

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR AND ISLAMIC WORK ETHICS AMONG SUPPORT STAFF IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between assertive behaviour and Islamic Work Ethics among Muslim support staff in a state municipality in Malaysia. In addition, this study determined the levels of assertive behaviour as well as the level of Islamic Work Ethics among the support staff. From a population of 260 support staff, 155 samples were involved via convenience sampling. The instruments used were Rathus Assertiveness Schedule and Islamic Work Ethics questionnaires. Data were analysed descriptively to determine the levels of assertive behaviour and Islamic Work Ethics, while Pearson correlation was used to determine the relationship between assertive behaviour and Islamic Work Ethics. The levels of assertive behaviour was found to be moderate while the level of Islamic Work Ethics was found to be high. The relationship between assertiveness Islamic Work Ethics was positive and significant but very weak. The respondents' understanding of the items in the questionnaire and their attitudes toward research may have contributed to the very weak relationship between the two variables. Thus, future research may focus on improving the questionnaires. Nonetheless, similar studies with different Malay Muslim populations would also be deemed necessary before assertive behaviour is considered a moderator.

Keywords: Assertive behaviour, Islamic Work Ethics, support staff, Malaysian cultural context.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Employees are valuable assets to organisations; without them all missions and visions set by the organisations will only be left on papers. Nonetheless, to enable the achievement of the missions and visions of the organisations, employees need to have certain qualities which, when interact with the various elements within the work place such as good leadership and conducive work environment, will bring desirable results. Among these qualities are assertive behaviour and work ethics.

Assertiveness have been accepted as an essential quality in communication and thus is a crucial quality to be acquired and practiced by all. Included in the list of assertive behaviours are the ability to express oneself with confidence and without offending others, to uphold one's opinion, to say no to favours or others requests without feeling guilty and to start or stop a conversation. Other assertive behaviours are the ability to openly talk about own desires and needs; the ability to say "No"; the ability to openly talk about own positive and negative feelings; and the ability to establish contacts, to begin, maintain and end a conversation (Lazarus, 1973).

Several other behaviours such as, "The right to change your mind", "The right to make mistakes and be responsible for them", "The right to say "I don't know"" and "The right to be illogical in making decisions" are also part of assertive behaviour (Smith, 1985). Alberti & Emmons (2008) and Smith (1985) sum up the meaning of assertive behaviour as the ability to protect one's rights in a humanistic manner, without prejudice or violation of others' rights.

Assertive behaviour enhances all aspects of life including communication (Chen, 1992; Dwairy, 2004) improving self-esteem (Hamdan, 2007; Hamound et al., 2011; Mahmoud et al., 2013 and Abed, 2015) as well as reducing stress (Croner 2002; Hamdan et al., and Zadih and Hashemi, 2017). Thus, people practising assertive behaviour are more successful in life (Yilmaz, 2008; Ayaz, 2008 and Bal, 2008). Like anyone else, these people have their own portions of life challenges, but the difference is that they meet these challenges with confidence and resolve problems in the best and adequate manner (Alberti and Emmons, 2008).

Another crucial quality to be practised by employees is the adherence to work ethics. In Islam, ethics is *akhlak* [conduct] (Al Modaf, 2005) and *akhlak* is an Arabic word which means habit, dignity, moral and behaviour (Ibn Manzūr, 1990). In fact, *akhlak* is a person's core from which emanates automatic behaviours, such that ethics is considered the driving force for the implementation of syariah (Al-Qawsi, 2008).

As Islam is a way of life (The Holy Quran, 3:19), thus work is also a form of obedience to Allah SWT, and the ultimate aim of work, is no other than seeking the pleasure of Allah SWT (The Holy Quran, 51:56).

Husin and Nor Hasniah (2012) explain that work ethics is the set of rules set by an organisation to guide employee behaviours and actions. These rules cover all related to work that will bring good to the employees and organisation (Al-Qawsī, 2008 ;Ahmad Mukhtār,2008) Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) is thus the *akhlak* (conduct) at work, which guides attitudes and behaviours of the workforce. Adhering to IWE is a form of obedience to Allah SWT.

The practice of IWE has been shown to bring about tremendous benefits to organisations, such as high commitment and low turnover (Muhammad Mustakim, 2015) and loyalty (Ali, 2007; Ahmad, 2011)

■2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to identify the relationship between the levels of assertive behaviour and IWE among support staff in a municipality in the state of Johor in Malaysia. This study also determined the levels of the five dimensions of assertive behaviour as well as the level of Islamic Work Ethics among the support staff.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

This was a quantitative study, utilising a questionnaire as the method for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, namely Section A, Section B and Section C. Section A pertained to demographic questions, namely gender, age, education level, marital status, work types & grades and work experience.

Section B contained 30 items related to assertive behaviour on a five point Likert scale, which ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The items used were in Bahasa Melayu (BM) and were adapted from Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973). This BM version had been used by other researchers with Malaysian population (such as Hawa, 2014; Nazifah, 2014; Nurfazilah, 2014). Fourteen of the items were phrased positively while 16 were phrased negatively. Table 1 below shows examples of positive and negative items in Section B.

Table 1: Examples Positive and negative items

Item number	Item statements	Item Type
3	<i>Saya terus mengadu kepada pelayan kedai jika makanan yang saya pesan tidak memuaskan</i>	Positive
5	<i>Saya sukar menyatakan “tidak mahu beli” setelah jurujual itu bersungguh-sungguh menerangkan tentang barangan jualan yang tidak berapa sesuai</i>	Negative
8	<i>Saya berusaha maju ke hadapan setanding dengan orang lain yang sama dengan kedudukan saya.</i>	Positive
12	<i>Saya sering teragak-agak untuk menelefon mana mana institusi atau syarikat perniagaan</i>	Negative

Section C consisted of 20 items in BM related to Islamic Work Ethics (IWE), based on the model by Hussain and Ahmad (2006). These items in BM had also been used by previous researchers (Norul Huda, 2015; Satriadi, 2015). A five point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was also used for this section. Examples of items are as follows:

“*Saya bekerja dengan bertujuan menjadikan ia sebagai sebahagian daripada ibadah kepada Allah.*”

“*Sekiranya majikan menambahkan kerja kepada saya, ia adalah amanah yang harus dilaksanakan.*”

The population for this study was 260 and based on Krejcie & Morgan (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970), the number of samples were 155. Due to several constraints the samples were chosen via convenience sampling.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to obtain information on the demographic details of the respondents. To determine the levels of assertive behaviour and the level of IWE, the means of each were interpreted using the guideline suggested by Chua (2016) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Interpretation of mean

Mean range	Levels
1.00-2.33	Low
2.34-3.66	Moderate
3.67-5.00	High

Pearson correlation was used to determine the relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE. To interpret the strength of correlation, Chua's (2016) guideline was also used. The guide is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Interpretation of Pearson coefficient

Pearson coefficient (+ or -)	Interpretation
0.91-1.00	Very strong
0.71-0.9	Strong
0.51-0.70	Moderate
0.31-0.50	Weak
0.01-0.30	Very weak
0	No correlation

■4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The questionnaire return rate was 100%. The respondents were all Malays and 74 (47.7%) were males while 81(52.3%) were females. Majority were married (103; 66.5%), about a third were single (49; 31.6%) and the rest were widows/ widowers (3; 1.9%).

Among the respondents, the highest age range (81; 52.2 %) was between 21 to 30 years old. The second highest age range was between 31 to 40 years old (52; 33.5%), followed by 41-50 years old (17; 11%) and finally the 51-60 years old (5; 3.3%). Table 4 illustrates the age distribution of the respondents.

Table 4 : Age of respondents

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Age Category
21 – 25	36	23.2	Early adulthood
26 – 30	45	29.0	
31 – 35	40	25.8	
36 – 40	12	7.7	
41 – 45	7	4.5	
46 – 50	10	6.5	Middle adulthood
51 – 55	4	2.6	
56 – 60	1	0.7	
Total	155	100.0	

From Table 4 above, it can be seen that majority of the respondents (90.2%) were young adults, aged between 20 and 45 years, while the rest were in their middle adulthood.

The education level of the respondents were categorised into five levels, namely secondary school and high school level (37; 23.9%), certificate level (25;16.1%), diploma level (59; 38.1%, degree level (33; 21.3%, and "others" (1; 0.6%). Table 5 depicts the education levels of the respondents.

Table 5: Education levels of the respondents

Education levels	Frequency	Percentage (%)
PMR/SPM/STPM	37	23.9
Certificate	25	16.1
Diploma	59	38.1
First Degree	33	21.3
Others	1	0.6
Total	155	100

It can be concluded that majority of the respondents (93; 60%) had substantial and good education level (Diploma, degree and others).

The respondents were from various work grades and sections, namely from skills and talents section (B19, B29), general assistants (H11), technicians and engineers (J19, J29, JA19, JA29), enforcement and security section (KP19, KP22, KP29, KP32), clerks and administrative support staff (N11, N19, N22, N29, N32, NA29), sports science and library section (S19, S22, S29), health (U19, U29) and financial section (W19, W29). Table 6 illustrates the details.

Table 6: Work Types and Work Grades of the respondents

Work types and Work grades	Frequency	Percentage (%)
B19	3	1.9
B29	7	4.5
H11	8	5.1
J19	20	12.9
J29	2	1.3
JA 29	1	0.6
JA19	2	1.3
JA29	18	11.6
KP19	15	9.7
KP22	1	0.6
KP29	3	1.9
KP32	1	0.6
N11	7	4.5
N19	37	23.8
N22	1	0.6
N29	5	3.2
N32	1	0.6
NA29	1	0.6
S19	1	0.6
S22	1	0.6
S29	1	0.6
U19	1	0.6
U29	2	1.3
W19	6	3.9
W29	10	6.5
Total	155	100.0

Referring to Table 6, nearly a quarter (37; 23.9%) of the respondents were N19 (clerks) followed by J19 (technicians; 20; 12.9%), JA 29 (assistant engineers; 18; 11.6%) and KP 19 (Assistant security officers; 15; 9.7%).

As to the work experience of the respondents, Table 7 illustrates.

Table 7: Work experience of the respondents

Work experience (years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1-5	71	45.8
6-10	56	36.2
11-15	9	5.8
16-25	14	9.0
26 and above	5	3.2
Total	155	100

Referring to Table 7, nearly half (71; 45.8%) of the respondents had 1-5 years of work experience, followed by 6-10 years of experience (56; 36.2%). Only about a fifth (28; 18%) had been working for more than 10 years.

Levels of assertive behavior and IWE

Analysis showed that the levels of assertive behaviour of the respondents was moderate while the level of IWE was high. Table 8 below illustrates.

Table 8: The levels of assertive behaviour and IWE

	Overall Mean	Level
Assertive behaviour	3.41	Moderate
Islamic Work Ethics (IWE)	4.34	High

The relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE among the support staff

Table 9 below shows the results of the Pearson correlation between assertive behaviour and IWE.

Table 9: Pearson correlation between assertive behaviour and IWE

		Assertive behaviour	Islamic Work Ethics
Assertive behaviour	Pearson correlation	1	.081**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Islamic Work Ethics	Pearson correlation	.081**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	100	100
	N	100	100

The relationship between the assertive behavior and IWE among the support staff in a municipality was positive and significant but very weak. [$r = .081$, $p > 0.01$]

■ 5.0 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Levels of assertive behaviour and IWE

Similar to other skills, assertive behaviours are learned skills (Better Health Channel, 2012). Therefore it is a reasonable argument to allude that the more work experience employees have, the better they are in managing work related situations. Thus, the more experience employees are the higher their assertive behaviours levels are. However, in this study, nearly half of the employees had only 1-5 years of experience, thus it is reasonable that they had moderate level of assertive behaviour. Although one may contend that the rest employees, who had work experience of 6 years and constituted 54.2% of the respondents would have made the level of assertive behaviour higher, another crucial factor is the culture. Culture plays a big role in people's lives including assertive behaviour, and the Malays were not known for their high level of assertive behaviour. Furthermore, Malaysia being a high power distance country (Sweetman, 2012) the position of the respondents as support staff may also have had a role in lowering the level of assertive behaviour. Within the Malaysian work culture support staff "are supposed" to support the administrators and higher level personnel and considered at lower ranks compared to the superiors; thus were expected to obey their superiors.

In addition, more than half of the support staff (81; 52.2 %) were in their early adulthood, a life stage when they are busy accomplishing many developmental tasks such as finding spouses, building career and starting families (Feldman, 2018). With more than half of the respondents were female (81; 52.3%) and married (103; 66.5%), more likely than not the main focus of the majority of the respondents were on their families, not their personalities. To many in Malay Malaysians, being less assertive is associated with compliance and may seem to be more favored by the superiors. This may be, in a way, a wise "strategy" to climb the career ladder.

The Malays were all Muslims and this had been the strongest possible contributing element to the high level of IWE. The items that asked the respondents related to obedience to Allah SWT, *ikhlas* (sincerity) and *amanah* (honesty and integrity), *itqan* (diligence) and efficient, cooperation and unity, and working towards common goal. These are all part and parcel of the Malay community. In fact, all these qualities are part of the faith.

The relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE among the support staff

Analysis showed that the relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE among the support staff was positive and significant, but very weak. This means that any an increase or decrease in the level of assertiveness among the support staff will not like to produce much changes in their IWE. As the sample size was substantial, the possible reasons for the very weak relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE were due the limitations of the study. Many respondents may have not understood the meaning of the questions or they may had answered the questions without much seriousness.

On another point, the researchers postulate that assertive behaviour may be a moderator in any relationship that involves IWE. Islam in fact teaches its followers to be assertive. Allah the Almighty revealed the teachings of Islam in the most assertive manner and the Sunnah of the Prophet p.b.u.h were full of examples of assertiveness (Jamilin et al., 2018; Wilda et al., 2019). Thus it would be more appropriate that assertive behaviour is the moderator when IWE is involved.

6.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations of the study may lie in the questionnaire of assertive behaviour which originated within a different culture and context. An additional factor may be the attitudes of the respondents when answering the questionnaire-whether they paid good attention to the meaning of the statements or merely finishing the questionnaire.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The many benefits of assertive behaviour and IWE to staff and employees in organisations qualify them to be further researched. The researchers proposed that a more robust assertive behaviour questionnaire for the Muslim Malaysian population is developed, taking into account the cultural context of Malaysia. It would beneficial need too to develop several variations of the questionnaire to suit the different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

As Islam is a universal religion and a way of life, the researchers recommend further research to improve IWE such that this questionnaire can be used with all Muslims irrespective of their race and ethnic group. As such, IWE may need to be translated into the various languages of the world.

Nonetheless, the same title of research need to be repeated with different Muslim populations in Malaysia before embarking on studies where the current variables are considered as moderators.

Systematic sampling method would be more appropriate to be used so that the results can be generalized.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate the relationship between the assertive behaviour and IWE among support staff in a municipality in Johor, Malaysia. The level of assertive behaviour was moderate while the level of IWE was high. There was a very weak positive and significant relationship between assertive behaviour and IWE. Further studies need to be carried out with improved versions of the questionnaires and using systematic sampling methods.

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