

Parenting Dimensions and Character Development through Law among Students in Multicultural Malaysia

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the role of parenting dimensions in the development of student character within the multicultural context of Malaysia. Specifically, it examines the relationships between parental care, autonomy, overprotection, and student character among university students. A quantitative research design with a descriptive correlational approach was employed. The sample consisted of 88 university students from UiTM Cawangan Pahang, selected using stratified random sampling to reflect Malaysia's ethnic diversity. Data were collected through validated questionnaires measuring three dimensions of parenting styles (care, autonomy, overprotection) and seven aspects of student character (religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, cooperation, tolerance, and empathy). Data analysis utilized descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation with SPSS version 26.0. The findings revealed that democratic parenting was the dominant style (47.7%). Parental care demonstrated the strongest positive correlation with student character ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.01$), followed by

autonomy ($r = 0.642$) and overprotection after reverse scoring ($r = 0.589$). Empathy showed the highest correlation with care ($r = 0.701$), while autonomy was most strongly associated with independence ($r = 0.689$). Overall student character was rated very high (mean = 3.43). Parental care showed the strongest association with student character. These findings highlight the importance of warm and supportive parenting in relation to students' moral and social characteristic moral values and social competencies essential for harmonious coexistence in multicultural society. Recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers are discussed.

Keywords: character education; multicultural Malaysia; parental care; parenting styles; student character.

Introduction

Family is one of the primary developmental contexts in which children and adolescents acquire social, emotional, and moral values. Through daily interactions, parental warmth, support, guidance, and the provision of autonomy, parents contribute to the development of children's social and psychological competencies. Parenting practices may remain relevant beyond childhood because the transition to young adulthood does not necessarily mark the end of parental influence. Parental attachment has been shown to contribute significantly to positive youth development among Malaysian youth, with a study of 677 community college students demonstrating significant relationships between both parental and peer attachment and the 5Cs of positive youth development (Mohamed et al., 2017). Recent research shows that parental warmth and autonomy support are consistently associated with positive developmental outcomes, although the strength of these effects may vary across individuals and contexts (Taşkesen et al., 2025). In particular, parental warmth provides an interpersonal context that can facilitate the internalization of values and prosocial orientations. Specifically, their chapter within the Malaysian multicultural framework demonstrates that the positive influence of authoritative parenting on adolescent developmental assets persists across varying levels of parental education, reinforcing its robust applicability within the nation's diverse societal structure (Kiadarbandsari et al., 2022). Empirical research among 1,380 adolescents has demonstrated a positive association between parental emotional warmth, parental attachment, peer attachment, and adolescents' character strengths (Zhang et al., 2021). Longitudinal evidence has also indicated that parenting styles are relevant to adolescents' moral values, although the associations vary according to parenting style and parent characteristics (Bornstein et al., 2022).

The relationship between parenting and positive youth development has also been demonstrated in the Malaysian context. Kiadarbandsari et al. (2022) reported that authoritative parenting was associated with higher positive youth development among Malaysian adolescents, whereas uninvolved parenting showed negative associations. Similarly, research among Malaysian undergraduates has indicated that parenting styles are related to prosocial behavior, with authoritative, permissive, and neglectful parenting showing significant associations with prosocial behavior, whereas authoritarian parenting was not significantly associated with the outcome (Chan et al., 2021). This pattern is further corroborated by a separate investigation among Malaysian undergraduates, which similarly identified authoritative and permissive parenting as positive correlates of prosocial behavior, while reaffirming that authoritarian parenting does not significantly contribute to such outcomes (Chan, Liu, & Khor, 2021). Although

these studies examined positive youth development and prosocial behavior rather than student character as an integrated construct, they demonstrate the relevance of family socialization to positive developmental and behavioral outcomes among Malaysian young people. Evidence from other Asian contexts further supports this relationship. Zhu et al. (2022), for example, found that positive parental and relational factors were significantly associated with adolescents' character attributes, including treating others well, self-discipline and law-abidance, and traditional virtues. Empirically, a comparative study of Malay, Chinese, and Indian caregivers in Malaysia found striking commonalities in parenting approaches across ethnic groups, with caregivers predominantly endorsing authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting styles, suggesting that shared cultural values may underlie parenting practices within Malaysia's multicultural society (Salehuddin & Winskel, 2016). These findings indicate that parental support and positive parent-child relationships constitute important ecological resources for character-related development.

Character becomes particularly relevant during the university years, when students undergo a transition toward greater independence, self-direction, and adult social roles. At this developmental stage, students are expected to manage academic responsibilities while simultaneously developing interpersonal competence, ethical judgment, self-regulation, and social responsibility. Character encompasses qualities that enable individuals to act responsibly and constructively toward themselves and others. From the positive youth development perspective, character is recognized as one of the core developmental strengths alongside competence, confidence, connection, and caring (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021). Recent research in the Malaysian context has similarly shown that positive parenting behaviors, including warmth, involvement, and consistent discipline, are associated with higher levels of positive youth development encompassing competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Pillai et al., 2025). Evidence involving undergraduate students from Malaysian universities further indicates that character constitutes an important component of young adults' developmental profile in higher education (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021). Thus, although universities provide important environments for character-related development, students' character may also reflect socialization experiences established before entering higher education.

The continued relevance of parenting during emerging adulthood is supported by research examining university and college students. A systematic review of 74 quantitative studies found that most research on overparenting and emerging adult development involved college students and that overparenting was generally negatively associated with emerging adults' psychological, behavioral, social and relational, academic, and career development (Cui et al., 2022). Research on parental autonomy support also suggests that parenting remains relevant to university students' behavioral regulation. Among 287 Chinese university students, parental autonomy support and parental psychological control were examined in relation to students' autonomous and dysregulated behavior through basic psychological need processes (Wei et al., 2022). In the Malaysian context, research involving 423 university students found a significant relationship between perceived parental overprotection and young adults' autonomy, further indicating that parenting practices remain relevant during the university years (Motevalli & Marjan Baniyasi, 2025). Supporting this pattern, Low and Chong (2024) demonstrated that helicopter parenting among Malaysian Chinese university students negatively predicts resilience, partially through the mechanism of fear of negative

evaluation. Supporting this broader relevance, a recent study among Muslim university students found that parenting dimensions encompassing warmth, structure, and autonomy support were positively associated with hardiness personality, indicating that parental practices may foster psychological resilience during the transition to adulthood (Safira et al., 2024). Other Malaysian studies have similarly demonstrated the continuing relevance of parental relationships during emerging adulthood, including associations between parental bonding and psychological outcomes among college students and between parental trust and identity exploration among undergraduate students. These findings collectively suggest that increasing independence during emerging adulthood does not eliminate the relevance of family experiences.

The relationship between parenting and character is also potentially shaped by cultural and identity contexts. Character involves not only personal qualities but also the ways individuals understand social norms, responsibilities, and their relationships with others. In culturally diverse settings, family socialization may interact with religious, ethnic, and national identities in shaping character-related outcomes. Cheah et al. (2021), for example, found that maternal religious socialization was associated with positive character development among Muslim American adolescents through stronger Muslim identity under conditions of moderate and high maternal warmth. Their findings illustrate that parenting, cultural identity, and character-related development may intersect within multicultural contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant to Malaysia, where family socialization occurs within a society characterized by considerable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.

The importance of character development is also reflected in Malaysian higher education policy. The *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education)* explicitly positions the development of holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates as a key aspiration of the higher education system. The framework emphasizes that graduates should possess not only disciplinary knowledge and skills but also ethics, morality, appropriate behavior, cultural and civilizational literacy, and the capacity to contribute to their families, communities, and nation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). More recently, the *Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035* has emphasized human-centered development, holistic well-being, diversity, inclusion, empathy, unity, and the internalization of values and competencies among future-ready graduates (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2025). This policy orientation indicates that Malaysian higher education conceptualizes graduate development beyond academic achievement and places character-related qualities within a broader framework of holistic human development.

Malaysia therefore provides a meaningful context for examining the relationship between parenting dimensions and student character. Higher education institutions bring together students from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, creating opportunities for intercultural interaction and the development of tolerance, empathy, respect for differences, and social connectedness. At the same time, multicultural environments require individuals to negotiate differing values, identities, and social expectations. An empirical study among Malay, Chinese, and Indian undergraduate students at three Malaysian public universities found relatively high levels of ethnic tolerance, with a combined ethnic tolerance index of 4.13 on a five-point scale (Wan Husin et al., 2021). These findings indicate that Malaysian university students demonstrate substantial potential for positive intercultural engagement, while also highlighting the

importance of understanding the developmental and socialization contexts associated with values such as tolerance, respect, and social responsibility. Accordingly, student character in a multicultural society should be understood not only as an educational outcome but also as a product of broader socialization processes.

The role of family-based socialization in character education is also evident among culturally diverse families living in Malaysia. A qualitative study of Indonesian families at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur found that parental engagement played an important role in character education and the transmission of values among Generation Alpha (Parental engagement in character education for Generation Alpha in diaspora, 2025). Although the study focused on a specific diaspora population and employed a qualitative approach, it illustrates how parents continue to serve as important agents in transmitting and reinforcing values within a multicultural Malaysian environment. Such evidence reinforces the importance of examining family experiences when considering character-related outcomes among young people in Malaysia.

Despite the growing literature on parenting and positive youth development, several research gaps remain. First, previous Malaysian studies have primarily examined parenting in relation to outcomes such as positive youth development, prosocial behavior, self-efficacy, autonomy, attachment, identity exploration, and psychological adjustment, whereas the specific association between parenting dimensions and student character remains comparatively underexplored. Second, existing research has frequently conceptualized parenting through broad typologies, such as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or uninvolved parenting. Although these typologies are useful for identifying general patterns of parenting, they may obscure the distinct associations of specific parenting dimensions with character-related outcomes. Third, evidence remains limited regarding how multiple parenting dimensions—particularly care, autonomy, and overprotection—are simultaneously associated with student character among university students in Malaysia. Examining these dimensions separately may provide a more nuanced understanding of family socialization than relying solely on broad parenting-style classifications. Fourth, although Malaysian higher education policy explicitly emphasizes holistic graduate development and character-related qualities, empirical evidence connecting these policy aspirations with family socialization experiences remains limited.

Based on these gaps, the present study offers several contributions. First, it examines the relationship between parenting dimensions and student character among university students rather than focusing exclusively on psychological adjustment, academic outcomes, or general positive youth development. Second, the study adopts a multidimensional approach by examining care, autonomy, and overprotection simultaneously, allowing the relative strength of their associations with student character to be examined. This approach extends previous research that has predominantly focused on global parenting styles or individual developmental outcomes. Third, the study focuses on university students within the multicultural context of Malaysia, providing empirical evidence from a setting characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Finally, the study connects family socialization with character education in higher education, thereby contributing empirical evidence that may inform character development strategies responsive to the Malaysian cultural context.

Based on the theoretical review and previous empirical findings, this study proposes four hypotheses. **H1:** Parental care is positively associated with university

students' character. **H2:** Parental autonomy support is positively associated with university students' character. **H3:** Parental overprotection is negatively associated with university students' character. **H4:** Among the three parenting dimensions, parental care demonstrates the strongest association with university students' character. The first three hypotheses address the expected direction of the relationships between each parenting dimension and student character, while the fourth examines the relative strength of these associations.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relationships between parenting dimensions—care, autonomy, and overprotection—and student character among university students in the multicultural context of Malaysia. The study also examines the differential associations between parenting dimensions and specific aspects of student character, including religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, cooperation, tolerance, and empathy. By examining these relationships, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence regarding the relevance of family socialization to student character during emerging adulthood and provide a basis for character education strategies that recognize the continuing relevance of family experiences within Malaysia's culturally diverse society.

Method

This study employed a quantitative design with a descriptive-correlational approach. The quantitative approach was selected to enable the systematic measurement of relationships between parenting dimensions and university students' character development, as well as statistical testing of the proposed hypotheses. The descriptive component aimed to characterize dominant parenting patterns and character profiles among Malaysian university students, whereas the correlational component examined the strength and direction of relationships between parenting dimensions and character aspects. This design was appropriate for the study's objectives of identifying dominant parenting styles, describing students' character profiles, and testing predictive relationships between parenting variables and character outcomes. The target population of this study consisted of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Malaysia. The sample was drawn from students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Pahang Branch. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. The sampling procedure was as follows:

1. The researchers identified several courses that were being conducted during the data collection period.
2. The researchers contacted the lecturers responsible for those courses to request permission to collect data during class hours.
3. On the day of data collection, the researchers distributed a Google Forms questionnaire link to all students present in the class.
4. Students who were present and voluntarily agreed to complete the questionnaire became the study respondents.

The use of convenience sampling means that this study falls under the category of non-probability sampling. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population of Malaysian university students; rather, they describe the phenomenon within the specific context of the Faculty of Business and Management at UiTM Pahang Branch. The ethnic composition, which was heavily dominated by Malay students ($n = 72$ out of 88), was a natural consequence of this sampling technique and

also reflected the demographic composition of the majority of students in the faculty. This limitation is discussed further in the discussion section.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) being actively enrolled as a student at UiTM Pahang Branch; (b) being between 18 and 25 years old, which corresponds to the typical age range of university students in the young adulthood developmental phase; (c) willingness to participate voluntarily, as indicated by completing an electronic informed consent form; and (d) the ability to complete the questionnaire independently. The exclusion criteria included students who were on academic leave, absent during data collection, or had incomplete questionnaire responses.

A total of 88 students participated in this study, consisting of 82 female students (93.2%) and 6 male students (6.8%). The predominance of female participants reflected the actual composition of the faculty, which had a substantially higher number of female than male students. Participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Malay ($n = 72$), Chinese ($n = 8$), Indian ($n = 5$), and other ethnicities ($n = 3$). Although the number of non-Malay participants was relatively small, their inclusion provided an initial indication of cultural diversity within the study. However, it should be noted that ethnic group comparisons using ANOVA would have low statistical power for the minority groups. Data were collected using validated self-report questionnaires distributed online through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information, a parenting style scale, and a student character scale.

a) Parenting Style Scale

The parenting instrument measured students' perceptions of their parents' parenting practices and was adapted from established instruments. Based on the theoretical review, the dimensions of Care and Overprotection were adapted from the *Parental Bonding Instrument* (PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979). Its applicability across different cultural settings has been recently reaffirmed through a validation study among Spanish university students (Zabolipour, Amador-Campos, & Ferrer-Garcia, 2026) whereas the Autonomy dimension was developed with reference to the concept of autonomy in Baumrind's theory and adapted from the Autonomy subscale of the *Perceived Parenting Styles Scale*.

The instrument adaptation process was conducted through the following stages:

1. **Forward–Backward Translation:** All original instrument items in English were translated into Malay by a certified translator with expertise in psychology. The Malay version was then translated back into English by a second independent translator who was blinded to the original version. The two English versions—the original and the back-translated version—were compared by the research team to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence. Minor discrepancies were discussed and revised until consensus was reached.
2. **Expert Judgment:** The adapted instrument was assessed for content validity by three experts in developmental and educational psychology. The experts evaluated the clarity of the items, their relevance to the constructs being measured, and their cultural appropriateness for the Malaysian context. Based on expert feedback, the wording of several items was revised to improve clarity and cultural relevance.

Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Often*, and 4 = *Always*. Because overprotection is theoretically considered maladaptive, all items in the Overprotection dimension were reverse-scored before analysis. Thus, higher scores consistently reflected more positive parenting patterns, namely high care, high autonomy,

and low overprotection. Consequently, higher total parenting scores indicated healthier parenting practices. To determine the dominant parenting style, respondents were categorized based on a median split for each dimension, using the following criteria:

- Democratic/Authoritative: Scores above the median on the Care and Autonomy dimensions, and below the median on the Overprotection dimension after reverse scoring.
- Authoritarian: Scores below the median on the Autonomy dimension and above the median on the Overprotection dimension after reverse scoring.
- Permissive: Scores below the median on the Care dimension and above the median on the Autonomy dimension, without strict consideration of the level of Overprotection, or in accordance with the adapted literature.

These criteria were based on Baumrind's typology, which was operationally modified for this study.

b) Student Character Scale

The student character instrument measured character development and was developed based on the Positive Youth Development framework and Malaysian education policy. The scale measured seven aspects of character: religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, cooperation, tolerance, and empathy. The character scale consisted of 28 items in total, with four items for each aspect. Items were rated using the same 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *Never* to 4 = *Always*. The total character score was calculated by summing all items, with higher scores indicating more positive character development.

c) Reliability Testing

Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The parenting style scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.82 for the Care dimension, 0.79 for the Autonomy dimension, and 0.71 for the Overprotection dimension. The student character scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.88 for the overall scale. Data collection was conducted over four weeks. The research team obtained institutional approval and ethical clearance from UiTM Pahang Branch before collecting data. Prospective participants were informed about the study objectives, procedures, and their rights as research participants, including confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. The questionnaire was distributed electronically through Google Forms to students in the Faculty of Business and Management. The questionnaire link was shared through official student communication channels, including class WhatsApp groups and university email. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would be used solely for research purposes. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participants proceeded to complete the questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire required approximately 15–20 minutes. Data were analyzed using SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) version 26.0 for Windows. The analyses were conducted in several stages in accordance with the descriptive-correlational design.

Descriptive Statistics: Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample and summarize the distribution of scores across parenting dimensions and character aspects. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, including gender, ethnicity, and faculty. For continuous variables, means, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values were calculated for each parenting dimension—Care,

Autonomy, and Overprotection—and each character aspect—Religiosity, Nationalism, Integrity, Independence, Cooperation, Tolerance, and Empathy. These statistics provided an overview of dominant parenting patterns and character profiles among the respondents.

Correlation Tests: Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationships between parenting dimensions—Care, Autonomy, and Overprotection—and student character, including both total scores and individual character aspects. This analysis tested the hypotheses concerning the presence and strength of associations between parenting variables and character outcomes.

Group Difference Tests: Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences in parenting and character scores by gender, namely between male and female students. One-way ANOVA was used to examine differences across ethnic groups, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic groups. These analyses provided insight into whether demographic factors influenced parenting experiences or character development.

Before inferential analysis, the data were checked for completeness, outliers, and violations of statistical assumptions. Missing data were minimal, accounting for less than 5%, and were handled using listwise deletion. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and visual inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots. Linearity was examined through scatterplots between parenting and character variables. Homoscedasticity was evaluated using Levene’s test. All assumptions for Pearson correlation and independent-samples *t*-tests were adequately met.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Institutional approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of UiTM Pahang Branch. All participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the study objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. The data were anonymized and securely stored, with access limited to the research team. The findings were reported in aggregate form to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Results And Discussion

Result

A total of 88 university students from UiTM Cawangan Pahang participated in this study. The sample comprised 82 female students (93.2%) and 6 male students (6.8%), reflecting the demographic composition of the Faculty of Business and Management. Participants represented Malaysia's multicultural diversity, with 72 Malay students (81.8%), 8 Chinese students (9.1%), 5 Indian students (5.7%), and 3 students from other ethnic backgrounds (3.4%). The age range of participants was 18 to 25 years, consistent with the emerging adult developmental stage.

Analysis of parenting styles revealed that democratic parenting was the dominant style, practiced by 42 participants (47.7%). Authoritarian parenting was reported by 24 participants (27.3%), while permissive parenting was reported by 22 participants (25.0%).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Parenting Dimensions

Parenting Dimension	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Category
Care	3.28	0.65	1.80	4.00	High
Autonomy	3.15	0.58	1.90	4.00	High
Overprotection (reversed)	3.24	0.68	1.67	4.00	High

All three parenting dimensions scored in the high category (mean > 3.00). Care exhibited the highest mean (3.28), followed by Overprotection after reverse scoring (3.24), and Autonomy (3.15). The relatively high Overprotection score after reversal indicates that parents generally did not engage in excessive protective behaviors, suggesting a tendency toward balanced parenting.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Character Aspects

Character Aspect	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Category
Religiosity	3.43	0.64	1.75	4.00	Very High
Nationalism	3.44	0.67	1.50	4.00	Very High
Integrity	3.47	0.63	1.50	4.00	Very High
Independence	3.32	0.62	1.75	4.00	High
Cooperation	3.42	0.65	1.00	4.00	Very High
Tolerance	3.44	0.64	1.30	4.00	Very High
Empathy	3.51	0.62	1.50	4.00	Very High
Character Total	3.43	0.58	1.76	4.00	Very High

Overall student character was rated very high (M = 3.43, SD = 0.58). Empathy had the highest mean (3.51), followed by Integrity (3.47), Nationalism (3.44), Tolerance (3.44), Religiosity (3.43), Cooperation (3.42), and Independence (3.32). All aspects scored above 3.30, indicating strong character development among participants.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations between Parenting Dimensions and Character Total

Variable	Care	Autonomy	Overprotection (R)	Character Total
Care	1	0.512**	0.423**	0.687**
Autonomy	0.512* *	1	0.387**	0.642**
Overprotection (R)	0.423* *	0.387**	1	0.589**
Character Total	0.687* *	0.642**	0.589**	1

Note: **p < 0.01 (two-tailed)

All three parenting dimensions showed significant positive correlations with character development. Care demonstrated the strongest correlation ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.01$), followed by Autonomy ($r = 0.642$, $p < 0.01$), and Overprotection after reverse scoring ($r = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$). These findings support Hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃, confirming significant positive relationships between all parenting dimensions and student character.

Table 4. Correlations between Parenting Dimensions and Character Aspects

Character Aspect	Care	Autonomy	Overprotection (R)
Religiosity	0.632* *	0.598**	0.512**
Nationalism	0.601* *	0.567**	0.498**
Integrity	0.678* *	0.623**	0.554**
Independence	0.654* *	0.689**	0.567**
Cooperation	0.589* *	0.534**	0.478**
Tolerance	0.623* *	0.578**	0.523**
Empathy	0.701* *	0.634**	0.591**

Note: **p < 0.01 (two-tailed)

Care showed the strongest correlations with Empathy ($r = 0.701$) and Integrity ($r = 0.678$). Autonomy demonstrated its strongest correlation with Independence ($r = 0.689$), followed by Empathy ($r = 0.634$) and Integrity ($r = 0.623$). Overprotection after reverse scoring showed moderate correlations across all character aspects, with Empathy ($r = 0.591$) and Independence ($r = 0.567$) being the highest.

Discussion

The present study found that parental care had the strongest association with students' character ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.01$), followed by autonomy ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.01$) and reverse-scored overprotection ($r = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$). This finding supports H4 and indicates that students who perceive their parents as warm, attentive, and emotionally supportive tend to report stronger character. Because the present study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, however, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. The stronger association observed for care is consistent with previous research indicating that parental emotional warmth is positively associated with adolescents' character strengths. Zhang et al. (2021), for example, found significant positive relationships between parental emotional warmth, parental attachment, peer attachment, and character strengths among 1,380 adolescents. Their findings suggest that emotional warmth may provide an interpersonal context that supports the development of positive character-related qualities.

The finding that care was most strongly associated with empathy ($r = 0.634$) and integrity ($r = 0.623$) is particularly meaningful. Emotional support from parents may provide opportunities for young people to learn to recognize emotions, consider others' perspectives, and internalize interpersonal and moral standards. This interpretation is consistent with Wagers and Kiel (2019), who found that parenting behaviors including parental warmth and reasoning were relevant to empathy development. Although their study focused on toddlers rather than university students, it provides developmental evidence that parenting processes can be connected to the emergence of empathic behavior. More directly, Zhang et al. (2021) found that parental emotional warmth was positively associated with adolescents' character strengths, supporting the interpretation that emotionally supportive family relationships may provide an important context for positive character-related qualities.

The relatively strong association between parental care and student character is also noteworthy because the participants were university students who are entering or experiencing emerging adulthood. At this stage, individuals are expected to become increasingly autonomous while continuing to maintain meaningful relationships with parents. Thus, parental involvement does not necessarily become irrelevant when children enter university. Instead, the form of parental involvement may become increasingly important. Research on emerging adults has distinguished autonomy-supportive parenting from helicopter parenting and found that emerging adults who perceived their parents as autonomy supportive reported higher life satisfaction, self-efficacy, and parent-child relationship quality than those experiencing helicopter or uninvolved parenting (Hwang & Jung, 2022). This finding helps explain why care and autonomy can coexist: emotional closeness may remain beneficial when parental involvement respects the young person's developing capacity for self-direction.

Parental autonomy was positively associated with student character and was most strongly associated with independence ($r = 0.689$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H2. This finding indicates that students who perceive their parents as providing opportunities to make decisions, express opinions, manage responsibilities, and solve problems tend to report stronger independence. The finding is consistent with research on university students showing that parental autonomy support is associated with autonomous behavioral regulation. Wei et al. (2022), using data from 287 Chinese university students, found that parental autonomy support was positively associated with basic psychological need

satisfaction and autonomous regulation of learning, whereas parental psychological control was associated with need frustration and dysregulated behavior. These findings support the interpretation that autonomy-supportive parenting can provide developmental conditions that allow university students to exercise self-direction while maintaining their connection with parents.

The positive association between autonomy and empathy ($r = 0.634$) is also noteworthy. Autonomy support does not necessarily imply individualism or emotional distance from the family. Rather, it can involve acknowledging young people's perspectives, allowing meaningful choices, and encouraging responsibility for decisions. When students are given opportunities to make decisions and experience the consequences of their actions, they may also develop greater awareness of how their choices affect other people. Therefore, autonomy may be associated not only with independence but also with interpersonal qualities such as empathy. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature suggesting that autonomy-supportive parenting is associated with more adaptive developmental outcomes during emerging adulthood (Hwang & Jung, 2022; Wei et al., 2022).

The findings concerning overprotection require careful interpretation. After reverse scoring, the overprotection dimension was positively correlated with all character dimensions (ranging from $r = 0.478$ to $r = 0.591$), meaning that lower perceived overprotection was associated with stronger character. This pattern is consistent with evidence that excessive parental involvement may be less adaptive during emerging adulthood. A systematic review of 74 quantitative studies found that overparenting was overwhelmingly negatively associated with emerging adults' psychological, behavioral, social-relational, learning/academic, and career development, although some mixed findings were observed in academic and career domains (Cui et al., 2022). The review is particularly relevant to the present study because most of the studies included college students and examined individuals within the emerging-adulthood age range.

The present finding is also consistent with research distinguishing helicopter parenting from autonomy-supportive parenting. Hwang and Jung (2022) identified distinct parenting patterns among emerging adults, including helicopter parenting and autonomy-supportive parenting. Emerging adults in the autonomy-supportive parenting class reported higher life satisfaction, self-efficacy, and parent–child relationship quality than those experiencing helicopter or uninvolved parenting. Thus, the positive association between reverse-scored overprotection and student character in the present study may reflect the developmental importance of allowing university students to exercise judgment and responsibility rather than having parents take over responsibilities that students can increasingly manage themselves.

Nevertheless, parental protection should not be equated with parental care. Parents can provide substantial emotional support while simultaneously allowing young adults to make decisions and assume responsibility. The critical distinction concerns whether parental involvement facilitates or restricts the young person's developing competence and agency. This distinction is consistent with the literature differentiating autonomy-supportive parenting from intrusive or controlling forms of parenting (Hwang & Jung, 2022; Wei et al., 2022). Furthermore, the magnitude of the association involving overprotection should be interpreted cautiously because the overprotection dimension in the present instrument consisted of only three items, compared with ten items for care

and autonomy. Differences in the number of items and measurement breadth may affect the stability and precision of the observed correlations.

The differential pattern across parenting dimensions provides an important finding. Care was most strongly associated with empathy and integrity, whereas autonomy was most strongly associated with independence. This pattern suggests that student character is multidimensional and that different parenting experiences may be associated with different character qualities. Emotional warmth may be particularly relevant to interpersonal and moral qualities, whereas autonomy support may be more closely related to self-directed qualities. This interpretation is broadly consistent with recent evidence showing that parenting styles are associated with multiple personality characteristics. A meta-analysis of 28 studies involving 11,061 adolescents found that authoritative parenting was positively associated with openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, while neglectful parenting was negatively associated with conscientiousness and agreeableness (Tehrani et al., 2024). Although personality traits are conceptually distinct from character, the findings provide supporting evidence that different dimensions of parenting may be differentially related to positive individual characteristics.

The finding that democratic parenting was the most frequently reported parenting style (47.7%) provides additional context for the dimensional findings. The predominance of democratic parenting suggests that many participants perceived their parents as combining emotional responsiveness with opportunities for autonomy. This pattern is compatible with the positive role of autonomy-supportive and warm parenting observed in research on emerging adults (Hwang & Jung, 2022; Wei et al., 2022). In the Malaysian context, such a combination may be particularly meaningful because university students negotiate increasing independence while continuing to maintain family relationships and cultural expectations. However, this interpretation should remain cautious because the present study did not directly test whether Malaysian cultural values moderate the relationship between parenting and character.

The relatively high mean scores for tolerance ($M = 3.44$) and empathy ($M = 3.51$) also provide an important contextual finding. These character dimensions may be particularly relevant in a multicultural society in which students encounter peers from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. However, the present study did not directly measure intercultural interaction or multicultural orientation; therefore, the high scores should not be interpreted as evidence that Malaysia's multicultural environment caused higher tolerance or empathy. Rather, the findings indicate that the participants generally reported relatively strong character qualities in these domains. Future studies could examine whether intercultural contact, cultural identity, perceived social cohesion, or campus climate helps explain variation in tolerance and empathy among Malaysian university students.

The findings have several practical implications. For parents, the results suggest the value of combining emotional warmth, open communication, appropriate guidance, and opportunities for age-appropriate decision-making. Parenting university students may therefore require a transition from direct control toward supportive guidance that maintains emotional connection while recognizing increasing autonomy. This implication is consistent with evidence that autonomy-supportive parenting is associated with more favorable outcomes among emerging adults (Hwang & Jung, 2022; Wei et al., 2022). For universities, family-based influences can be complemented by institutional programs that

strengthen empathy, integrity, tolerance, ethical decision-making, and responsible independence. Character education may therefore benefit from approaches that connect family socialization with campus-based developmental experiences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was predominantly female (93,2%) and was drawn from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings to Malaysian university students as a whole. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions regarding the direction of the relationships between parenting and student character. However, it is worth noting that a previous study among Malaysian undergraduates found no significant differences in parenting styles across ethnic groups, suggesting that the predominance of Malay participants in the present sample may not substantially distort the observed associations between parenting dimensions and student character (Che Hassan & Hew, 2017). Third, all variables were measured using self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability, common-method bias, and differences in participants' perceptions of parenting. Fourth, the three-item overprotection dimension may provide less measurement coverage than the ten-item care and autonomy dimensions. Finally, although the study is situated within multicultural Malaysia, it did not directly compare ethnic or cultural groups or examine multicultural variables as moderators. Future research should therefore involve multiple universities and more gender- and culturally diverse samples, employ longitudinal or multi-informant designs, and examine potential mechanisms such as self-efficacy, emotion regulation, moral identity, peer influence, and campus climate. Comparative research across ethnic and cultural groups could also clarify whether the relationships between parenting dimensions and student character are culturally invariant or context dependent.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between parenting dimensions and character development among 88 university students at UiTM Cawangan Pahang, Malaysia. The findings showed that parental care had the strongest association with overall student character development ($r = .687, p < .01$), followed by parental autonomy ($r = .642, p < .01$) and lower levels of parental overprotection ($r = .589, p < .01$, after reverse scoring). Care was most strongly associated with Empathy and Integrity, whereas Autonomy was most strongly associated with Independence. These findings indicate that character development among university students is related to a parenting environment characterized by emotional warmth, support, and opportunities for responsible autonomy.

The study contributes to the understanding of parenting and character development in Malaysia's multicultural context. The predominance of democratic parenting in the sample and the relatively high levels of empathy, tolerance, and integrity suggest that family relationships remain an important context for character education during emerging adulthood. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of helping parents balance emotional responsiveness with age-appropriate autonomy, while universities can reinforce these values through inclusive campus environments, mentoring, and character education initiatives.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions about causal relationships between parenting and character development. Second, the sample was predominantly female and drawn

from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to male students, other academic disciplines, and students from different Malaysian regions or universities. Third, the study relied on students' self-reports of both parenting experiences and character, which may be affected by recall bias, social desirability, and common-method bias. In addition, the overprotection dimension was measured with fewer items than the Care and Autonomy dimensions, which may have reduced the precision of this construct. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs, recruit larger and more gender-balanced samples from multiple universities, and include multiple sources of information, such as parent, peer, or lecturer reports. Future studies should also examine mediating and moderating factors—including self-efficacy, emotion regulation, peer influence, campus climate, socioeconomic background, and ethnic or cultural values—to provide a more comprehensive explanation of how parenting is associated with character development among Malaysian university students.

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