

Spirituality Beyond Religiosity: Understanding Perceptions of Academic Cheating in Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract. Cumulating evidence suggests that high levels of spirituality can foster integrity. However, integrity violations remain prevalent, even among populations with strong religious beliefs. This study collected data from 2,800 students across 17 academic institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia to examine the relationship between their levels of spirituality and their perceptions of academic cheating. Although both countries have predominantly Muslim populations, they differ in how religious practices are implemented. The results revealed a significant correlation between spirituality and perceptions of cheating in both countries. However, one aspect of spirituality in Indonesia diverged from the broader concept, underscoring the complex and nuanced relationship between spirituality and religion. While these concepts often overlap, they also exhibit distinct differences. Such differences in spirituality and religiosity may help explain the paradox of integrity issues, including the prevalence of cheating within religious communities.

Keywords: cheating; Indonesia; Malaysia; spirituality; religiosity

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The influence of spirituality on personal moral values is widely acknowledged. Strong involvement in religious practices has been linked to ethical behavior, as indicated by the findings of (Elsayed et al., 2023). Reminders of religious consequences of engaging in unethical behavior can make people more honest (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011). A study by Nelson et al. (2017) supports this, showing that students who frequently participate in religious activities are less likely to engage in academic dishonesty than those with minimal religious involvement. The relationship is further reinforced by several studies that highlight the positive impact of heightened spirituality on moral reasoning (Baumsteiger et al., 2013; Morton et al., 2006; Tepe et al., 2016). As a result, it seems clear that individuals with a solid spiritual foundation are less likely to participate in academic misconduct.

However, instances of cheating in schools remain a complex and concerning issue, even when a high level of religiosity is present. Indonesians consider religion to be an important part of their lives (Tamir et al., 2020), yet academic dishonesty remains a problem for them (Jamaluddin & Lufityanto, 2021). This paradoxical situation reveals a disconnection between religiosity, which often emphasizes integrity and honesty, and students' behavior in academic settings. Academic misconduct in school manifests in various forms, reflecting the diverse ways students may circumvent academic integrity. One commonly found method is plagiarism, where students present someone else's work, whether from peers, published authors, or online sources, as their own (Jones, 2011). Another prevalent form is copying during exams, often facilitated by discreetly written notes, peeking at another student's paper, or using technology like smartphones to access information (Park et al., 2013). Understanding and addressing these various types of cheating is crucial for educators to maintain academic integrity and foster a culture of honesty and fairness in schools.

Indonesia and Malaysia are countries with a notably high number of religious adherents. In Indonesia, 87.2% of the population identifies as Muslim (Statistik, 2010), while in Malaysia, Muslims make up 61.3% of the population (of Statistics Malaysia, 2011), with the remainder practicing other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and more. Religion is a vital component of daily life in both societies, as the Pew Research Center reported in 2018. This strong religious inclination suggests a higher level of spirituality in these societies compared to others where religion might not be as significant. However, despite this religious and spiritual overtone, instances of cheating are still observed within these communities. In Indonesia, academic dishonesty is a problem that many academic institutions struggle to tackle (Ampuni et al., 2020), and the same is true in Malaysia (Abusafia et al., 2018). As people who show unethical behavior in the workplace have already started to perform such behavior in school (Graves, 2008; Sims, 1993), both nations likewise struggle to combat corruption in their societies.

Nevertheless, while Indonesia and Malaysia share common roots in the Islamic faith, their practice and interpretation of it exhibit distinct cultural and historical nuances. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Islam is often characterized by a more diverse and moderate approach (Wanandi, 2002). This country's unique rendition of Islam results from its diverse ethnic and cultural heritage intertwining with Islamic practices (van Bruinessen, 1999). Often, religious activities become interwoven with local cultural traditions, leading to the development of rituals that were not

initially part of Islam as prescribed in the Holy Qur'an (Afandi, 2023).

While Indonesian Islam has been influenced by local customs and pre-Islamic beliefs, leading to a more syncretic and inclusive practice of the faith, Malaysia follows a more conservative and homogenous interpretation (Hamayotsu, 2002). Part of this stems from how Islam is mobilized. The Malaysian government plays a more active role in defining and enforcing Islamic practices, whereas Islam in Indonesia is more driven by civil society forces (Ufen, 2009). In other words, the approach of Islamic practice in Malaysia is more top-down, while in Indonesia, it is more bottom-up.

There is a possibility that the implementation of Islamic governance might be related to how populations perceive and value integrity. In countries where the school system integrates Islamic principles, such as Malaysia, there is often a direct correlation between religious norms and moral judgment (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022). The educational system's active role in promoting Islamic values shapes a collective mindset where integrity is closely linked to religious adherence and personal piety. Conversely, in nations with a more relaxed approach to Islamic value implementation in the education system, such as Indonesia, the perception of integrity may be less tied to religious doctrine and more influenced by a combination of religious, cultural, and universal ethical principles (Jamaluddin & Lufityanto, 2021). This variation in the intertwining of religion and state policies may result in diverse cognitive appraisals of integrity across different Islamic societies.

In our present study, we aimed to explore the cognitive aspects of integrity as they relate to spirituality. We focused on understanding students' perceptions of cheating behaviors at school and examining whether these perceptions were influenced by their self-assessed level of spirituality. To this end, we gathered data from both Indonesian and Malaysian participants to determine if variations in the implementation of religiosity in these countries impacted students' attitudes toward cheating behaviors.

It is worth noting that religiosity and spirituality are concepts that often overlap but also have distinct differences (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). They both deal with the human quest for meaning and connection with something greater than oneself, but they approach this quest from different angles (Hill et al., 2000). Religiosity typically refers to the formal, outward practice of a religion (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). This includes participation in organized services, adherence to specific rituals, observance of religious holidays, and other practices that are part of an established religious institution. Religiosity is often associated with particular beliefs about the nature of God or the divine, an afterlife, and the practice of moral and ethical guidelines as prescribed by religious texts or doctrines (Mueller, 1980). It can be measured by one's level of commitment and adherence to these institutional practices and beliefs (Cornwall et al., 1986).

On the other hand, spirituality is often associated with personal experience and individualized beliefs. It is a broader concept that can include a sense of connection to something bigger than oneself or some sense of a higher power that is not strictly defined by religious doctrine (Elkins et al., 1988). Spirituality is less about formal practices and more about personal growth, a quest for meaning, and the pursuit of individual values and connections. It can be practiced both within and outside of religious traditions (Schnell, 2012).

We believe that the connection between religiosity and spirituality is interwoven, as numerous individuals engage in spiritual practices framed by their religious convictions and customs (Loewenthal, 2013). For such individuals, their spiritual and religious aspects are closely linked, with their spiritual journey enhancing and giving depth to their religious observances. Religiosity tends to be organized and characterized by external rituals and doctrines, whereas spirituality is centered around personal faith and introspection (Loewenthal, 2013). Given our focus on the cognitive aspect of integrity, specifically attitudes towards cheating, we surmised that the domain of spirituality would be more pertinent, as both integrity and spirituality function within the same internal dimension. Therefore, we examined the spirituality level rather than religiosity level for this study while also exploring potential disparities between the two concepts.

Methods

Participants

This research involved 2,800 participants, with 1,624 from Indonesia and 1,176 from Malaysia. All were students (age range 18-24 year old) from 17 different universities across both countries. Recruitment occurred through email or the universities' internal communication channels. Participation in the study was voluntarily, with no rewards offered for completion. Data was collected either offline using a printed questionnaire or online using a Google survey: the method varied between participating institutions. Participants generally completed the survey within 20 to 30 minutes. Before beginning the study, participants provided their informed consent, which the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia had approved.

Instruments

In this study, we utilized two psychological measurement tools: (i) the Perception Toward Cheating Scale (developed by Waugh et al. (1995) and (ii) the Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS), created by Howden (1992). To ensure the fidelity of the scales' content to their original versions, a back translation process was employed for both instruments. However, most Malaysian participants completed the original English version of the questionnaire, as they tend to be more proficient and at ease with English compared to their Indonesian counterparts.

The Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS) encompasses four primary dimensions (Howden, 1992): (i) a sense of purpose or meaning in life, exemplified by statements like 'My life's meaning gives me a sense of peace'; (ii) innerness, such as 'I experience a sense of harmony or inner peace'; (iii) unifying interconnectedness, illustrated by 'I feel connected to the community where I live'; and (iv) transcendence, for example, 'My understanding of the universe goes beyond traditional notions of space and time.' Participants responded to these statements using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale's Cronbach's alpha value is .805 (Jamaluddin & Lufityanto, 2021), indicating high reliability.

The Perception Toward Cheating Scale (PCS) is designed to assess an individual's subjective

understanding of cheating behaviors (Waugh et al., 1995). It consists of three main sections: (i) defining cheating, with items like 'Considering it cheating if you don't report a teacher's grading error that benefits you'; (ii) exploring the motivations for cheating, such as 'Cheating is more likely in classes where the exams don't reflect the taught material'; and (iii) examining methods to prevent cheating, for example, 'Small classes with personalized teacher-student interaction are effective in preventing cheating.' Participants rated these statements using a 4-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). This scale is also highly reliable, indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of .864. Given the sensitivity of cheating as a subject and the potential for bias in self-reporting past unethical behaviors (Bernadi & Adamaitis, 2006), this scale offers an alternative method for gathering more accurate data by focusing on individuals' perceptions rather than their direct participation in such behavior.

Data Analysis

We utilized two different statistical tests to analyze our data. First, we conducted an independent sample t-test to determine whether there were significant differences in the scores of the Spirituality Assessment Scale and the Perception Toward Cheating Scale between the Indonesian and Malaysian samples. Next, we applied Pearson correlation and regression analyses to examine whether spirituality could predict individuals' perceptions of cheating overall. To further explore the findings, we divided the data by country and assessed whether the observed patterns held consistently for both Indonesian and Malaysian samples. Additionally, we analyzed the correlations between each dimension of the Perception Toward Cheating Scale and the Spirituality Assessment Scale to investigate whether specific aspects were significantly related.

The Use of AI-Generated Tools in the Writing Process

In composing this manuscript, the authors utilized ChatGPT-4, OpenAI's expansive language model, for drafting specific segments (OpenAI, 2024). The authors took the initial outputs from this AI tool and then thoroughly revised, adapted, and enhanced them to align with their specific requirements. The authors bear full responsibility for the final content presented in this publication.

Results

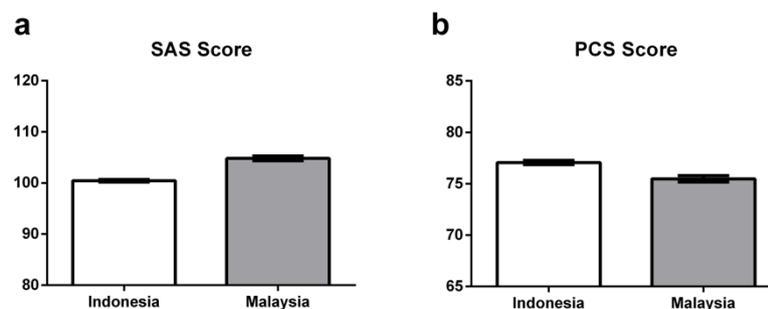
Our analysis revealed notable differences in the mean scores between our Malaysian and Indonesian samples. As indicated in Table 1, the mean score for the Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS) was significantly higher in the Malaysian sample compared to the Indonesian sample ($t(1622) = 8.842, p < .001$, as seen in Fig. 1a). Conversely, the mean score for the Perception Toward Cheating Scale (PCS) was lower in the Malaysian sample than in the Indonesian sample ($t(1174) = 4.454, p < .001$, shown in Fig. 1b). This suggests that Malaysians possess a higher level of spirituality than Indonesians, but Indonesians demonstrate greater awareness when it comes to the perception of cheating.

Table 1*Psychometric Analysis of SAS and PCS*

	Indonesia N = 1624	Malaysia N = 1176	Total N = 2800
Spirituality Assesment Scale (SAS)			
Mean	100.43	104.82	102.28
Maximum	154	168	168
Minimum	28	28	28
Standard Deviation	10.24	15.97	13.14
Reliability of Estimate	0.692	0.873	0.804
Perception Cheating Scale (PCS)			
Mean	77.06	75.48	76.40
Maximum	108	108	108
Minimum	27	27	27
Standard Deviation	8.31	10.48	9.32
Reliability of Estimate	0.851	0.877	0.864

Figure 1

The differences between (a) spirituality (SAS) and (b) awareness toward cheating (PCS) score in Indonesian and Malaysian samples. The mean and SD were shown on Table 1

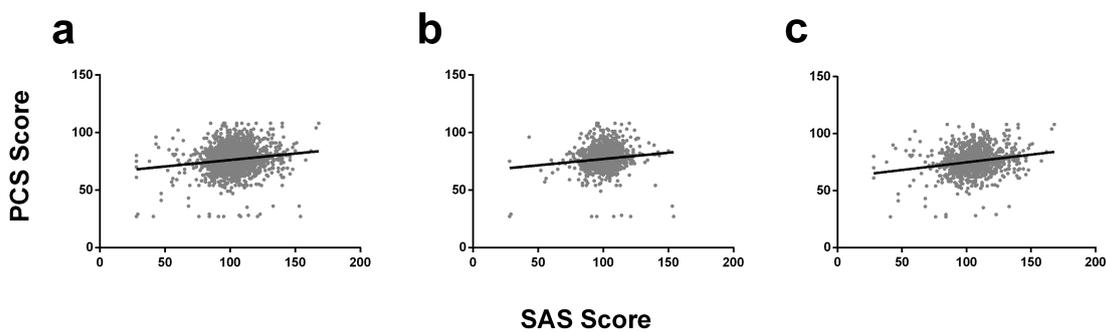


Our analysis demonstrated that spirituality was a significant predictor of the perception of cheating, $\beta = .158$, $t(2798) = 8.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.086, .138]. The overall model was also significant, $R^2 = .025$, $F(1,2789) = 72$, $p < .001$, shown in Fig. 2a. Then, we separated the data by country to check whether the pattern persisted. For Indonesians, the pattern held, $\beta = .135$, $t(1622) = 5.48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.070, .149], and the model was significant, $R^2 = .018$, $F(1,1622) = 30$, $p < .001$, shown in Fig. 2b. A similar pattern was observed for Malaysians. Spirituality was a significant predictor of the perception of cheating, $\beta = .205$, $t(1174) = 7.18$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.098, .171], and the overall model was likewise significant,

$R^2 = .042$, $F(1,1174) = 51.6$, $p < .001$, shown in Fig. 2c. These findings suggest that a higher level of spirituality is associated with an increased ability to recognize unethical behaviors in both Indonesian and Malaysian contexts. However, the strength of this association appears to be more pronounced in the Malaysian sample. The explanatory power of the variable in the Indonesian sample accounts for only 1.8% of the variance, while in the Malaysian sample, it accounts for 4.2%.

Figure 2

The correlation between spirituality (SAS) and awareness toward cheating (PCS) score. (a) Total correlation between both variables is significant. This pattern was also observed in the (b) Indonesian samples, and (c) Malaysian samples



Subsequently, we conducted a more detailed analysis by examining the correlations between various dimensions of the variables in both samples, as illustrated in Table 2. The result indicated that overall spirituality showed the strongest correlation with the discouragement of cheating aspect, evident in both the Indonesian ($r = .113$; $p < .001$) and Malaysian ($r = .195$, $p < .001$) samples. This pattern indicates that people with greater spirituality may have a heightened awareness of cheating, potentially deterring them from engaging in such behavior (i.e. discouraged).

Our research also investigated which aspect of spirituality shares the strongest correlation with perceptions of cheating. We discovered that the sense of meaning or purpose aspect held the most significant correlation with overall perceptions of cheating in both Indonesian ($r = .260$; $p < .001$) and Malaysian ($r = .259$; $p < .001$) samples. This implies that individuals with a strong spiritual sense of purpose are more likely to cognitively perceive cheating as unethical behavior. Furthermore, this sense of meaning or purpose was strongly linked to the discouragement of cheating, as evidenced in both Indonesian ($r = .240$, $p < .001$) and Malaysian ($r = .284$, $p < .001$) participants. It suggests that individuals with a profound sense of purpose or meaning in their spirituality tend to possess a well-developed understanding of right and wrong, serving as a moral compass and influencing their attitudes toward specific behaviors like cheating.

Our findings offer intriguing insights that contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of religiosity in distinct subgroups, specifically Indonesia and Malaysia. In Malaysia, we observed a

synchronous relationship among the different dimensions of spirituality: (i) meaning or purpose, (ii) innerness, (iii) unifying interconnectedness, and (iv) transcendence, as all these dimensions showed positive correlations with each other. However, this pattern was not replicated in the Indonesian subgroup. In this sample, unifying interconnectedness negatively correlated with the meaning of purpose ($r = -.069$). Additionally, it did not correlate with the perception of cheating. While the aspect of innerness aligned with other dimensions of spirituality, it also lacked a correlation with cheating perceptions.

Discussion

Our research indicates that in terms of spirituality levels and perceptions of cheating, Indonesian and Malaysian participants show certain similarities. The study reveals a notable correlation between spirituality and individuals' cognitive perceptions of cheating. Those with higher levels of spirituality are also more adept at recognizing cheating behaviors. Among the various facets of spirituality, the sense of purpose or meaning most significantly influences students' perceptions of cheating. A sense of meaning or purpose in this context refers to the understanding or belief that one's life has a significant reason or aim beyond mere existence or material success. Individuals with a strong sense of meaning or purpose in their spirituality often feel that their actions and decisions contribute to something beyond themselves. This can lead to a sense of responsibility to live in specific ways, such as ethically, following the perceived purpose or the divine plan (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Jack et al., 2016).

Prior research has established connections between spirituality and various dimensions of morality, including moral concern (Jack et al., 2016), moral emotions (Hardy et al., 2014), and moral reasoning (Baumsteiger et al., 2013; Morton et al., 2006; Tepe et al., 2016). Morality encompasses the guidelines and principles that define right and wrong, as well as good and bad behavior (Gert & Gert, 2020). It is shaped by a complex array of values and ethical beliefs that influence how individuals assess and decide upon their actions and those of others to maximize social gain (Krebs, 2008). Our study reveals that the sense of meaning or purpose in spirituality is closely associated with discouragement of cheating behaviors. We surmise that this is due to spirituality enhancing moral reasoning, which in turn attenuates individuals likelihood of engaging in acts of cheating.

Our research primarily addresses the cognitive dimension of integrity, specifically the perception of cheating. To translate this into concrete actions, multiple factors influencing behavior must be considered. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), intended behaviors arise from a combination of elements: (i) subjective norms, (ii) attitudes, and (iii) perceived behavioral control. In our context, spirituality functions as the subjective norm, while the perception of cheating acts as an attitude toward cheating behavior. For these to manifest into actual behaviors of integrity, an additional component, perceived behavioral control, is crucial. This concept relates to a person's judgment of how easy or hard it is to perform a certain action, considering their access to required resources and opportunities (Ajzen, 2002).

Malaysia and Indonesia may exhibit differences in perceived behavioral control, particularly

regarding religious influence on integrity. In Malaysia, the government's direct involvement in endorsing Islamic values, particularly in educational settings (Abbott & Gregorios-Pippas, 2010), might act as a form of perceived behavioral control that fosters integrity. This top-down approach could provide a more structured framework for moral behavior.

Conversely, in Indonesia, the emphasis on Islamic values is less robust than in Malaysia. Malaysia considers Islam to be their only official religion (Martinez, 2001), while Indonesia explicitly recognizes six official religions (Seo, 2012), Islam being one of them. As a result, public schools in Indonesia are more inclusive, and students with different religious beliefs have their own religious educations (Utami, 2022). This could lead to varied interpretations of spirituality and potentially weaker perceived behavioral control in fostering integrity. While it is not yet clear whether academic cheating is more prevalent in Indonesia than in Malaysia, available data indicates that Malaysia is seen as the less corrupt of the two nations, according to the World Economics Corruption Perception Index^{**}). Additionally, the occurrence of fraud in organizational settings was reported to be significantly higher in Indonesia compared to Malaysia, as noted in a 2018 report by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Our study indicates that various dimensions of spirituality are interrelated and collectively shape the broader concept of spirituality. However, in the Indonesian subgroup, the aspect of unifying interconnectedness did not show a significant correlation with the holistic concept of spirituality. The principle of unifying interconnectedness revolves around the idea that all parts of the universe, including humans, the natural world, and the cosmos, are inherently connected (Howden, 1992). This principle, a core aspect of numerous spiritual and religious doctrines, underscores the belief that the universe's components are part of an integrated, interdependent network. It posits that all elements of nature are interconnected and depend on each other for survival. The extent to which the implementation of Islam in Indonesia incorporates this sense of spiritual interconnectedness, particularly in terms of fostering connections among individuals, other living beings, and the world at large, remains an open question.

The relationship between spirituality and religiosity is complex and nuanced, with areas of overlap and distinct differences. Although the concept of unifying interconnectedness is a prevalent aspect of spirituality, it may not be as deeply integrated into formal religious practices. Spirituality typically centers on personal and subjective experiences and seeking understanding, meaning, or connection, whereas religiosity is more about engaging in organized religious activities (Koenig, 2012). Unifying interconnectedness represents a higher spiritual understanding, requiring a deep, personal journey. Neuroscientific studies suggest that experiences of interconnectedness and transcendence, often facilitated by meditation or other contemplative practices, are associated with altered activity in the default mode network (DMN), a brain network linked to self-referential processing, which fosters a sense of unity and dissolution of ego boundaries (Brewer et al., 2011). This concept may extend beyond traditional religious practices to encompass a more holistic sense of connection with the broader universe. By understanding shared existence and dependent origination, individuals are motivated to engage in ethical behavior that promotes collective well-being (King et al., 2020).

Direct studies on integrating "unifying interconnectedness" and its effects on integrity in religious contexts are scarce. However, research generally supports the idea that fostering intrinsic moral frameworks through religious or spiritual education may reduce unethical behaviors. Past research indicated that students motivated by learning and moral principles tend to engage in less cheating than those focused on performance metrics (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005). The principle of unifying interconnectedness could therefore potentially influence individual moral principles.

Hence, there may be a need for religious practices to incorporate the principle of unifying interconnectedness, especially in the Indonesian academic setting. This inclusion could help illustrate how individual actions, like cheating, not only breach religious norms but also impact others and the broader cultural or systemic framework. This could potentially enhance integrity and address the paradoxical issue of cheating in religious communities.

Conclusion

This study highlights the intricate relationship between spirituality and perceptions of cheating among students in Indonesia and Malaysia. It demonstrates that spirituality, particularly the dimension of meaning or purpose, significantly correlates with individuals' moral reasoning. However, the principle of unifying interconnectedness, a vital aspect of spirituality, appears less integrated within the Indonesian subgroup. Differences in religious implementation and perceived behavioral control between the two countries also contribute to variations in how spirituality shapes integrity. Furthermore, while spirituality correlates strongly with perceptions of morality, its actual translation into ethical behaviors may depend on additional factors such as societal norms and the presence of structured moral frameworks, as evidenced by Malaysia's more direct incorporation of religious values into educational and governmental policies.

Recommendations

Religious practices, particularly in Indonesia, could benefit from incorporating the principle of unifying interconnectedness into spiritual education. Emphasizing how individual actions, such as cheating, affect the broader community and systemic framework can foster a deeper understanding of integrity. Additionally, strengthening students' perceived behavioral control is essential. This can be achieved by creating supportive environments, enforcing fair rules, and providing resources that help align ethical behavior with achievable goals.

Academic programs should also focus on promoting a sense of purpose among students by blending moral and ethical discussions into the curriculum, emphasizing how individual contributions align with societal and spiritual values. Further comparative studies are needed to explore the specific ways in which religious and cultural differences influence the integration of spirituality and moral behavior, offering insights into best practices for fostering integrity in diverse contexts.

NOTE:

World Economics has converted the ranking data into an index on a scale from 0-100, where 0 is absolute corruption and 100 is no perception of government corruption. Malaysia's level of perceived corruption in 2022 was 52.2 against a global average of 48.4, while Indonesia's was 37.8. <https://www.worldeconomics.com/Indicator-Data/Corruption/Corruption-Perceptions-Index.aspx>

Declaration

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