes.

Overall, the results provide empirical evidence that religiosity functions as a significant determinant of student character within vocational education. The direct effect identified in the model confirms that religiosity independently explains variation in student character, while subsequent analyses examine the extent to which this relationship is further explained through indirect pathways involving learning motivation and literacy.

Learning Motivation as a Mediating Pathway Between Religiosity and Student Character

Beyond its direct influence, the findings of this study demonstrate that learning motivation plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between religiosity and student character in vocational education. This result indicates that religiosity does not shape student character solely through direct internalization of moral values, but also indirectly by strengthening students' motivation to engage meaningfully in learning processes. In other words, religious values contribute to character formation by fostering motivational orientations that support disciplined, responsible, and persistent learning behavior (Asfiati, 2023; Azhari et al., 2024).

The statistical analysis confirms that religiosity has a positive and significant effect on learning motivation, and that learning motivation, in turn, exerts a significant influence on student character. When learning motivation is included in the analytical model, the indirect pathway from religiosity to character through motivation remains statistically meaningful, indicating partial mediation (David & Iliescu, 2022; Noh et al., 2023). This finding is fully consistent with the dissertation's core model and reinforces the argument that character formation is a process shaped by interacting psychological mechanisms rather than by isolated moral attributes.

From a theoretical standpoint, this result aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory, which conceptualizes motivation as a function of internalized values and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Religiosity can be understood as a comprehensive value system that provides students with a sense of purpose, existential meaning, and moral direction, which in turn strengthens intrinsic and identified forms of learning motivation. Rather than functioning merely as a set of ritual practices or doctrinal beliefs, religiosity shapes how students interpret their roles, responsibilities, and aspirations within the educational process (Curren & Ryan, 2020). When learning is perceived as congruent with religious and moral commitments, students are more likely to internalize educational goals as personally meaningful rather than externally imposed. This internalization process transforms learning from an instrumental activity aimed solely at grades or credentials into a morally significant endeavor connected to self-improvement, responsibility, and ethical growth (Zainudin, 2024). As a consequence, students develop sustained engagement, self-discipline, and perseverance key psychological attributes that underpin positive character development and long-term educational commitment.

From the perspective of motivational psychology, this process reflects a shift from controlled forms of motivation toward more autonomous regulation (Koestner et al., 2008). Religiosity contributes to this shift by embedding learning within a broader moral narrative that emphasizes purpose, accountability, and self-transcendence (Shin et al., 2022). When students believe that effort, discipline, and perseverance are morally valued and spiritually meaningful, they are more likely to regulate their behavior voluntarily and persistently. This finding supports the view that values-based motivation is more enduring and resilient than motivation driven primarily by external rewards or sanctions. Consequently, religiosity enhances not only the intensity of students' motivation, but also its quality,

fostering forms of engagement that are closely associated with responsibility, integrity, and self-regulated behavior.

In the context of vocational education, the mediating role of learning motivation becomes particularly salient due to the demanding and practice-oriented nature of vocational learning environments (Apriyanti et al., 2024; Burns, 2020). Vocational students are often required to engage in physically and cognitively demanding tasks, adhere to structured schedules, and demonstrate consistency in both classroom-based instruction and hands-on training. These requirements place substantial demands on students' motivational resources (Pasaribu et al., 2025). Motivation therefore functions as a psychological engine that enables students to persist in the face of fatigue, difficulty, and delayed rewards. Without sufficient motivation, vocational learning risks being experienced as burdensome or merely procedural, which may undermine both learning outcomes and character development (Pasaribu et al., 2025; Smith, 1992).

The findings of this study suggest that religiosity contributes meaningfully to this motivational engine by framing vocational learning as a morally valuable and purposeful activity. When students interpret their educational efforts as aligned with religious values such as diligence, responsibility, and commitment they are more likely to approach vocational tasks with seriousness and perseverance (Mintrop, 2012). Learning is no longer perceived merely as a requirement for certification or employment, but as part of a broader ethical responsibility toward personal growth and future social contribution (Evans, 2009). This moral framing encourages students to endure challenges, maintain discipline, and invest sustained effort even when immediate rewards are not apparent.

As a result, motivated vocational students are more likely to exhibit character traits that are essential for both educational success and professional life, including responsibility, diligence, reliability, and commitment to continuous improvement (Bilgrami, 2021; Syam, 2024). These traits are not only outcomes of motivation but also reinforce motivational processes themselves, creating a reciprocal relationship between motivation and character. In this way, learning motivation operates as a crucial psychological pathway through which religiosity is translated into observable character-related behavior within vocational education. By illuminating this pathway, the study underscores the importance of integrating value-based education with motivationally supportive learning environments to foster holistic character development among vocational students.

Empirical studies in educational psychology have consistently shown that motivated learners tend to display stronger self-regulation, goal orientation, and ethical conduct (Yu et al., 2022). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that learning motivation also functions as a conduit through which religious values are translated into observable character traits. This mediating role helps explain why religiosity alone does not automatically produce character outcomes; rather, its influence depends on how deeply values are internalized and enacted through motivated behavior (Miller & Brickman, 2004). For importantly, the findings challenge simplistic assumptions that religiosity directly and uniformly produces positive character traits. Instead, they support a more nuanced explanation: religiosity enhances character to the extent that it shapes motivational orientations toward learning. This perspective is consistent with contemporary views of moral development that emphasize agency, internalization, and reflective engagement rather than mere rule-following (Kim et al., 2023). Students who are motivated to learn are more likely to take ownership of their actions, reflect on their responsibilities, and act consistently with moral principles qualities that constitute core elements of character.

The vocational education setting further amplifies the importance of this mediated relationship. Learning motivation in vocational contexts is closely tied to professional identity formation and readiness for the world of work. Students who are motivated by internalized values tend to approach vocational training with a sense of responsibility and long-term orientation, rather than short-term

compliance (Adewale & Ndwandwe, 2026; Hu, 2024). Religiosity, by providing ethical meaning and a sense of calling, may strengthen this orientation and encourage students to view vocational learning as part of a broader moral and personal development journey.

To clarify the mediating role of learning motivation within the research model, Table 2 summarizes the key relationships identified in the mediation analysis.

Table 2. Learning Motivation as a Mediator Between Religiosity and Student Character

Pathway Examined	Direction of Effect	Statistical Significance	Interpretive Meaning
Religiosity - Learning Motivation	Positive	Significant	Religious values strengthen students' motivation to engage in learning
Learning Motivation - Student Character	Positive	Significant	Motivated learning behavior supports positive character traits
Religiosity - Student Character (via Motivation)	Indirect Positive	Significant (Partial Mediation)	Religiosity influences character through enhanced learning motivation

As shown in Table 2, learning motivation serves as a meaningful psychological pathway linking religiosity to student character. The presence of partial mediation indicates that while religiosity retains a direct influence on character, a substantial portion of its effect operates through motivational mechanisms. This finding reinforces the conceptual framing of the study as a mediated model rather than a simple direct-effect analysis. As presented in Table 2, religiosity has a positive and statistically significant effect on learning motivation ($\beta = 0.405$, $SE = 0.058$, $t = 7.032$, $p < 0.001$). Learning motivation also demonstrates a significant positive effect on student character ($\beta = 0.143$, $SE = 0.057$, $t = 2.519$, $p = 0.012$). And the indirect effect of religiosity on student character through learning motivation is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.058$, $SE = 0.025$, $t = 2.340$, $p = 0.020$). Because the direct effect of religiosity on student character remains significant when the mediator is included in the model, the mediation is classified as partial mediation.

From a practical perspective, these findings carry important implications for vocational education. They suggest that efforts to strengthen student character through religious or value-based education will be most effective when accompanied by pedagogical strategies that actively support student motivation (Cai & Qi, 2019; Popescu & Țîrlea, 2022). Religious values that remain abstract or disconnected from learning experiences may have limited impact on character outcomes. In contrast, when values are integrated into learning practices that promote autonomy, competence, and engagement, they are more likely to be internalized and expressed as stable character traits (Guna et al., 2024). Moreover, the mediating role of motivation highlights the importance of learning environments that support students' psychological needs. Even students with strong religious values may struggle to translate those values into character-consistent behavior if learning environments are perceived as controlling, punitive, or irrelevant (Abd Hannan & Ach Fatayillah Mursyidi, 2023; Akmaliah, 2020). This insight underscores the interplay between personal values and institutional contexts in shaping character development.

In summary, the findings of this study demonstrate that learning motivation is a key mediating mechanism through which religiosity contributes to student character formation in vocational education. Religiosity strengthens character not only by providing moral guidance, but also by enhancing students' motivation to engage meaningfully in learning. This mediated relationship offers

a more comprehensive understanding of character formation processes and underscores the importance of integrating value education with motivationally supportive pedagogical practices. By illuminating this pathway, the study contributes to a more sophisticated and empirically grounded discourse on the role of religiosity in education.

The Mediating Role of Literacy in Translating Religious Values into Character Formation

The findings of this study indicate that literacy plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between religiosity and student character in vocational education. This result suggests that religiosity contributes to character formation not only through direct moral internalization or motivational mechanisms, but also through students' cognitive and interpretive capacities. Literacy functions as a critical conduit through which religious values are understood, reflected upon, and translated into consistent patterns of character-related behavior (Khaidir & Suud, 2020).

The mediation analysis demonstrates that religiosity has a positive and significant influence on students' literacy, and that literacy, in turn, significantly predicts student character. When literacy is included in the model, the indirect effect of religiosity on character through literacy remains statistically significant, indicating partial mediation (Azzahra & Amanta, 2021; Reddy et al., 2020). This finding reinforces the argument that character formation is a mediated and multidimensional process rather than an automatic consequence of religious belief or practice. Similar conclusions have been suggested in broader educational research, which emphasizes that values require cognitive engagement and interpretive capacity to be enacted meaningfully (G. J. J. Biesta, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with contemporary frameworks that conceptualize literacy as a foundational competence for reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, and responsible action. Literacy is no longer confined to basic reading and writing skills, but is increasingly understood as a complex set of abilities that include critical literacy, digital literacy, and the capacity to evaluate and synthesize information across contexts (A'la & Makhshun, 2022; OECD, 2022). These competencies are essential for character development because they enable individuals to engage critically with norms, assess moral implications, and make reasoned decisions. In this sense, literacy provides the cognitive infrastructure that allows religious values to be translated into lived ethical dispositions.

Religiosity may contribute to literacy development through several interconnected pathways. Religious traditions commonly emphasize engagement with texts, interpretation of moral narratives, and reflection on ethical meanings (Fikri, 2023). Such practices encourage habits of reading, contemplation, and critical engagement with values, which may indirectly strengthen literacy competencies. Previous studies have noted that religious engagement can foster reflective thinking and meaning-making processes that are closely related to literacy and moral reasoning (Sahin, 2018; King & Boyatzis, 2015). The findings of this study support this view by showing that students with higher levels of religiosity tend to demonstrate stronger literacy skills, which subsequently contribute to character formation.

The mediating role of literacy can also be interpreted through Freire's concept of literacy as conscientization. According to Freire, literacy is not merely a technical skill, but a process through which individuals develop critical awareness of themselves, their values, and their social reality (Freire, 2021). Literacy enables learners to question assumptions, interpret meanings, and act ethically within their social contexts. Within vocational education, this critical awareness is particularly important, as students are expected to navigate complex technical, social, and ethical challenges in professional environments. Literacy equips students with the capacity to interpret rules, evaluate consequences, and align their actions with internalized moral principles (Reddy et al., 2020).

In vocational education settings, literacy assumes a distinctive and strategic role. Vocational students are required to engage with technical manuals, safety procedures, digital platforms, and numerical data, all of which demand functional, digital, and critical literacy skills (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022). At the same time, they are expected to demonstrate professional character traits such as responsibility, integrity, and ethical judgment. The findings of this study suggest that literacy acts as a bridge between religious values and professional conduct, enabling students to apply moral principles thoughtfully within practical and work-related situations (Zahari et al., 2022). This finding resonates with research emphasizing the role of literacy in supporting employability, adaptability, and ethical professionalism in vocational contexts (Chiu et al., 2023).

Importantly, the mediating effect of literacy highlights the cognitive dimension of character formation, which is often underemphasized in discussions of religiosity and moral education. While religiosity provides moral orientation and value commitment, literacy enables moral reasoning and ethical decision-making (Guna et al., 2024). This distinction helps explain why religiosity alone may not always result in consistent character outcomes. Without adequate literacy skills, students may struggle to interpret values in complex or ambiguous situations, evaluate competing norms, or apply ethical principles in novel contexts. Similar concerns have been raised in character education literature, which warns against approaches that emphasize value transmission without fostering critical reflection and reasoning (Lickona, 1999).

The findings of this study also contribute to ongoing debates about the role of literacy in character education. Traditional character education approaches have often focused on habituation and moral exemplarity, sometimes overlooking the importance of cognitive engagement. Recent scholarship, however, argues that character formation requires not only moral commitment but also the ability to reason ethically and critically about values (G. J. J. Biesta, 2015; Syam, 2024). The present findings support this argument by empirically demonstrating that literacy mediates the relationship between religiosity and character, highlighting the necessity of integrating value education with cognitive skill development.

Furthermore, the vocational education context amplifies the importance of literacy as a mediating mechanism. Vocational students frequently encounter real-world situations that require ethical reasoning, such as workplace safety decisions, responsible use of technology, and collaboration with diverse colleagues. Literacy enables students to interpret technical information accurately, assess risks responsibly, and make informed decisions that align with both professional standards and moral values. In this way, literacy facilitates the enactment of religious values in everyday vocational practice, transforming abstract moral commitments into concrete ethical behavior (Wahab et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2014).

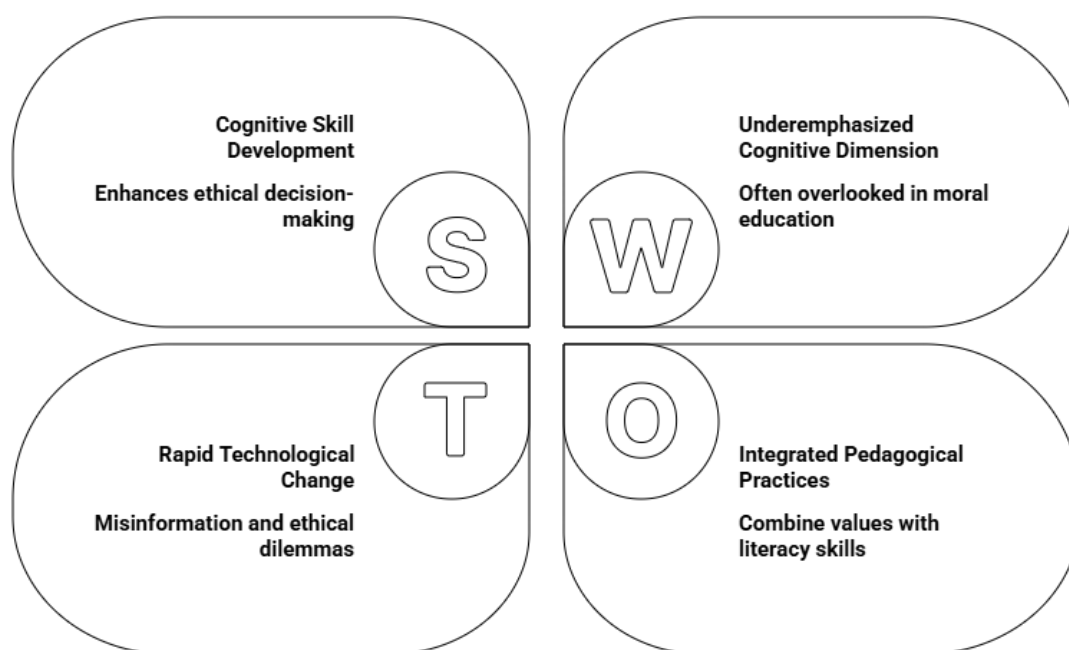
The mediating role of literacy is also particularly relevant in contemporary educational environments characterized by rapid technological change and information overload. Digital literacy and critical literacy are essential for navigating misinformation, ethical dilemmas, and conflicting value claims in online and professional spaces. Students with strong religious values but limited literacy skills may be vulnerable to uncritical acceptance of information or simplistic moral judgments (OECD, 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2025). Conversely, students with well-developed literacy skills are better equipped to evaluate information ethically, reflect on moral implications, and act responsibly. The findings of this study underscore the importance of literacy in ensuring that religiosity contributes positively to character formation in complex informational contexts.

Moreover, the partial mediation effect observed in this study indicates that literacy complements rather than replaces the direct influence of religiosity on character. Religiosity remains a foundational source of moral orientation, while literacy provides the means through which values are interpreted, contextualized, and enacted (Husairi, 2016; Noddings, 2013). Together, these elements form a coherent

explanatory model in which character formation emerges from the interaction of values, cognition, and behavior. This integrated perspective aligns with ecological and developmental models that view character as the product of interacting personal and contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

From an educational standpoint, these findings suggest that character education initiatives grounded in religious values will be more effective when integrated with literacy-oriented pedagogical practices. Religious education that emphasizes memorization or ritual practice without fostering interpretive and critical skills may have limited impact on character outcomes (G. Biesta, 2020). In contrast, approaches that encourage students to engage critically with texts, reflect on moral meanings, and apply values to real-life situations are more likely to support sustainable character development. This implication is consistent with calls for more dialogical and reflective approaches to moral and religious education (Sahin, 2018).

Figure 1 Literacy Mediates Religiosity's Impact



In summary, this study provides robust empirical evidence that literacy functions as a significant mediating pathway through which religiosity influences student character in vocational education. Religiosity offers a moral framework and value orientation, while literacy supplies the cognitive and interpretive capacities that enable students to understand, evaluate, and enact those values in everyday behavior. By foregrounding literacy as a mediating mechanism rather than a peripheral skill, the findings advance a more integrated and mechanism-oriented understanding of character formation and contribute to the literature on religiosity, literacy, and vocational education. Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, particularly in measuring religiosity and character, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Moreover, alternative influences such as school climate, teacher modeling, peer interactions, or family background may also shape character development alongside religiosity and literacy. Future research could address these issues through longitudinal or mixed-method designs and

by examining additional contextual variables, thereby refining understanding of how religious values are translated into character outcomes across different educational settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of religiosity in student character formation within vocational education by explicitly testing the mediating functions of learning motivation and literacy. The findings provide clear empirical evidence that religiosity contributes to character development through both direct and indirect pathways, confirming that character formation is a mediated and multidimensional process rather than a simple moral outcome of religious belief. Religiosity functions as a foundational source of moral orientation that supports responsibility, discipline, ethical awareness, and social sensitivity among vocational students, qualities that are essential alongside technical competence in vocational contexts.

Beyond its direct influence, religiosity was found to shape student character indirectly through learning motivation and literacy. Learning motivation operates as a psychological mechanism that translates religious values into sustained engagement, perseverance, and self-regulated behavior, while literacy serves as a cognitive mechanism that enables students to interpret, reflect on, and apply those values in academic and vocational situations. Together, these findings support an integrated model of character formation in which values provide orientation, motivation drives behavioral engagement, and literacy enables reflective and ethical application.

The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it advances research on character education by demonstrating how religiosity operates through motivational and cognitive pathways rather than solely through direct moral influence. Practically, the findings suggest that efforts to strengthen student character in vocational education will be more effective when value-based education is integrated with instructional strategies that foster learning motivation and literacy development. In conclusion, character formation in vocational education cannot be reduced to moral instruction or skills training alone, but must be understood as the outcome of interactions among values, motivation, and literacy within educational environments.

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