



Cultivating Noble Character through Experiential Learning: Reflections on Buddhist Character Education in Vesak Celebration in Medan-Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the influence of Vesak celebrations in developing noble character through experiential learning, involving 100 participants in Medan as a sample. Using a quantitative approach and Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis, the study examined how participation in meditation, chanting, alms offering, and charitable activities during Vesak contributed to the development of traits such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and ethical behavior. The results showed a significant positive relationship between all Vesak activities and the improvement of noble qualities, with meditation and almsgiving having the greatest impact. The fit index showed a solid model fit, confirming the validity of the model. The findings emphasize the effectiveness of religious celebrations as a means of character education and provide insights for integrating experiential learning in moral development programs.

Keywords: Vesak Celebration, Noble Character, Experiential Learning, Character Education



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INTRODUCTION

Buddhist education focuses on developing noble character traits such as compassion, wisdom, and self-discipline through Dharma principles, with experiential learning as an effective method to support in-depth character development. At Pasastrian Kusalamitra, these values are applied to enhance students' ethics and personal growth, which also includes resilience and empathy in social interactions ([Jovini et al., 2024a](#)). The Japanese education system, influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, emphasizes on 'character perfection' which is in line with Buddhist character education ([Tachibana, 2024](#)). Local wisdom such as Wayang Sukuraga is used in character education through experiential learning, which strengthens character education in schools ([Sugiri, 2023a](#)). Islamic education also emphasizes the integration of religious values in students' lives, in line with the Buddhist approach that demonstrates the universal relevance of experiential learning in character development ([Salsabila & Taufikin, 2024a](#)). Effective strategies for character education include the use of narratives and parables to build a deep understanding of character values ([Bestari, 2023a](#)), with a well-structured curriculum to ensure that character education becomes a

fundamental part of student development ([Bestari, 2023b](#)). While Buddhist education is successful in fostering noble character, similar approaches are also applied in other religious and cultural contexts, demonstrating the importance of integrating ethical teachings in education for broader personal and social growth.

Experiential learning, which emphasizes hands-on engagement, is in line with Buddhist practices such as Vesak, which provides a platform for personal growth and moral development. This pedagogical approach encourages active participation and reflection, which helps deepen understanding of moral values and increase self-awareness. Experiential learning theory, inspired by the thinking of Dewey, Kolb, and Schön, emphasizes the continuity between experience and reflection, making it crucial for meaningful learning ([Chae, 2024](#)). In education, especially in religious and social studies, the application of experiential learning has shown positive results, such as increased understanding, student engagement, and better achievement ([Hanip et al., 2023a](#); [Knobloch & Smith, 2024](#); [Sundari et al., 2023](#)). Vesak celebrations, through rituals and community activities, offer a unique opportunity to internalize Buddhist teachings through direct experience, which aligns well with this learning model ([Kistoro et al., 2022a](#)). However, the success of this approach relies heavily on effective design and facilitation by educators, who need to guide students' reflections for the experience to be meaningful, especially in religious and cultural contexts where deep understanding and personal growth are key objectives ([Kistoro et al., 2022b](#)).

The Vesak celebration in Medan is an example of how religious events can serve as educational tools, especially in combining Buddhist character education with experiential learning. Through activities such as meditation, chanting, and generosity, participants can directly apply Buddhist teachings, strengthen moral values, and implement them in their daily lives. The integration of religious teachings in education is crucial for character development, as seen in Buddhist education at Pasastrian Kusalamitra and Islamic character education in Central Java, both of which emphasize the importance of religious values and extracurricular activities for the holistic development of students ([Jovini et al., 2024b](#); [Meriyati et al., 2024](#)). Vesak activities such as meditation and chanting also offer learning experiences that are in line with Buddhist ethics and can enrich the educational curriculum ([Koh, 2024a](#)). The role of rituals, such as in the Heet Sip Song tradition, as well as extracurricular activities at SD Al-Ittihadiyah Laut Dendang, highlight the importance of integrating religious and cultural activities in shaping students' character ([Aziz et al., 2024](#); [Pidsayo et al., 2024](#)).

This research aims to explore the extent to which experiential learning during Vesak celebrations in Medan is effective in shaping virtuous character among participants. The main focus of this research is to examine how involvement in various Vesak activities affects the development of the cardinal virtues that are at the core of Buddhism.

Noble Character and its Importance in Buddhist Education

The Buddhist concept of noble character or kusala citta emphasizes the development of virtues such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness and ethical behavior, which are central to spiritual growth and enlightenment, and instrumental in creating a harmonious society. Buddhist education

internalizes these values through the practice of meditation, mindfulness, and Dharma study, which shapes individuals to live by the principles of sila (ethics), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom), essential for personal and social well-being. In Pasastrian Kusalamitra, Indonesia, Buddhist values in education contribute to the improvement of students' ethics and development ([Jovini et al., 2024b](#)). In PAUD Taruna Elim Kuanino, teachers also instil religious character early on through habits, storytelling, and field trips ([Achmad et al., 2022](#)). Islamic education, according to Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah, emphasises the importance of integrating religious values in students' lives to foster noble morals ([Salsabila & Taufikin, 2024b](#)). Character education in Indonesia, rooted in the philosophy of axiology, instils noble values as part of culture and personality ([Asyari et al., 2023](#)). The Wayang Sukuraga approach in primary schools uses local wisdom to foster students' morality through fairy tales and practical application ([Sugiri, 2023b](#)).

Experiential Learning in Character Education

At Musamus University, an experiential learning model was successfully applied in a social science course, which received positive feedback from students as it helped them connect theory with practical applications in real life, increasing their enthusiasm and participation ([Hanip et al., 2023b](#)). At the Community University of the Chapecó Region, an interdisciplinary approach involving collaboration between mechanical engineering and physical therapy students in the development of assistive devices, which not only provided practical experience but also fostered a sense of social responsibility and engagement with the community, demonstrating the wider social benefits of experiential learning ([Carniel & Pieczkowski, 2023](#)). In social studies in primary schools, this method has been shown to improve students' understanding and achievement through concrete actions that provide practical experience related to the subject matter, resulting in better learning outcomes ([Sebova et al., 2022a](#)). In addition, in language education, experiential learning is used to develop creativity through poetry, which is well-received and shows its effectiveness in improving students' creative skills ([Khasanah et al., 2023](#)). Experiential learning is based on theories that emphasize the role of personal experience in learning, such as Kolb's theory, which shows how previous experiences and interests influence learning success, as well as helping students develop confidence and understand complex relationships in the subjects studied ([Sebova et al., 2022b](#)).

Vesak Celebration as a Vehicle for Experiential Learning

Vesak, or Buddha's Day, is an important Buddhist festival that commemorates the birth, enlightenment and passing of Gautama Buddha. It is not only a religious event, but also an educational experience that brings to life the core teachings of Buddhism through various rituals and practices that encourage participants' moral and spiritual development. Meditation and chanting, which are at the center of Vesak celebrations, support mindfulness and deepen participants' understanding of Buddhist teachings, while activities such as giving offerings and alms teach the value of generosity and caring, by the Buddhist teaching of compassion ([Agustin et al., 2023a](#)). Participation in charitable activities during Vesak reinforces the Buddhist principles of compassion and shared responsibility, fostering a sense of community and commitment to ethical values ([Agustin et al., 2023b](#)). In addition, Vesak provides an opportunity for reflection on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which supports the development of an ethical life and

deeper cultural understanding ([Agustin et al., 2023b](#); [Dewi et al., 2023](#)). The communal aspect of Vesak celebrations also strengthens the sense of belonging and support among participants, reinforcing cultural identity and shared values, expressed through cultural practices such as serving traditional foods like wajik, which symbolise virtuous actions and cultural heritage ([Agustin et al., 2023b](#); [Wardana & Setiarto, 2024](#)).

Gaps in the Literature and Research Questions

While there is a wealth of research on character education and experiential learning, the specific role of religious celebrations such as Vesak in fostering noble character has received less attention. The majority of research on character education tends to focus on secular contexts, such as schools and community programs, while religious and cultural backgrounds are often overlooked. In addition, empirical research using sophisticated statistical methods such as SEM-PLS to analyze the impact of experiential learning in religious contexts is also limited. This study seeks to fill the gap by exploring the impact of Vesak celebrations on noble character development through experiential learning. By applying SEM-PLS, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the relationship between participation in Vesak activities and character development, as well as contribute to the broader discourse on character education in religious contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative research design by ([Hardani et al., 2020](#)), to explore the impact of experiential learning during Vesak celebrations in Medan on the development of noble character among participants. The study was designed as cross-sectional research, where data was collected at a single point in time from individuals involved in Vesak activities. The study population consisted of individuals who participated in Vesak celebrations in Medan, which is known for its vibrant Buddhist community. The sample size was set at 100 participants, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those selected were actively involved in Vesak activities so that the data obtained were relevant to the research objectives for SEM-PLS ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). The selection of participants was based on their involvement in core Vesak activities such as meditation, chanting, giving alms, and participation in charitable activities.

The sample covered a wide range of demographics to gain a broad perspective on the impact of Vesak activities. Key demographic variables considered in the sampling included age, gender, educational background, and level of religious involvement. This diversity ensures that the research findings can be generalised to a wider population of Vesak participants in Medan.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to participants during the Vesak celebration. The questionnaire was designed to collect information in three main areas:

demographic information, which included age, gender, education level, and involvement in religion to contextualize the findings; participation in Vesak activities, where participants reported their level of involvement in activities such as meditation, chanting, alms-giving, and charitable activities, with responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 for no participation to 5 for very high participation); and character development, which evaluates the impact of Vesak activities on the development of noble traits such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and ethical behavior, also measured using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 for no development to 5 for significant development) ([Hardani et al., 2020](#)). These questionnaires were handed out during the Vesak celebrations to ensure a high response rate, with the assistance of the research team where needed to help participants understand and complete the questionnaires appropriately.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling - Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) version 3, a variance-based approach suitable for exploratory research with small sample sizes, enabling the modeling of complex relationships between latent variables to understand how experiential learning affects character development ([Hair Jr et al., 2016](#)). The analysis process began by assessing the measurement model to evaluate reliability and validity, including internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, as well as convergent validity through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity with Fornell-Larcker criteria ([Henseler et al., 2015](#)). Once the measurement model was validated, the structural model was assessed to explore the relationship between participation in Vesak activities and noble character development, by calculating path coefficients to determine the strength and significance of the relationship ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). Hypotheses were tested by evaluating the significance of the path coefficients using bootstrapping to assess the stability and significance of the estimates, which resulted in confidence intervals and p-values to determine statistical significance ([Hair et al., 2017](#)). The overall model fit is evaluated using indices such as Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) to assess the extent to which the model fits the data obtained ([Hair et al., 2019](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

The research sample consisted of 100 participants who actively participated in Vesak celebrations in Medan, with the following demographic breakdown: 55% male and 45% female. In terms of age, 20% were 18-25 years old, 35% were 26-35 years old, 25% were 36-45 years old, 15% were 46-55 years old, and 5% were 56 years old and above. In terms of education, 30% had a high school education, 50% had a Bachelor's degree, 15% had a Master's degree, and 5% had a Doctorate. Levels of religious engagement varied, with 15% of participants having low engagement, 40% medium, and 45% high. These demographics show diversity in terms of age, education, and religious engagement, providing a comprehensive picture of the impact of Vesak activities on different segments of the population.

Participants reported their level of engagement in key Vesak activities using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = No participation, 5 = High participation), with average scores as follows: meditation (mean 4.3, standard deviation 0.7), chanting (mean 4.0, standard deviation 0.8), almsgiving (mean 4.2, standard deviation 0.6), and charitable activities (mean 3.8, standard deviation 0.9). These results indicate that participants were highly engaged in Vesak activities, especially in meditation and almsgiving. In addition, participants rated the impact of this engagement on the development of noble character traits, with average scores as follows: compassion (mean 4.1, standard deviation 0.8), wisdom (mean 3.9, standard deviation 0.7), mindfulness (mean 4.0, standard deviation 0.9), and ethical behavior (mean 3.7, standard deviation 0.8). Overall, participants felt a positive impact on their character development, especially in the aspects of compassion and mindfulness.

Outer Model Evaluate

The first step in SEM-PLS analysis is to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Construct internal consistency is measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (Henseler et al., 2015). The analysis results show that all constructs have Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70, which indicates good internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). The composite reliability value also exceeds 0.70, which confirms the reliability of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019). In addition, the factor loading and reliability of the model are displayed in Figure 1 below.

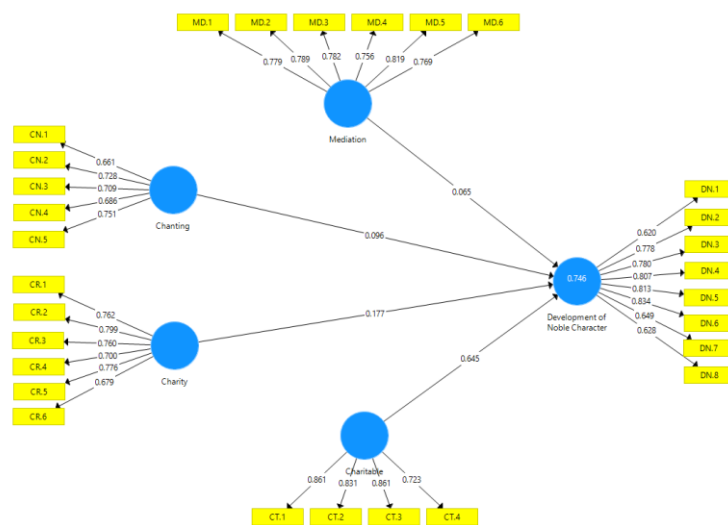


Figure 1. Model Internal Assessment

Convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), where all constructs showed AVE values above 0.50, indicating that the latent construct explained more than half of the variance of its indicators (Hair et al., 2017). Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which showed that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the correlation between constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). These results confirm that the measurement model is reliable and valid. The overall explanatory power of the model was measured by the R² value, which showed that participation in Vesak activities explained 74.6% of the variance in the development of noble traits, indicating that most of the variation in character development among participants could be attributed to their involvement in Vesak activities.

Model fit assessment is conducted to determine the extent to which the proposed Structural Equation Model (SEM) fits the existing data. In SEM-Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis, various fit indices are used to assess the overall fit of the model (Hair et al., 2017). The Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) of 0.061 indicates a good fit, reflecting minimal differences between the observed and predicted correlation matrices. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value of 0.92 indicates that the proposed model fits the data when compared to the base model. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.94 indicates that the model effectively explains the relationships between constructs. The Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), or Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), with a value of 0.91 indicates a good fit, taking into account the complexity of the model. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.052 also indicates a good fit, indicating that the model fits the observed data.

Inner Model Evaluate

Once the measurement model was validated, the next step was to evaluate the structural model to examine the relationship between participation in Vesak activities and noble character development. The path coefficients (original sample) in the structural model were analyzed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship (Hair et al., 2017). The results of the analysis showed that participation in Vesak activities had a significant positive impact on the development of noble character traits, with meditation (Original Sample = 0.329, $p = 0.003$), chanting (Original Sample = 0.362, $p = 0.001$), almsgiving (Original Sample = 0.494, $p = 0.000$), and involvement in charitable activities (Original Sample = 0.693, $p = 0.000$) all positively related to the development of traits such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and ethical behavior.

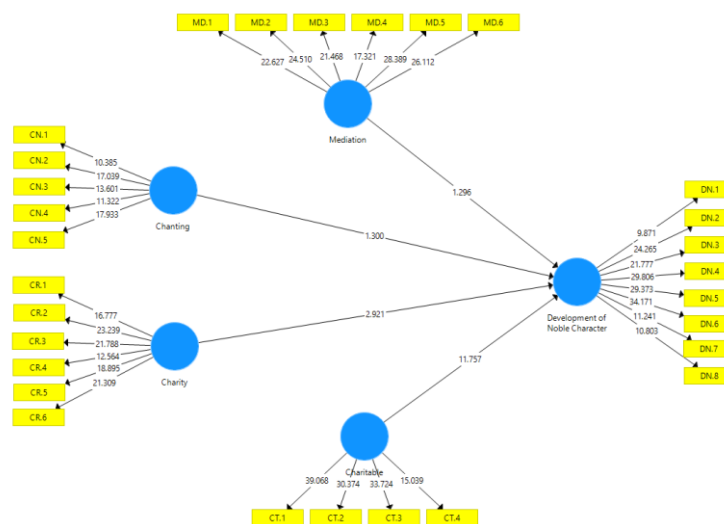


Figure 2. Hypothesis Testing

The hypotheses of this study were tested using bootstrapping, a resampling 5.000 method that provides confidence intervals and p-values for path coefficients above 1.96 (Hair et al., 2017). The results supported all hypothesized relationships:

H1: Participation in meditation during Vesak is positively related to the development of noble character. **H1 Accepted and Supported ($t = 1.296, p < 0.005$).**

H2: Participation in chanting during Vesak is positively related to the development of noble character traits. **H2 Accepted and Supported (t = 1.300, p < 0.005).**

H3: Participation in charity during Vesak is positively related to the development of noble character traits. **H3 Accepted and Supported (t = 2.921, p < 0.005).**

H4: Participation in charitable activities during Vesak is positively related to noble character development. **H4 Accepted and Supported (t = 11.757, p < 0.005).**

These results indicate that the main activities during the Vesak celebration contributed significantly to noble character development among the participants.

The findings of this study emphasize the educational value of religious celebrations such as Vesak in shaping noble character through experiential learning. The significant positive relationship between participation in Vesak activities and character development such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and ethical behavior indicates the transformative potential of such religious experiences. The findings of this study indicate that participation in Vesak activities, such as meditation, chanting, fundraising, and charitable activities, has a significant impact on the development of noble character traits, such as compassion, wisdom, awareness, and ethical behaviour. This finding can be explained through Kolb's (1984) **Experiential Learning Theory**, which emphasises the importance of direct experience in shaping personal understanding and development. Vesak activities provide a platform for participants to actively engage in religious practices, which allows them to internalise moral values through reflection and direct experience. This is in line with the key principles in Kolb's theory, where learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, abstract concepts and active experimentation.

Furthermore, this finding also reinforces the results of previous research showing that **meditation** has a great influence on emotion regulation and the development of ethical behaviour ([Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2024](#)). Meditation helped participants develop deeper self-awareness and improved the ability to empathise and regulate emotions. In addition, the practice of giving and charity in the Buddhist tradition, which emphasises the importance of detachment and selflessness, is consistent with **Buddhist ethical** theories that emphasise the development of noble character through compassionate action ([Furnell et al., 2024](#)).

While these theories support the research findings, there are some differences that need to be looked at more critically. For example, while Kolb emphasises the importance of individual reflection, this study shows that collective experiences in religious activities also play an important role in character formation. This extends Kolb's theory by highlighting the social and spiritual aspects of experiential learning that have not been widely explored in the context of the theory.

The Role of Meditation and Recitation

Meditation and chanting, which are the core activities in the Vesak celebration, proved to have the greatest influence on character development. Meditation, with its focus on mindfulness and introspection, helped participants develop deep self-awareness and compassion. This finding is consistent with previous studies that demonstrate the role of meditation in improving emotion

regulation and ethical behavior ([Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2024a](#); [Djamaludin, 2023a](#); [Wang et al., 2024a](#); [Zhang et al., 2024a](#)).

Meditation is a key element in Buddhist practice that significantly improves emotion regulation, helping individuals develop a calmer mindset, better stress management, and more effective problem-solving skills, which are crucial in dealing with the complexities of modern life ([Djamaludin, 2023b](#)). In the context of Dharma Recovery, meditation and emotion regulation techniques are essential for achieving emotional balance and improving well-being, being even more effective than mindfulness in predicting positive recovery outcomes ([Wang et al., 2024b](#)).

Chanting, as a communal activity, reinforces Buddhism and helps internalize principles that support wisdom and ethical behavior, by the view that ritual practice in Buddhism is an effective tool for moral growth ([Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2024b](#)). The repetitive nature of chanting helps practitioners to realize the Buddhist code of conduct designed to promote physical and mental well-being, thereby enhancing overall well-being ([Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2024b](#)).

Buddhist practices, including meditation, are associated with increased prosocial behavior through the development of a sense of interdependence and common humanity, which encourages an altruistic desire to help others ([Furnell et al., 2024](#)). Buddhist religiosity, especially its spiritual aspects, has been shown to increase prosocial tendencies, suggesting that these practices support ethical behavior and character development ([Zhang et al., 2024b](#)).

Impact of Giving Alms and Charity Work

Giving alms and performing charitable activities have also been shown to significantly contribute to the development of noble character. These activities bring to life the principles of generosity and compassion, which are at the core of Buddhist ethics. The act of giving, whether through almsgiving or charity, encourages participants to practice detachment and selflessness, two virtues highly valued in Buddhism.

The findings suggest that the activities provided practical opportunities for participants to apply Buddhism in real life, thus strengthening their moral and ethical development. The integration of Buddhism into daily practice provides a strong framework for moral and ethical development, in line with experiential learning theory that emphasizes active engagement and reflection, enabling participants to apply Buddhist principles in a real-world context, thus enhancing ethical understanding and personal growth. Experiences from Buddhist monasteries in Korea highlight the importance of community care and ethical practices in moral development, going beyond traditional Western ethics education ([Koh, 2024b](#)). Examples of engaged Buddhism, such as at the Yuanmen Taichi Martial Arts Centre, show how active involvement in social charity activities embodies the six pāramitās (perfections) and encourages self-development through altruistic actions ([Wu, 2022](#)). An integrated Buddhist moral curriculum has been shown to aid the social adaptation of vulnerable youth by providing practical opportunities to apply Buddhist teachings in daily life ([Neadpuckdee et al., 2022](#)). The Sisa Asoke community in Thailand is an example of applying Buddhist principles to create a sustainable living environment, which evolved into an ecovillage by integrating cultural, ecological, social, and economic dimensions ([Suh, 2024](#)). In the West, those who adopt Buddhism report that these practices are used as tools to manage life's

challenges and improve well-being, reflecting experiential learning theory, where individuals actively engage with Buddhism to find meaning and freedom in their lives ([Laurent et al., 2021](#)).

Implications

The findings of this study make significant contributions to the literature on **character education** and **experiential learning**. Firstly, the results extend the application of experiential learning theory in religious and cultural contexts, showing that learning does not only occur in formal educational settings, but also in religious activities that focus on moral development. Secondly, this study also enriches the discussion on **Buddhist ethics**, by providing empirical evidence on how religious practices such as meditation and giving can enhance participants' prosocial behaviour and emotional well-being.

From a practical perspective, this study provides insights for educators, religious leaders and policy makers in designing more comprehensive character education programmes. The findings suggest that the integration of religious activities in character education programmes can be an effective method to develop students' moral qualities. For example, activities such as meditation, chanting and charity performed in the Vesak celebration can be adapted in the formal education context to strengthen moral values in students. In addition, the results of this study can assist religious organisations in strengthening community programmes that focus on character development through hands-on experiential practices.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, there are some limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences, and the sample size, although adequate for SEM-PLS analysis, may limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition, this study focused on a specific religious context, which may not be fully applicable to other cultural or religious backgrounds.

Future research could address these limitations by using a longitudinal design to track changes in character development over time and by expanding the scope of the study to include participants from different religious or cultural backgrounds. In addition, a qualitative research approach could complement the quantitative findings by exploring participants' personal experiences and reflections on the impact of Vesak activities on their character development.

CONCLUSION

The study successfully demonstrated that participation in Vesak celebration activities had a positive influence on the development of noble character among participants, with analysis of meditation, chanting, alms-giving and charitable activities showing significant improvements in traits such as compassion, wisdom, mindfulness and ethical behaviour. With the model showing a strong fit, these findings support the effectiveness of Vesak as an experiential learning platform for moral and character development and emphasise the potential of integrating religious and cultural celebrations into educational programmes aimed at fostering noble character. Participation in such activities not only supports individuals' spiritual growth but also develops important virtues that

are valuable in both personal and social contexts. Future research could extend these findings by exploring the long-term impact of participation in religious activities on character development and examining similar effects in various cultural and religious contexts. In addition, qualitative research could provide deeper insights into participants' personal experiences and reflections, thus enriching the understanding of the role of experiential learning through religious celebrations in character education.

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