

Altruistic Behaviour among Gen Z Youth in Malaysia

¹Salwa Amirah Awang*, ²Fidlizan Muhammad., ³Umi Syahidah Anuari., ⁴Noorulziwaty Kamaruzaman

^{1,4}Department of General Studies, Polytechnic of Sultan Azlan Shah, Perak, Malaysia

²Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia

³Department of General Studies, Polytechnic of Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian youth currently face significant socio-economic challenges, including a moderate risk of mental health issues and a persistent unemployment crisis. To improve the well-being of this group, altruism is deemed as the key mechanism for developing the social and ethical skills necessary to navigate these challenges and foster societal resilience. Utilizing a quantitative survey approach with 328 polytechnic students, the research aims to establish a descriptive baseline of altruistic beliefs and behaviours among the Gen Z of Malaysian youth. Findings indicate a "Very High" level of altruistic belief (Mean = 4.3780), characterized by a strong emotional inclination toward helping others. However, actual altruistic behaviour was rated as "Moderate" (Mean = 3.3355), revealing a distinct "intention-behaviour gap". While respondents frequently engage in low-risk daily courtesies such as "picking up rubbish" or assisting classmates they are less likely to participate in high-stakes actions like blood donation or providing rides to strangers. Spearman's Rho correlation analysis confirmed a moderate positive relationship ($r_s = .406, p < .01$) between beliefs and acts, suggesting that while the two are significantly linked, internal convictions do not always translate into practice. The study concludes that although Malaysian youth possess a strong moral foundation, external or internal barriers hinder consistent altruistic practice. It is recommended that future interventions should focus on action-oriented strategies and providing low-barrier opportunities for community engagement rather than further value-based education.

Keywords: Altruism, Malaysian Youth, Prosocial Behaviour, Intention-Behaviour Gap, Social Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The escalating pace of social and economic development in Malaysia presents both opportunities and challenges for the nation's youth, who represent the future of its community cohesion and social capital. According to the Malaysian Youth Mental Health Index 2023 (MyMHI'23), Malaysian youth face a moderate risk of mental health issues, evidenced by an overall rating of 71.9. This risk manifests primarily through high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, compounded by reported deficiencies in social and environmental support (UNICEF, 2024). They also evidently face a persistent unemployment crisis, as reported in the Labour Force Statistics, Malaysia, 2024 by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). This report consistently shows that the youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24 or 15–30) remains significantly higher than the national average, indicating a structural challenge in labour market integration (DOSM, 2024).

Beyond mental health and economic precarity, Malaysian youth face a range of social and delinquency issues. Data from the National Anti-Drugs Agency (AADK) consistently highlights that a significant portion of addicts are in the younger age group (21–30 years), with thousands of drug abuse cases annually involving students (AADK, 2024). Furthermore, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022 revealed alarming trends in teenage vulnerability, specifically documenting increased instances of suicidal thoughts, verbal and physical abuse within homes, and high rates of bullying and cyberbullying as well as sexual conduct (Institute for Public Health, 2022).

Thus, to better equip the nation's youth, altruism is deemed as a key mechanism for developing essential social and ethical skills necessary for successful navigation of the adult world. Altruism, defined as the selfless concern for the well-being of others, plays a crucial role in fostering positive social interactions, voluntary community participation, and resilient societal structures. Altruistic behaviours are strongly linked to positive mental health outcomes in adolescents, counteracting common psychological challenges during this developmental stage. Increases Happiness and Life Satisfaction: Engaging in selfless actions activates the brain's reward centres, contributing to a "helper's high" (Batson, 1991; Lyubormirsky, 2007). Research indicates a significant positive correlation between altruism and life satisfaction in adolescents, suggesting that helping others directly boosts their subjective well-being (Simatupang et al., 2023; Lyubormirsky, 2007). Furthermore, studies have shown that an increase in altruistic behavior has the potential to significantly reduce the rate of juvenile delinquency (Simatupang et al., 2023).

Beyond mitigating existing social challenges, altruism is a crucial developmental strategy that fosters essential social and ethical growth in young people. Altruism inherently requires perspective-taking, a skill which directly nurtures and develops empathy and compassion—foundational elements of social competence and maturity (Semrud & Clikeman, 2007). Furthermore, this behaviour promotes social order and sustainability. Young individuals who adopt a "Golden Rule" morality and engage in routine altruistic practices view this involvement as a proactive, normative behaviour, thereby indicating their social potential to reproduce social order, promote social solidarity, and contribute to long-term social sustainability. Finally, altruism encourages the acquisition of prosocial values in which family modelling and community involvement are identified as significant motivators that instil the values of sincerity, generosity, and prioritizing the welfare of others over personal wants (Antonova et al., 2025). In essence, promoting altruism is not merely about encouraging charitable acts; it is a vital, evidence-based strategy that supports young people in becoming happier, healthier, more skilled, and ethically grounded adults.

Problem Statement

Despite the recognized importance of altruism in promoting positive youth development and social harmony, there is a significant gap in current empirical knowledge regarding the specific nature, extent, and forms of altruistic behaviour exhibited by youth (aged 15–30) in Malaysia. Current understanding often relies on anecdotal evidence or studies focusing narrowly on specific types of prosocial behaviour (e.g., formal volunteering) without providing a comprehensive, descriptive baseline of altruism in its various manifestations (e.g., informal helping, emotional support, sharing resources). This lack of descriptive data makes it challenging for policymakers, educators, and youth development organizations to accurately benchmark the current state of altruistic engagement among Malaysian youth as well as to identify specific demographic in the prevalence and type of altruistic acts and to develop targeted and culturally sensitive interventions that effectively cultivate and sustain prosocial and altruistic behaviours in the Malaysian youth population.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this empirical void by providing a detailed descriptive analysis of the nature, frequency, and contexts in which Malaysian youth engage in altruistic acts, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent hypothesis-driven research in this area.

Research Objectives

This paper seeks to achieve these objectives:

1. To identify the altruistic beliefs and acts exhibited by Malaysian youth.
2. To describe the contexts in which Malaysian youth primarily engage in altruistic acts.
3. To determine the extent of engagement in various altruistic acts among Malaysian youth.
4. To determine the relationship between altruistic beliefs and altruistic acts among Malaysian youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Altruism in Modern Youth

Current literature has discussed the concept of altruism among youth. According to Spyska (2022) altruism is defined by youth in modern world as voluntary, self-directed actions rooted in a genuine desire to benefit others, often prioritizing another person's interests over one's own. At its core, it involves a blend of humanistic beliefs and emotional empathy, where the individual accepts personal responsibility and finds intrinsic joy in the act of helping. However, the motivations behind these actions are complex and multi-layered. While they often stem from moral and universal values, they can also be driven by cognitive curiosity, a need for social belonging, or even self-serving goals such as career development, the alleviation of guilt, and the enhancement of self-esteem.

A qualitative study of 41 young people in Tehran suggests that altruism is a complex product of both individual agency and social structure, yet it currently remains at a low level due to systemic challenges. While participants value responsibility and express strong patriotism, their ability to act altruistically is hindered by a lack of social hope, low social belonging, and perceived inequalities in the distribution of opportunities. The findings emphasize that for altruism to flourish, there must be a structural foundation of meritocracy, social tolerance, and cultural pluralism. Ultimately, the study concludes that increasing altruism requires a reciprocal relationship where macro-level decision-makers respond to the needs of youth, aligning social structures with the increasing agency of the younger generation (Abolfathy & Saboktakin Rizi, 2025).

According to Antonova et al. (2025), altruism among modern youth is conceptualized as a voluntary and selfless activity centred on the "Golden Rule," which serves as a foundation for social solidarity and justice. While young people associate the ideal altruist with traits such as responsiveness, sacrifice, and mobility, the study reveals that actual practice is often selective and focused on local, non-institutionalized interactions. It is further noted that while this daily proactive behaviour has the potential to sustain social systems, it is occasionally hindered by egoistic attitudes resulting from rationalized self-interest or past negative experiences. Ultimately, the researchers conclude that fostering this altruistic potential requires a balance between individual agency and supportive social structures (Antonova et al., 2025).

Impact of Altruism

Recent literature underscores altruism as a multifaceted construct that serves as both a psychological buffer and a developmental catalyst across various social and professional contexts. In organizational settings, altruism acts as a powerful moderator; for instance, Liu et al. (2025) found that among juvenile criminal justice social workers, high levels of altruism amplify the effectiveness of organizational career management in reducing job stress and enhancing job satisfaction. Similarly, in high-stakes environments like disaster relief, Shakibkhah et al. (2025) identified a significant positive correlation between altruistic behaviour and resilience, suggesting that selfless dedication helps rescue workers manage extreme psychological pressure. These findings indicate that while altruism is often viewed as a service to others, it simultaneously provides the actor with critical resources for professional endurance and emotional stability.

In the developmental landscape of adolescence and young adulthood, altruistic behaviour is linked to profound improvements in well-being and identity formation. Han and Yoo (2024) demonstrate that empathy only translates into psychological well-being for Korean adolescents when it is manifested through actual altruistic actions, highlighting that the "doing" is more impactful than the "feeling." Furthermore, engaging in these behaviours is predictive of higher self-esteem, reduced loneliness, and improved peer relationship quality (Biswas & Mitra, 2025). This prosocial orientation also serves as a protective factor against aggression; Pastor et al. (2024) found that fostering altruism in digital spaces significantly reduces cyberbullying and helps adolescents explore their values within their "identity formation" process. Even in the face of adversity, Lacomba-Trejo et al. (2024) suggest that individuals can experience "post-traumatic growth," where those who have faced adverse childhood experiences may develop higher levels of altruism if they utilize adaptive, problem-focused coping strategies.

Finally, the literature suggests that while altruistic tendencies are shaped by personality traits and moral perfectionism, they are not necessarily at odds with personal ambition or digital life. Research by Barsukova et al. (2021) indicates that ambition does not preclude altruism, as ambitious young people can be both self-oriented and selfless. However, the benefits of altruism may not be universal or automatic; Tashjian et al. (2021) found that interventions encouraging kind acts were most effective for those already high in baseline altruism, suggesting a "rich-get-richer" effect for psychological benefits. Furthermore, in Southeast Asian contexts, Buenconsejo et al. (2024) highlight the mediating role of the "5Cs" of Positive Youth Development, noting that while religiousness supports altruism, a high focus on self-efficacy can sometimes negatively correlate with other-oriented behaviours in collectivistic cultures. Collectively, these studies suggest that cultivating a balance between social competence, personality development, and supportive social structures is essential for maximizing the societal and personal benefits of altruism (Lalita & Mittal, 2024; Kumar & Pandey., 2025).

Altruism and Prosocial Activities

Recent literature conceptualizes altruism as a fundamental motivational state and a primary psychological driver for prosocial engagement among youth. According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, altruism is defined as a motivational state where the ultimate goal is increasing another's welfare, a motive that remains valid even if self-benefit occurs as an unintended consequence (Batson & Shaw, 1991). In practical applications, research confirms that altruism serves as the psychological basis and leading motivation for student volunteering (Podolianchuk, 2021). This internal drive is significantly influenced by religiosity; studies by Khamilah (2021) and Shaukat et al. (2025) consistently demonstrate that religiosity—rather than other traits like gratitude—serves as a primary predictor of altruistic behaviour in young adults, particularly in high-stakes environments such as disaster mitigation.

In the modern digital and social landscape, altruistic traits are increasingly being activated through social media and institutional frameworks. Zhang and Liu (2024) found that exposure to information on social media enhances both altruism and self-efficacy, thereby increasing the willingness of youth to participate in life-saving acts like blood donation. Furthermore, the internal emotional satisfaction derived from helping, often termed the "warm glow," has been identified as the strongest predictor of green entrepreneurial intentions, surpassing external environmental factors (Weng et al., 2022). However, the conversion of a general prosocial propensity into specific actions is not automatic; Neaman et al. (2023) argue that an individual must feel a specific "connection to the domain" (such as a connection to nature or people) to translate their altruistic traits into ecological or human-related behaviours.

Finally, the literature explores the interplay between moral foundations and social influences in shaping altruistic outcomes. Pastor et al. (2024) highlight that family functioning and mindfulness interventions significantly improve empathy and compassion, which in turn drive online charitable behaviours and supportive actions toward victims of cyberbullying. While moral sentiments like care and harm often drive youth to support refugees despite rational social preferences (Kwarcinski et al., 2023), other contexts show a preference for egoistic benefits. For instance, Kumar and Pandey (2023) found that while social media stimulates altruism, Indian youth still prioritize egoistic motivations, such as health benefits, when making green purchases. Ultimately, altruism's effectiveness in promoting bystander intervention and social sustainability is mediated by the quality of social structures, such as moral identity and the strength of friendship networks (Liu et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This quantitative research employed a survey approach, with data collected through online questionnaires distributed to specific groups of Malaysian polytechnic students using convenience sampling. Given the typical age range of 18–24 years old for this population, the cluster was considered an appropriate representation of the youth demographic in Malaysia. The instrument used in this study was adopted from Awang et al. (2023). A priori power analysis was conducted using the G*Power 3.1.9.7 to determine the sample size required to detect a medium effect size ($|p| = 0.3$) for a point biserial correlation. With an alpha of 0.05 and a desired power of 0.95, the results indicated that a minimum total sample size of $N = 134$ is required. However, this study managed to gather 328 responses which surpassed the minimum requirement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1.1 Respondents' Demographic Profile

Respondent Information	Details	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	177	54.0
	Female	151	46.0
Race	Malay	233	71.0
	Chinese	7	2.1
	Indian	73	22.3
	Sabah Ethnic	8	2.4
	Sarawak Ethnic	2	.6
	Others	5	1.5
Department	Department of Electrical Engineering	48	14.6
	Department of Commerce	81	24.7
	Department of Civil Engineering	50	15.2
	Department of Mechanical Engineering	74	22.6
	Department of Information Technology and Communication	62	18.9
	Department of Hospitality	11	3.4
	Department of Tourism Management	2	.6
Course	Diploma	313	95.4
	Degree	15	4.6
Semester	1	54	16.5
	2	177	54.0
	3	44	13.4
	4	16	4.9
	5	18	5.5
	6	19	5.8
TOTAL		328	100

The demographic profile of the 328 respondents in Table 1.1 indicates a relatively balanced gender distribution, with 54% males and 46% females. The racial composition is predominantly Malay at 71%, followed by Indian at 22.3%, with smaller representations from Chinese, Sabah/Sarawak ethnic groups, and others. Academically, the participants are primarily Diploma students (95.4%) distributed across various technical and vocational departments, with the largest groups originating from the Department of Commerce (24.7%) and Mechanical

Engineering (22.6%). Furthermore, the sample captures a specific stage in the students' academic journey, as more than half (54%) are currently in their second semester.

Table 1.2 Altruistic Beliefs Result

No	Item	Frequency / %				
		1	2	3	4	5
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
B1	"I will not hesitate to give help to those in need."	15(4.6)	8(2.4)	36(11.0)	135(41.2)	134(40.9)
B2	"I believe the help I provide can contribute to a better life for others."	1(0.3)	3(0.9)	31(9.5)	127(38.7)	166(50.6)
B3	"Helping others makes me happy."	1(0.3)	2(0.6)	20(6.1)	105(32.0)	200(61.0)
B4	"I provide help without expecting anything in return."	1(0.3)	6(1.8)	23(7.0)	104(31.7)	194(59.1)
B5	"I easily feel sympathy for the suffering of others."	2(0.6)	6(1.8)	22(6.7)	112(34.1)	186(56.7)
B6	"I easily empathize with the suffering of others."	3(0.9)	3(0.9)	39(11.9)	123(37.5)	160(48.8)

The survey results indicate a high level of altruistic belief among the 328 polytechnic students, with respondents showing a strong emotional and moral inclination toward helping others. The most significant finding was the "helper's high," with 61.0% of participants strongly agreeing that helping others makes them happy, while 59.1% affirmed they provide assistance without expecting anything in return. Additionally, over half of the respondents expressed a strong sense of sympathy (56.7%) and a firm belief that their actions contribute to a better life for others (50.6%). Across all six belief items (B1–B6), the combined "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" percentages were consistently high, suggesting that these youth possess the internal traits associated with *Ithār*, or selfless benevolence, as a foundation for their prosocial actions.

Table 1.3 Altruistic Behaviour Result

No	Item	Frequency / %				
		1	2	3	4	5
		never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
C1	"I helped people who had car breakdowns on the side of the road."	123 (37.5)	51 (15.5)	91 (27.7)	34 (10.4)	29 (8.8)
C2	"I help give directions to strangers."	10(3.0)	19(5.8)	103(31.4)	105(32.0)	91(27.7)
C3	"I helped a stranger change money."	80(24.4)	36(11.0)	106(32.3)	63(19.2)	43(13.1)

C4	"I donate money to charity."	9(2.7)	13(4.0)	106(32.3)	112(34.1)	88(26.8)
C5	"I provide financial assistance to people who are in need or who ask for help."	5(1.5)	15(4.6)	93(28.4)	124(37.8)	91(27.7)
C6	"I donate goods and clothing to charity."	29(8.8)	34(10.4)	91(27.7)	99(30.2)	75(22.9)
C7	"I do volunteer work for charity."	43(13.1)	45(13.7)	100(30.5)	86(26.2)	54(16.5)
C8	"I donate blood."	203(61.9)	33(10.1)	36(11.0)	27(8.2)	29(8.8)
C9	"I help strangers carry things."	15(4.6)	26(7.9)	108(32.9)	100(30.5)	79(24.1)
C10	"I hold the door open for strangers in public."	19(5.8)	18(5.5)	85(25.9)	87(26.5)	119(36.3)
C11	"I let others go ahead of me when queuing in public."	10(3.0)	15(4.6)	102(31.1)	102(31.1)	99(30.2)
C12	"I gave a stranger a ride in my vehicle."	152(46.3)	43(13.1)	72(22.0)	33(10.1)	28(8.5)
C13	"I returned the extra change to the employee who mistakenly gave it to me."	18(5.5)	24(7.3)	65(19.8)	76(23.2)	145(44.2)
C14	"I lent my belongings to a neighbour I am not very close with."	69(21.0)	45(13.7)	98(29.9)	57(17.4)	59(18.0)
C15	"I help classmates I'm not close with on their homework or assignments when I have more knowledge."	8(2.4)	16(4.9)	81(24.7)	99(30.2)	124(37.8)
C16	"I voluntarily help my neighbour look after their children or pets for free, even though they didn't ask me to."	93(28.4)	42(12.8)	73(22.3)	53(16.2)	67(20.4)
C17	"I offer assistance to people with disabilities or senior citizens to cross the road."	55(16.8)	35(10.7)	91(27.7)	76(23.2)	71(21.6)
C18	"I offer my seat to strangers when riding the bus or train."	51(15.5)	38(11.6)	79(24.1)	73(22.3)	87(26.5)
C19	"I helped a friend carry items when they moved."	27(8.2)	26(7.9)	74(22.6)	95(29.0)	106(32.3)
C20	"I pick up and throw away rubbish found in public."	1(0.3)	11(3.4)	84(25.6)	107(32.6)	125(38.1)

The findings on altruistic behaviour reveal that while respondents frequently engage in low-risk, daily normative actions, they are more selective regarding high-effort or high-risk tasks. The most common behaviours involve environmental and social courtesy, with 70.7% of students "often" or "always" picking up rubbish in public and 68.0% assisting classmates with academic assignments. Furthermore, a significant majority demonstrate high levels of integrity and politeness, as 67.4% frequently return extra change mistakenly given to them and 62.8% routinely hold doors open for strangers. Conversely, behaviours requiring significant physical resources or personal risk are less common; for instance, 61.9% of participants have "never" donated blood, and 46.3% have never provided a ride to a stranger in their vehicle. This pattern suggests that youth altruism is primarily

expressed through "local proactive" behaviours that foster social sustainability without necessitating high-stakes personal sacrifice.

Table 1.4 Mean scores and standard deviation of altruism beliefs and behaviour

Components	SD	Mean	Interpretation
Altruistic Beliefs	0.60833	4.3780	Very High
Altruistic Behaviour	0.79409	3.3355	Moderate

Based on the data presented in Tables 1.4 and 1.5, the analysis reveals a notable distinction between the participants' perceptions of altruism and their actual practices. The mean score for Altruistic Beliefs is 4.3780, which falls within the 4.21 – 5.00 range, signifying a "Very High" level of belief in altruistic values. In contrast, the mean score for Altruistic Behaviour is recorded at 3.3355, placing it in the 2.61 – 3.40 range, which corresponds to a "Moderate" interpretation. This suggests that while the participants strongly internalize the importance of altruism and hold very high moral standards regarding it, their practical application or behavioural manifestation of these beliefs is significantly lower. Furthermore, the higher standard deviation for behaviour (SD = 0.79409) compared to beliefs (SD = 0.60833) indicates that there is greater variability among participants regarding how they act on these values than in the beliefs they hold.

Table 1.5 Mean Score Interpretation Table

Mean Range	Interpretation
4.21 – 5.00	Very High
3.41 – 4.20	High
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate
1.81 – 2.60	Low
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low

Source: Bringula, R. P., et al. (2012). A Model for Determinants of Computer Programming Performance. International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education

Table 1.6 Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Between Altruistic Beliefs and Altruistic Behaviour

			Altruistic Acts	Altruistic Beliefs
Spearman's rho	Altruistic Acts	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.406**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	328	328
	Altruistic Beliefs	Correlation Coefficient	.406**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	328	328

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the Spearman's rho correlation analysis, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between altruistic acts and altruistic beliefs. The correlation coefficient (r_s) is **.406**, indicating a **moderate positive correlation**. This relationship is statistically significant at the **0.01 level**, as evidenced by a p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) of **.000**. These results suggest that as the scores for altruistic acts increase, there is a corresponding tendency for the scores of altruistic beliefs to increase as well. This implies that while there is a gap between altruistic beliefs and behaviours, they remain significantly linked; as an individual's altruistic conviction strengthens, their likelihood of engaging in altruistic behaviour also improves.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The disparity between high altruistic intentions and moderate behavioural outcomes leads to several significant conclusions regarding the participants' social dynamics. It is evident that there is a distinct "intention-behaviour gap" within the group; while individuals psychologically subscribe to altruistic values at a "Very High" level, they encounter internal or external barriers when translating those values into concrete action. This suggests that the group possesses a strong moral foundation and a shared understanding of social responsibility, but the "Moderate" behavioural score indicates that these beliefs do not consistently manifest in daily practice. The high standard deviation in behaviour further suggests that altruistic action is inconsistent across the sample, with some individuals being highly active while others remain largely passive despite their beliefs.

To address this gap, it is recommended that interventions focus on action-oriented strategies rather than further value-based education. Since the belief system is already well-established, programs should be designed to provide clear, low-barrier opportunities for participants to practice altruism, such as structured peer-mentoring or community service initiatives. If the context is academic or professional, leadership should work to identify and remove systemic obstacles—such as high-pressure environments or lack of time—that may be discouraging helpfulness. Furthermore, leveraging the "high-activity" individuals to model altruistic behaviour can help normalize these actions for the rest of the group. Finally, conducting qualitative interviews could provide deeper insight into the specific inhibitors preventing these high moral beliefs from becoming high-frequency behaviours.

Ethical Approval:

This study was granted approval by the Research, Innovation and Commercialization Unit, Polytechnic of Sultan Azlan Shah.

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