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Exploring the relationship between Moral Character and Academic Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Moral character, as a set of internalized virtues and ethical principles, plays a crucial role in shaping students' emotional and academic functioning, making it a significant factor in understanding academic well-being. This study aimed to explore the relationship between moral character and academic well-being among senior high school students.

Methods: The study employed a descriptive–correlational research design, and the population consisted of senior high school students. A total of 314 students (150 girls; Mage = 16.81; SD, age = 0.89) were selected through convenience sampling. Participants completed electronic questionnaires assessing moral character and academic well-being. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to examine the structural relationships among the variables.

Results: The results showed that moral character positively predict academic well-being. The obtained beta coefficients were as follows: Etiquette ethics (β= 0.44, p < 0/01), Pious ethics (β= 0.48, p < 0.03), Conscientious ethics (β= 0.66, p < 0.02), Forgiving ethics (β= 0.37, p < 0.005), submissive ethics (β= 0.47, p < 0.01), Independence ethics (β= 0.53, p < 0.007), Honesty ethics (β= 0.39, p < 0.02), and Sensitive ethics (β= 0.67, p < 0.006). the greatest predictive power is related to the Sensitive ethics and Conscientious ethics moral character. In total, moral character in the research model explained 0.41 of the variance of academic well-being.

Conclusions: These studies offer novel insights from theoretical perspectives, contributing to the existing knowledge on the intrapersonal antecedents of academic well-being. The findings suggest that moral character directly enhances students' academic well-being.

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Introduction

In recent years, educational psychology researchers have also focused on the role of positive components, such as well-being, concerning problems related to education and teenagers, including test anxiety (Strack & Esteves, 2015) and depression (Duarte et al., 2015; Shek & Chai, 2020). Well-being is an essential indicator of a range of educational outcomes such as academic success (Casuso-Holgado et al., 2013), dropout prevention (Korhonen et al., 2014), and students' academic aspirations (Widlund et al., 2018; Korhonen et al., 2016). Considering the centrality of the school's role in the lives of teenagers, it seems logical to define well-being in the educational context (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Therefore, researchers have conceptualized the structure of academic well-being, which has received wide attention (Nair et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2022).

Researchers have taken steps to determine the components of academic well-being. For example, academic self-concept, perceived learning difficulties, and school burnout are considered components of academic well-being (Korhonen et al., 2014). Similarly, school burnout and academic engagement have also been identified as components of academic well-being by Fiorilli et al. (2017). Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) proposed a more comprehensive view of the structure of academic well-being, including school burnout, schoolwork engagement, school value, and satisfaction with educational choice (school satisfaction). The present study utilized the academic well-being model of Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) because it includes both positive emotional and behavioral components, e.g., schoolwork engagement, and negative components, e.g., school burnout. Additionally, this model accounts for the expectation value of learners (school value) and their emotional state toward education (school satisfaction) (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012).

Each component of academic well-being has received attention from educational researchers and has been defined separately. School burnout, for instance, is defined as a decrease in psychological ability resulting from prolonged exposure to academic stress and the pressure to achieve success (Di Chiacchio et al., 2016). Salmela-Aro and Read (2017) suggested that burnout may stem from school demands, pessimistic attitudes toward school, and feelings of academic incompetence. Empirical evidence has highlighted the numerous negative consequences of academic burnout among learners, including cognitive and physical disorders (Aranas et al. 2020; Madigan & Curran, 2020; May et al. 2015a). If left undiagnosed, academic burnout may lead to more severe mental health challenges such as depression and addiction, and poorer academic performance

(Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Salmela-Aro & Read, 2017). Schoolwork engagement is another important component of academic well-being, characterized by a positive emotional connection to education and a sense of vigor, dedication, and absorption while pursuing academic activities (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2020). Most studies of academic engagement have found that high levels of schoolwork engagement are associated with better academic performance, less burnout, and greater persistence (Kuh, 2009).

School value is an important component of academic well-being, referring to the importance that individuals place on education compared to other activities in their cognitive repertoire (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Expectancy-value theory suggests that people's choices, stability, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about the successful performance of a task and the value they attach to that activity (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Therefore, students who value education and related activities are more likely to demonstrate academic follow-up, perform better, and experience greater satisfaction with their education (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017). School satisfaction is another important component of academic well-being, which refers to students' positive emotions toward school and educational programs (Marchiondo et al., 2010). Jadidian and Duffy (2012) defined school satisfaction as a person's satisfaction with school programs and classes. High levels of academic satisfaction are associated with better academic performance (Dhaqane & Afrah, 2016).

Considering the importance of academic well-being and its components, which lead to many positive and negative consequences, educational psychology researchers have investigated the antecedents of this critical structure in order to predict and explain it. The antecedents of academic well-being investigated in past research can generally be classified into intrapersonal and situational antecedents. Among intrapersonal antecedents, researchers have focused more on the role of motivational and emotional factors as well as individual abilities (Cohen, 2006; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012; Shek & Chai, 2020). Specifically, academic performance (Korhonen et al., 2014); achievement goals (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012); motivational beliefs (Baker, 2004); creative problem-solving skills (Hajiyakhchali, 2013); hope, optimism, and self-efficacy (Robinson & Snipes, 2009); and individual capabilities such as social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence, resilience, and self-determination (Shek & Chai, 2020; Cohen, 2006) have been studied. Among situational factors, researchers have focused on the

characteristics of the family and school context and the relationship between them (Arunkumar et al., 1999; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). Specifically, the discriminatory climate of the educational environment and the social support of parents, peers, and school (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001); inconsistency between school and family values (Arunkumar et al., 1999); and school climate, which includes the school value system and teachers' attitudes towards students (Ruus et al., 2007), as well as family economic stress (Mistry et al., 2009), are considered situational antecedents of academic well-being.

To explain the academic well-being of students, it is crucial to identify the inner abilities that can be cultivated through which it is possible to improve their academic well-being. By creating these abilities, it is possible to improve students' academic well-being to some extent. In addition, paying attention to intrapersonal antecedents can be more effective because learners have more control over these factors. Among intrapersonal antecedents, personality traits can predict several positive and negative educational outcomes (Sobowale et al., 2018; Anglim et al., 2020). Although studies have been conducted on the relationship between traits in the Big Five personality theory or the HEXACO model and positive academic outcomes, such as academic performance (Poropat, 2009) and academic engagement (Rostami et al., 2017), the role of narrower personality traits, such as moral character, in predicting academic well-being has not been investigated based on searches conducted in various scientific databases. One prominent model related to moral character is the Khormaei and Ghaeme (2017) model, which is based on Iranian Islamic culture. According to this theoretical model, moral character includes a network of moral-religious attributes and values that are influenced by social education and learning. Therefore, cultivating moral character can help people adapt to and improve their quality of life.

Theoretical framework

Khormaei and Ghaeme's (2017) model of moral character includes Eight-character traits, each based on a combination of positive and negative moral philosophy and embedding moral traits and religious values. These traits include etiquette ethics, conscientious ethics, pious ethics, forgiving ethics, honesty ethics, submissive ethics, sensitive ethics, and independence ethics. Moral character refers to the stable and enduring set of personal qualities that influence an individual's ethical thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Cohen et al., 2014). Unlike broader personality traits, moral character specifically focuses on virtues, principles, and dispositions that guide an

individual's actions in morally relevant situations (Cohen et al., 2014). It encompasses the capacity to discern right from wrong, the motivation to act ethically, and the resilience to uphold moral values even in challenging circumstances. Within this broader understanding of moral character, the Khormaei and Ghaeme (2017) model, stemming from Iranian Islamic culture, offers a nuanced framework comprising eight distinct components. By identifying the relationship between these traits and academic well-being, the current study aims to address the existing research gap. This study, therefore, directly addresses an important gap in the existing literature by thoroughly investigating the relationship between specific moral character traits and academic well-being, a connection that has been largely overlooked in previous research.

Moral character is a new concept in the research literature of moral psychology. Although various models have been proposed regarding moral characters, such as the classification presented by Blasi (2005) for moral virtues, the model of moral characters by Khormaei and Ghaeme (2017) was chosen as the underlying model of the research for various reasons, including greater alignment with Iranian-Islamic culture and considering the criterion of the ability to cultivate moral characters in selecting the underlying characters of each of the structures in the model. In this model, the first is Etiquette ethics character that refers to traits based on altruistic values, such as caring for and respecting others, including good manners, kindness, empathy, humility, and gratitude, and the negation of their opposite traits, such as unkindness and ingratitude. Conscientious ethics character also encompasses a range of traits based on fulfilling duties and individual commitments, such as responsibility, adherence, punctuality, discipline, and patience, and the negation of their opposite traits, such as laxity and disorganization (Arbezi & Khormaei, 2021a; Arbezi, 2024). Pious ethics character includes a network of traits based on religious values, such as belief, trust, gratitude, and sincerity, and the negation of their opposite traits. Forgiving ethics character includes traits based on altruistic values such as tolerance, forgiveness, openness to criticism, covering faults, and negation of their opposite traits. Honesty ethics character includes traits based on honesty values, such as honesty, and the negation of selfish traits, such as deception, fraud, opportunism, self-praise, and seduction. Submissive ethics character encompasses a network of traits whose core is the negation of selfish traits based on destruction and harm to others, such as backbiting, slander, expectation, fault finding, blaming, lust, and curmudgeon. A sensitive ethical character includes a network of traits whose core is the negation of selfish traits

based on insensitivity to public interests and others, such as ingratitude, hoarding, caution, and carelessness. Independence ethics character includes a network of traits whose core is the negation of selfish values based on concern and anxiety in losing power and social status, such as status-worship, possession, power-seeking, and flattery (Khormaei & Ghaeme, 2017).

The theoretical connection between moral character and academic well-being is grounded in self-regulatory and resource-building frameworks, wherein enduring moral dispositions actively cultivate the psychological resources necessary for thriving in educational settings (Khormaei & Ghaeme, 2017). Academic well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing positive states, such as schoolwork engagement and school value, alongside the mitigation of negative states like school burnout (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012). Within this framework, specific moral traits serve as foundational antecedents to these dimensions. For instance, conscientious ethics—characterized by responsibility, discipline, and adherence to commitments—directly enhances students' self-regulatory capacities (Pintrich, 2000). This trait enables learners to effectively manage academic demands, thereby preventing the prolonged stress and feelings of incompetence that characterize school burnout, while simultaneously fostering the vigor, dedication, and intrinsic appreciation of learning (i.e., school value and engagement) required for sustained academic well-being. Therefore, moral character is not merely an assumed correlate, but a vital developmental scaffold that equips students with the behavioral and motivational tools to navigate academic challenges successfully.

While a review of the research background on the existing procedures in each of the moral characters with academic well-being shows that the relationship of each of these moral characters with academic well-being and its components has yet to be explicitly measured, the ability of moral character to predict related variables was considered. Evidence has confirmed the adaptive role of moral characters in the educational context. For instance, the moral character in Khormaei and Ghaemei's (2017) model can predict goal orientation (Arbezi & Khormaei, 2021a; Arbezi & Khormaei, 2021b), academic adjustment (Zare et al., 2021), academic dishonesty (Barani & Khormaei, 2021), academic procrastination (Khormaei et al., 2016; Khormaei & Azadi Dehbidi, 2017), hope (Marhemati & Khormaei, 2018), wisdom (Ghorbani & Khormaie, 2019), Eudaimonic Well-Being (Marhemati & Khormaei, 2017) and psychological wellbeing (Khormaei et al., 2021). Research has shown that constructs that are conceptually close to moral character also have

positive outcomes for learners, such as spiritual well-being (Deymevar et al. 2024; Alavi, 2024). Miner's (2009) study also showed that religious orientation is related to psychological adjustment. While the present study utilizes the Khormaei and Ghaeme (2017) model due to its strong cultural resonance, it is essential to situate this framework within the broader international literature on moral character. Globally, established frameworks such as the VIA Classification of Character Strengths (Park & Peterson, 2005) and models of moral personality development (Lapsley, 2016) have extensively documented the adaptive role of virtues in educational settings. Recent international research consistently confirms that character strengths (e.g., self-control, perseverance, and inquisitiveness) are robust predictors of positive educational outcomes, including academic achievement (Tang et al., 2019; da Silva et al., 2022). In addition to academic outcomes, these capabilities are also associated with positive psychological outcomes (Mahomed et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2014) and the coping strategies they use (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón, 2016).

However, contemporary cross-cultural psychology emphasizes that while the function of moral character (promoting well-being and self-control) is universal, the specific manifestations and prioritization of these virtues are deeply embedded in cultural contexts (Cohen et al., 2014). Therefore, the Khormaei and Ghaeme model does not contradict international frameworks; rather, it complements them. It offers a culturally nuanced operationalization of moral traits (such as pious and etiquette ethics) that are highly relevant to the specific socio-cultural context of the study's population. By doing so, this study directly addresses the ongoing call in global moral psychology for more culturally diverse and contextually grounded representations of character strengths (McGrath, 2015).

Based on theoretical bases and research background, it is essential to focus on academic well-being and identify its antecedents, particularly intrapersonal and cultivable antecedents. Academic well-being and its components have positive consequences (Burch et al., 2015; Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017), whereas academic burnout has unpleasant consequences (May et al., 2015a; May et al., 2015b). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors that contribute to academic well-being. Furthermore, the gap in the literature on the role of moral characters in predicting academic well-being highlights the significance of this study. Therefore, this study determined whether moral

characters can predict academic well-being. The study investigated the structural relationship between moral character and academic well-being in senior high school students.

Objective

The research aimed to investigate the antecedent role of moral character in predicting academic well-being. The conceptual model of the research is presented in Figure 1.

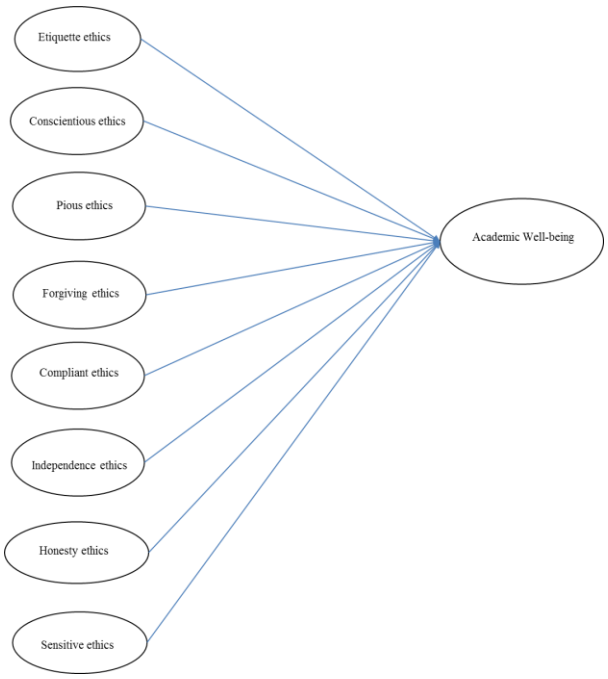

Figure 1. Conceptual research model

Material and Methods

Sample and Procedure

The current research design describes a correlation study that examines the relationships between the variables in the research model using the method of structural equation modeling. The research population included all senior high school students in Evaz City, located in the south of Fars province, who were studying in the academic year 2020-2021. To determine the sample size, Kline (2016) suggests choosing 10 to 20 participants for each parameter calculated in the model. In this study, a sample size of 314 senior high school students was selected using a Convenience sampling method.

The widespread school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the use of an electronic questionnaire for data collection. On the other hand, the use of this type of

questionnaire does not provide the possibility of random selection of participants due to the lack of control over them. The sample size meets the criterion of having at least 200 participants, as suggested by Kline (2016). In this study, participants completed electronic version of questionnaires about moral character (Khormaei & Ghaemei, 2017) and academic well-being (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012). The criterion for entering the research was satisfaction with participation, and the criterion for exiting was lack of desire and enthusiasm to participate. The following tools were used to collect data.

Research Tools

***The Moral Character Questionnaire (MCQ)*:** The Moral Character Questionnaire (MCQ) is a tool designed by Khormaei and Ghaemei (2017) to measure moral character. The MCQ consists of 24 items that assess eight components, namely, etiquette, conscientiousness, pious, forgiveness, honesty, submissive, sensitivity, and independent ethics. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from completely disagree (score 1) to completely agree (score 5). Khormaei and Ghaemei (2017) confirmed the validity and reliability of the MCQ, reporting reliability estimates ranging from 0.55 to 0.90 for the components and 0.88 for the total score using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the current study, the internal consistency of the MCQ components was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.46 to 0.79. The MCQ demonstrated high internal consistency overall, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90 for the total score. Furthermore, the construct validity of the MCQ in the current sample was supported by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which confirmed the hypothesized factor structure with acceptable fit indices (e.g., X^2.df = 2.69, RMSEA = 0.07).

***Academic Well-Being Questionnaire (AWBQ)*:** The Academic Well-Being Questionnaire (AWBQ) is a tool designed by Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) to measure academic well-being. The AWBQ consists of 31 items that assess four components: school value (scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from completely disagree (score 1) to completely agree (score 7)), academic burnout (scored on a seven-point Likert scale inversely, ranging from completely disagree (score 7) to completely agree (score 1)), academic satisfaction (scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from not at all (score 1) to very much (score 5)), and schoolwork engagement (scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from never (score 1) to daily (score 7)). Tuominen-Soini et al. (2012) reported internal consistency estimates ranging from 0.64 to 0.94 for the AWBQ components using

Cronbach's alpha coefficient, confirming the validity and reliability of the tool. Moradi et al. (2017) confirmed the validity of the Persian version of the AWBQ using confirmatory factor analysis (X2.df = 1.96, RMSEA = 0.06). They reported reliability estimates ranging from 0.87 to 0.92 for the AWBQ components and 0.92 for the total AWBQ score using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the current study, the internal consistency of the AWBQ components was good, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.93. The internal consistency of the AWBQ total score was acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the ethical principles of research, this study ensured that all participants provided informed consent and that confidentiality of their information was maintained throughout the research process. In order to obtain informed consent for the most important ethical principle of the research, an option to ensure the participants' consent was considered before entering the first questionnaire. Specific measures were taken to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants, such as assigning unique identifiers to each participant and storing their data in a secure location. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penal

Procedure

Given the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread school closures, data collection was conducted using electronic questionnaires. The questionnaire link was provided to students by school administrators. Students responded to the questions voluntarily from their homes, a common practice during the period of confinement, and the average response time for each questionnaire was estimated to be approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The primary implementers of the research were the researchers, with school administrators acting solely as facilitators in distributing the link. They were briefed on the research objectives and data confidentiality, consistent with best practices for online research. The data collection process was carried out over ten days. To encourage honest and serious participation, emphasis was placed on informed consent, complete confidentiality of responses, anonymity of participants, and the voluntary nature of participation, and students' cooperation was appreciated.

Data Analysis

The data analysis method involved conducting descriptive analysis of data and assessing assumptions using SPSS-24 software. Specifically, the researchers employed SEM to examine the causal relationships between research variables. The SEM model was tested using AMOS-24 software.

Results

The results of the study are presented below. The study's sample comprised 314 participants. The mean age of the participants was 16.81 years (SD = 0.89), with ages ranging from 15 to 18 years. The gender distribution indicated that 164 (52.2%) were boys, and 150 (47.8%) were girls. The descriptive statistics, encompassing means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among the research variables, are systematically presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation coefficients between research variables (N = 314)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1- Etiquette ethics	1												
2- Pious ethics	.47**	1											
3- Conscientious ethics	.53**	.47**	1										
4- Forgiving ethics	.53**	.24**	.39**	1									
5- Submissive ethics	.51**	.46**	.44**	.42**	1								
6- Independence ethics	.34**	.28**	.49**	.34**	.38**	1							
7- Honesty ethics	.51**	.48**	.41**	.40**	.53**	.29**	1						
8- Sensitive ethics	.45**	.50**	.56**	.33**	.45**	.45**	.51**	1					
9- School Value	.34**	.38**	.47**	.28**	.31**	.42**	.31**	.38**	1				
10- School burnout	-.17	-.22**	-.31**	-.02	-.07	-.19**	-.12*	-.26**	-.49**	1			
11- satisfaction with educational choice	.32**	.38**	.49**	.19**	.33**	.43**	.21**	.39**	.65**	-.44**	1		
12- Schoolwork engagement	.22**	.28**	.46**	.26**	.29**	.40**	.19**	.32**	.59**	-.38**	.65**	1	
13- Academic well-being	.21**	.23**	.33**	.30**	.32**	.37**	.19**	.24**	.53**	.27**	.53**	.72**	1
M	11.74	12.53	11.21	1.25	1.53	9.64	1.87	11.07	3.71	4.25	13.54	34.48	29.74
SD	2.46	2.63	2.63	2.68	2.54	2.74	2.53	2.22	7.84	15.31	3.54	12.76	1.93
SE	.14	.15	.15	.15	.14	.15	.14	.12	.44	.86	.20	.72	1.10

Note: N= Number of participants, M= Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, SE = Std. Error of Mean, *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$

As presented in Table 1, the correlation matrix revealed significant positive relationships between all dimensions of moral character and academic well-being. Specifically, Independence moral character exhibited the strongest correlation with academic well-being ($r = .53$, $p < .001$), whereas Honesty moral character showed the weakest, yet still significant, association ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the intercorrelations among the moral character dimensions were moderate, suggesting that while related, these constructs represent distinct facets of moral character. These significant bivariate associations provide preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized relationships. To formally test these relationships within a comprehensive framework, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed. However, before formulating and testing a model, it is important to examine the assumptions required to use this method. Skewness and kurtosis values were used to assess the univariate normality of the data. In the study's structural equation model, the skewness of some variables was positive (right-skewed), ranging from 0.10 to 0.49, while for other variables, it was negative (left-skewed), ranging from -0.10 to -1.07. The standard deviation of skewness for all variables was 0.14. Additionally, the kurtosis of some variables was positive, ranging from 0.12 to 1.15, whereas for others, it was negative, ranging from -0.06 to -0.72. The standard deviation of kurtosis for all variables was 0.27. To investigate the normality of multivariate, Q-Q diagram used. This graph showed that all the data are close to the diagonal line; thus, the multivariate normality of the data confirmed (Meyers et al., 2016). Based on the aforementioned criteria, the normality assumption for data distribution was met in this study. Therefore, the research model was developed and tested using the AMOS-24 software (Figure 2). The results of the structural equation model analysis, which included the direct effect of moral character on academic well-being and the variance explained by academic well-being, are reported in Table 3. The fit indices also indicate that the research model fits the data well, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Fit indices of the structural equation model

Index	χ^2/f	GFI	AGFI	TLI	IFI	CFI	RMSEA	PCFI
The model value	2.31	.95	.92	.94	.96	.96	.06	.66
Optimum value	3>	.90<	.90<	.90<	.90<	.95<	.08 >	.05<

The value of the fit indices also confirms the conformity of the research model with the data; and confirms the adequacy of the findings. As can be seen in Table 2, the value of chi-square divided

by the degree of freedom in this study was 2.31; an appropriate or acceptable value for ($\chi 2/df$) is considered to be <3 (Meyers et al., 2016); thus, the research model is confirmed. The GFI goodness of fit index and the adjusted AGFI goodness of fit index were obtained as 0.95 and 0.92, respectively. The value of GFI and AGFI greater than or equal to 0.90 means that the research model is confirmed (Meyers et al., 2016). The comparative or relative fit indices CFI, IFI and TLI are equal to 0.96, 0.96 and 0.94, respectively. If the values mentioned for CFI are greater than 0.95 and for IFI and TLI are greater than 0.90, it confirms the research model (Meyers et al., 2016); and if the value of the root mean square approximation index RMSEA is less than 0.08, it is suitable for the acceptance of the mentioned indices (Meyers et al., 2016); and the value of this index in this study is 0.06. The comparative goodness of fit index PCFI is equal to 0.66; and values greater than 0.05 indicate the acceptance of the research model (Meyers et al., 2016).

The results of the structural equation model analysis, including the direct effects and total effect of the variables present in the research model, and explained variance of the variables of academic well-being, are reported in Table 3. It should be mentioned that the tested research model is given in the Figure 2.

Table 3. Direct effect and explained variance

Path	Direct effect		Lower Bounds		Upper Bounds		Variance explained
	β	*p*	β	*p*	β	p	
Etiquette ethics → Academic well-being	.44	.01	.30	.001	.56	.001	.41
Pious ethics → Academic well-being	.48	.03	.36	.001	.56	.001	
Conscientious ethics → Academic well-being	.66	.02	.56	.001	.73	.001	
Forgiving ethics → Academic well-being	.37	.005	.25	.001	.51	.001	
Submissive ethics → Academic well-being	.47	.01	.36	.001	.59	.001	
Independence ethics → Academic well-being	.53	.007	.45	.001	.64	.001	
Honesty ethics → Academic well-being	.39	.02	.23	.001	.50	.001	
Sensitive ethics → Academic well-being	.67	.006	.53	.001	.86	.001	

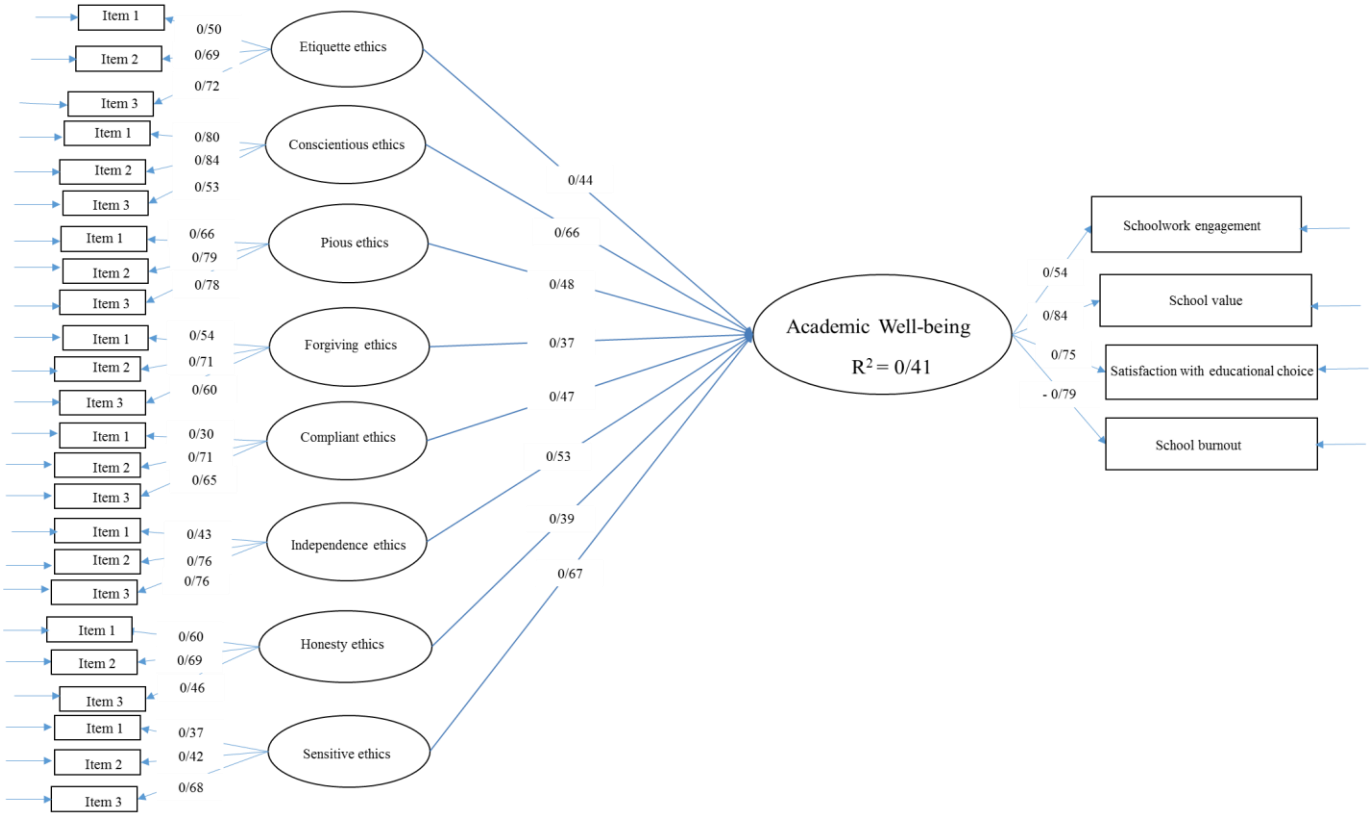

Figure 2. Tested model of the research

The test of the research model showed that all the moral Character in the model of Khormaei and Ghaemei (2017) are able to significantly predict academic well-being. The obtained beta coefficients of the moral traits were as follows: Etiquette ethics (β= .44, $p < 0.01$), Pious ethics (β= 0.48, $p < 0.03$), du Conscientious ethics (β= 0.66, $p < 0.02$), Forgiving ethics (β= 0.37, $p < 0.005$), submissive ethics (β= 0.47, $p < 0.01$), Independence ethics (β= 0.53, $p < 0.007$), Honesty ethics (β= 0.39, $p < 0.02$), and Sensitive ethics (β= 0.67, $p < 0.006$). As can be seen from Table 3, the greatest predictive power is related to the Sensitive ethics and Conscientious ethics moral character. The results indicated that ethical traits explained 0.41 of the variance in academic well-being. The highest coefficients pertained to the Sensitive ethics and Conscientious ethics. The lowest coefficient belonged to the Forgiving ethics.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the predictive role of moral character in academic well-being using structural equation modeling (SEM). The overall research model demonstrated an excellent fit, and the results revealed that moral character is a significant and positive predictor of academic well-being, explaining a substantial proportion of its variance. This finding provides robust empirical support for the adaptive role of moral characters in promoting positive academic outcomes (Arbezi & Khormaei, 2021a; Zare et al., 2021), suggesting that students equipped with higher moral character possess the psychological and behavioral resources necessary to thrive in educational settings. Also, this finding extends previous research on the antecedents of academic well-being, which has primarily emphasized motivational beliefs, emotional competencies, resilience, self-efficacy, and broad personality traits (Cohen, 2006; Shek & Chai, 2020; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012), by demonstrating that culturally grounded moral character traits also contribute to understanding why some students experience higher levels of academic well-being than others. To explain this finding, it can be argued that moral characters, such as conscientiousness, patience, self-control, forgiveness, care, and respect, as proposed by Khormaei and Ghaemi's (2017) model, provide individuals with the necessary resources to experience the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of academic well-being positively. Individuals with high moral character scores possess resources that allow them to achieve academic success. For instance, conscientious moral character, which emerged as one of the strongest predictors in the model, includes traits such as conscientiousness and patience, which help students develop self-regulation, purposefulness, and problem-solving skills (Khormaei & Ghaemi, 2017), leading to increased engagement, vigor, absorption, dedication, and ultimately, academic success. Furthermore, individuals who are satisfied with their academic status have a positive perception of school and experience fewer negative emotions such as burnout. Empathy is the core facet of the etiquette moral character, which is another component of the moral character model proposed by Khormaei and Ghaemi (2017). Empathy is a cognitive and emotional ability that allows individuals to understand other people's perspectives and emotions (Dionigi et al., 2020) and is associated with extensive intrapersonal and interpersonal adaptive functions (Vinayak & Judge, 2018; Vachon et al., 2014). According to the empathy-altruism model proposed by Batson (2010), empathy can lead to prosocial behaviors, which in turn may create altruistic motives. Consequently, the impact of

empathy on a person's social relationships is crucial for positive educational outcomes, including well-being. Empathy facilitates interpersonal relationships (Batson, 2010) and can reduce personal tensions while promoting motivation, positive emotions, and adaptive behaviors, such as engagement and absorption. Consistent with the findings of this study, previous research has shown that empathy is positively related to academic well-being (Vinayak & Judge 2018).

The Forgiving ethics moral character is another component of the moral character model proposed by Khormaei and Ghaemi (2017) and was examined in the present study. Forgiveness is believed to positively affect psychological well-being independent of its positive interpersonal effects (VanOyen Witvliet & Luna, 2017). It is worth noting that forgiveness can occur in the form of self-forgiveness or other forgiveness, and despite differences in the cognitive and emotional processes underlying these two types of forgiveness, both can have positive effects (Le, 2020; Rostami et al., 2022). Self-forgiveness has been associated with the resolution of negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and anxiety (Griffin et al., 2016). In general, forgiveness is related to reduced anxiety and depression (Chen et al., 2019), while forgiveness is associated with the release of anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Therefore, forgiveness can serve as a basis for the growth of positive emotions by reducing negative emotions and creating enthusiasm and energy to pursue academic assignments, thereby increasing academic well-being. According to Fredrickson's (2001) model, positive emotions play a role in creating sustainable personal resources. These resources can stimulate the experience of positive aspects of academic well-being, such as schoolwork engagement, school value, and school satisfaction, and reduce negative components of academic well-being, such as school burnout. This interpretation aligns with previous evidence linking forgiveness to psychological well-being and emotional adjustment (Chen et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2016; VanOyen Witvliet & Luna, 2017).

Pious moral character is another component of the moral character model, which includes characteristics such as being believer, thankful, sincere, and trusting, similar to religious orientation. Other studies have also shown that religious orientation predicts positive academic outcomes (Farasatkish et al., 2017; Momeni & Moradi, 2019). Individuals with religious orientation possess psycho-structures that can be effective in their adaptation (Miner, 2009). Therefore, adapting to adversities and difficulties in education can form the basis for adaptive cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses to education, thus affecting academic well-being.

Likewise, honesty moral character may facilitate trusting interpersonal relationships, reduce interpersonal conflict, and promote a psychologically safe learning environment. These findings are broadly consistent with studies reporting positive associations between honesty–humility and well-being (Aghababaei et al., 2016). However, unlike the HEXACO model, the present study conceptualizes honesty ethics within a broader moral framework that explicitly integrates culturally embedded ethical values. Thus, the findings suggest conceptual convergence with international personality research while simultaneously highlighting the added value of culturally grounded conceptualizations of moral character.

Individuals with honesty ethics possess a set of characteristics that includes the absence of deception, self-praise, and seduction, while learners with the Etiquette ethics possess characteristics such as kindness, pleasantness, and humility. These characteristics can create positive relationships and a soothing environment in schools, leading to inner peace. These consequences serve as the basis for experiencing more positive emotions such as eagerness to learn, positive feelings towards school, and valuing school. Consequently, schoolwork engagement and experience of academic well-being can be expected.

Independence ethics is characterized by a set of traits that reject selfish values rooted in worry and anxiety about losing financial resources and social status. However, individuals with this moral character tend to experience fewer preoccupations and concerns. Consequently, they are more likely to experience positive emotions and enjoy engaging in education. According to Pekrun's (2016) model of academic emotions, emotions are determinants of tendency or avoidance motives, where negative emotions such as anxiety activate avoidance motives, and positive emotions such as relaxation activate tendency motives, leading to effort, engagement, and perseverance (Fanselow, 2018). Individuals with an Independence ethics moral character experience less anxiety, leading to more positive emotions and subsequently increased motivation. Motivational factors in education also contribute to a favorable view of education and provide the energy required for academic engagement (Gable & Dreisbach, 2021). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Independence ethics moral character contributes to the optimistic prediction of academic well-being. Submissive ethics moral character and sensitive ethics moral character are both characterized by a set of traits that reject selfish values. The Submissive ethics moral character negates selfish traits based on destruction and harm to others, while the sensitive ethics moral

character negates selfish traits based on insensitivity to public interests. These two constructs in the moral character model proposed by Khormaei and Ghaemi (2017) are theoretically related to the dark triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Antisociality) and are in conflict with them. Machiavellianism is characterized by deceptive behavior, indifference, self-centeredness, autocracy, and self-interest (Collison et al., 2018). Narcissism involves thinking of oneself as irrationally superior to others, which can manifest in various aspects, such as success, strength, cleverness, beauty, or a sense of magnanimity (Crowe et al., 2019). Antisocial personality disorder involves a lack of empathy with others and a lack of guilt after committing an immoral act (Lynam et al., 2018).

Studies have shown a negative relationship between the dark triad and adverse outcomes, such as burnout and less success (Mirkovic & Bianchi, 2019; Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015). In contrast, the set of characteristics that include not harming others and sensitivity to public interests promotes a positive self-concept and goals of a positive nature, such as academic success. Consequently, academic well-being is experienced as one of the expected positive outcomes. By negating selfish values and promoting empathy and sensitivity to public interests, individuals with submissive ethics and sensitive ethics moral character are less likely to engage in a constant fight and flight process and are more likely to pursue positive goals, such as academic success.

Limitation and suggestions

When discussing the limitations of this study, it is important to note that the research was conducted using a descriptive correlation method. Therefore, caution is necessary when making causal inferences based on these results. Given this limitation, future researchers should explore the efficacy of interventions based on teaching moral character to enhance students' academic well-being. Specifically, researchers could investigate the impact of interventions on the development of moral characters as well as their influence on students' academic well-being. By addressing this question, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of interventions in promoting academic well-being among students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that moral characters can predict academic well-being. The findings of the present research are theoretically important; Because it led to the increase of existing knowledge about the intrapersonal antecedents affecting academic well-being. These

findings can be used as a basis for designing educational interventions in order to improve the academic well-being of students.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of University of Shiraz.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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