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A cross-cultural comparison of Muslim and non-Muslim students in terms of Islamic Work Ethic characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the cross-cultural comparison between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of Islamic work ethic (IWE) characteristics. To date, researches on IWE are numerous but studies that compare Muslims with non-Muslims in regards to IWE are rare to find. Therefore, the study aims to examine to what extent the IWE scale distinctively measures the work ethics of Islam by comparing it between Muslims and non-Muslims. The study uses a sample of 347 Muslims and non-Muslims university students in Malaysia. The findings of this study show that in general Muslims and non-Muslims are not significantly different in terms of their level of association with IWE characteristics. This implies that the current IWE scale failed to appropriately measure the work ethics of Islam. The teachings of Islam are full with code of work ethics and to have IWE scale that measures the valid work ethics of Islam is very essential. Therefore, in order for IWE to be considered as Islamic, the IWE scale must be tested and compared with non-Muslims and then verified. Limitation and lines of future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Work Ethic (IWE) received a wide attention from many scholars and researchers (Yousef, 2000; Rokhman, 2010; Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008; Ali and al-Kazemi, 2007; Ali, 2005). IWE has been researched against various magnitudes and affected numbers of workplace outcomes such as organizational innovation (Kumar and Che Rose, 2012), firms performance (Abbasi *et al*, 2012), job satisfaction (Haroon, Zaman and Rehman, 2012) and organizational commitment (Rahman, Muhammad and Othman, 2006) to cite a few. According to Ahmad (2011), the practice of IWE in the organization could improve employees' moral and productivity, increase job satisfaction and reduce stress among the staffs. Also, numerous IWE research has been undertaken on Muslims employees (Rokman, 2010; Yousef, 2000) and Muslim managers (Ali and Al-Kazemi, 2007; Kumar and Che Rose, 2011; Rusnah, Mohd Khairi and Azmi, 2008; Uygur, 2009). However, very least attention was devoted on comparing Muslims with non-Muslims in terms of IWE characteristics. Although the origin of IWE is rooted in Islamic religion, its measurement scales which widely used in the literature (Ali, 1988, 1989 1992 and 2005; Ali and Azim, 1994; Yousef, 2001a and 2001b) are relatively universal in nature. Therefore, comparing Muslims with non-Muslims on the IWE characteristics can significantly show whether Muslims display more IWE along the characteristics than the non-Muslims. If no differences emerged, it would be difficult to argue that there is anything exclusively 'Islamic' about the IWE.

Therefore, the objective of the present study is to examine to what extent Muslims differ from the non-Muslims on the characteristics used in IWE scale. Understandably, Islam is a universal and complete religion as indicated in the Qur'an (5:3) which means it does not contradict the universal work ethics. Furthermore, the practice of Muslims is not good indicators of Islam as some Muslims behaved are no different from or even worse than non-Muslims. This study attempts to examine the significant difference between Muslims and non-Muslims and also to find out whether the IWE is significantly stronger among Muslims than non-Muslims.

Literature Review:

Islamic work ethic (IWE) scale:

Ali (2005) defined IWE as the Islamic view of work and its ethical consideration. This orientation influences the involvement and participation of Muslims in the workplace (Ali and Al-Owaihian). IWE

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originated in the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Ali and Al-Owaidan, 2008; Zulfikar, 2012; Ali, 1988; Ali, 2005), and its underlying principles were built on four concepts of effort, competition, transparency and morally responsible conduct (Ali, 2005; Kumar and Che Rose, 2010; Yesil, Sekkeli and Dogan, 2012). Expanding these four concepts, Ali (1988) developed the IWE scale consisted of 46 items and the short version comprised of 17 items (Ali, 1988, 1989 1992 and 2005; Ali and Azim, 1994; Yousef, 2001a and 2001b).

The first item in the short version is "*laziness is a vice*". Vice is a practice, behaviour or habit generally considered as immoral, sinful or degrading (Wikipedia, 2014). Laziness is the quality of being unwilling to work or to use energy (Oxford dictionary, 2014). It is one of the diseases that the Prophet SAW sought Allah's protection and refuge from. This is found in the hadith which Prophet SAW said "*O Allah, I seek refuge in You from helplessness, laziness, cowardice, niggardliness, burden of debt and domineering men*". Islam discourages laziness and waste of time or engages in unproductive activities (Khan, Abbas, Gul and Raja, 2013; Abeng, 1997). The Qur'an says "*man has nothing except that for which he strives*" (53:39). The second item of IWE scale is "*One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities*". Work hard is the opposite word of laziness and it is an important element of work ethic. The definition of work ethic is a commitment to work hard which is stronger than just providing a living (Barbash, 1983). Furthermore, the definition of Islamic work ethic itself is a set of values or system of beliefs derived from the Qur'an and *Sunnah* concerning work and hard work (Hassan, 1988; Ahmad and Owoyemi, 2012). Islam puts great emphasis on work hard and gives a full weight on work hard as indicated by the Prophet SAW "*hard work caused sins to be absolved and no one eats better food than that which he eats out of his work*". And importantly, Islam regards hard work as a type of worship (Ali, 2005). The fourth caliphs also stated that failure to perfect ones' work while ones are sure of the reward is injustice to own self (Ali, 2005). Closely related to hardworking is dedication as indicated in third item of IWE scale which is "*Dedication to work is a virtue*". Ali (1988; 2005) and Yousef (2000) viewed commitment to job as a virtue and included it in the IWE scale. Work in Islam is a form of worship, thus dedication to work is ranked even more (Ali, 2005). In this regards, Hadith narrated by 'Aishah indicated that "*the Prophet SAW liked the act of worship most in the performance of which a person was regular and constant*". The words of regular and constant in this Hadith can be understood as dedication or commitment. In addition, the Qur'an instructs Muslim to persistently pursue whatever work is available and whenever is available (Ali, 2005) provided that it is permissible (*halal*) and beneficial. Therefore, the fourth IWE item is "*Good work benefits both one's self and others*" is related to what the Prophet SAW said "*the best work is the one that results in benefit*". This shows that Islam is highly encouraged work that benefits people and condemned such work as bribery, cheating, manipulation and monopoly because these will result in pain, unlawful profits and also unbeneficial to people. The Prophet said "*the best of people are those who benefit others*" and on another occasions the Prophet SAW mentioned "*God cursed the one who gives and the one who receives bribery*" and the Prophet SAW used to say "*He who deceives us is not one of us*". The Qur'an (83:1-6) also condemns cheating and the people who do it, and has warned them of bad consequences. Whilst, the fifth on IWE scale is "*Justice and generosity in the work place are necessary conditions for society's welfare*". Justice is referring to the quality of being impartial. The Qur'an (4:58) says "*when you judge between man and man see that you judge with justice*". Justice also means giving others equal treatments as the Prophet SAW said "*whoever delegates a position to someone, whereas he sees someone else more competent, verily he has cheated God and His Apostle and all the Muslim*". Generosity also is highly encouraged in Islam as indicated in the Hadith which the Prophet SAW has said "*the generous person is closest to God, heaven, people and far from hell*". Prophet SAW also said "*Charity does not decrease the wealth*", instead it is honoured by God as mentioned in the Qur'an (2:272) "*...And whatever you spend of good – it will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged.*"

The sixth item on IWE scale is "*Producing more than enough to meet one's needs contributes to the prosperity of society as a whole*". Ali (1988, 2005) did not elaborate on this or gave justification for the reason of using this item. However, this item is closely related to the concept of benevolence (*ihsan*). Umar-ud-din (1991) defined benevolence as "*an act which benefits persons other than those from whom the act proceeds without any obligation*". Prosperity exists when the wealth is earned through lawful means and benefited others and society as a whole. Producing more can ease economic hardship for other Muslims and also eliminate inequality in the society. This is also an act of brotherhood in which Allah says "*Believers are indeed brothers*" (49: 10). In relation to this verse, the Qur'an also adds "*The believers, both men and women, are awlia (helpers, supporters, allies) to each other.*" (9: 71). The seventh of IWE scale is "*One should carry work out to the best of one's ability*". In this regards, Prophet SAW said "*Indeed Allah loves one who does work, he does it with perfection*". Working is one of responsibility (*amanah*) that workers are accountable to excellently carrying out the duties and tasks. Therefore, performing excellently on the job is considered ethical in Islam which means that a mediocre performance is unacceptable. Next is item number eight on IWE scale "*Work is not an end in itself but a means to foster personal growth and social relations*". This item emphasizes on the concept of balanced benefit between the ends and means of working. Ali (1988) when developing this item to measure IWE did not relate the evidence from the Qur'an or Sunnah in justifying the inclusion of this scale. Even so, the inclusion of this item can be understood due to the equal importance of both ends and means in Islam as

compared to other religions. In Islam, the means must be as lawful and beneficial as the ends. The Qur'an says "*Kind speech and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury. And Allah is Free of need and Forbearing*" (2: 263). According to Ali (2005), morally based conduct is an essential precondition for sustaining a prosperous economy. Nasr (1984) also stated that Islam provides a climate of work within which the ethical is not separated from the economic. In other words, the profit earned must be through a legitimate mean and with the right intention. And according to Ahmad (2011) seeking legitimate (*halal*) earnings is a compulsory after obligatory prayers and other duties in accordance with a Hadith. Even so, workers also need to socialize and social relations at work are therefore encouraged in order to meet one's needs and establish equilibrium in one's individual and social life (Yousef, 2000). Inversely, the next item on IWE scale is "*Life has no meaning without work*". Surely, life is not solely just centred on working but it is highly encouraged and is a source of honor as mentioned in the Qur'an "*Say: work and Allah will see your work*" (09: 105). Whilst, the next item on the scale which is "*work gives one the chances to be independent*". According to Yousef (2000), work is considered to be a source of independence and a means of fostering personal growth, self-respect, satisfaction and self-fulfillment. Therefore, this item explains the reason for the importance of working. Also, according to Ali (1988) and Khan *et al* (2013), in IWE, work is a virtue as well as necessity to maintain equilibrium in one's personal and social life. In this regards, the society would have fewer problems if individuals committed to their work to improve oneself and the community as well as societal welfare which also included avoiding unethical methods of wealth accumulation (Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008). Therefore, the eleventh item on the IWE scale which is "*Work enables man to control nature*" can be considered a valid and reasonable item. This item also in line with the explanation of the economic man and also an integral parts of the Islamic view of human nature (Ali, 2005). Whilst, the twelfth item used in IWE scale is "*More leisure time is good for society*" is the opposite of the "*Life has no meaning without work*", therefore it is treated as the reverse coding item.

Islam gives a high emphasis on both man-to-God and man-to-man relationship. The Qur'an (3:112) specifically mentions this man-to-man or human relation as *hablunminannas*. Therefore, the thirteenth item on IWE scale which is "*Human relations should be emphasized and encouraged*" is supported by the Qur'an. The Prophet SAW himself also practiced this element of human relation in which the Prophet SAW also warned Muslims to well treat the workers (man) based the hadith which said "*Those who expose their servants to ill-treatment will find the Paradise gates shut to their faces.*" The Prophet SAW also cautioned Muslims in which he said "*Be careful about those who depend on you. Treat them mildly. The owner, who mistreats his servant, shall never enter the portals of Paradise.*" The IWE scale also has item that measures creativity which is "*Creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment*". Naturally, work and creativity are honoured in all their forms (Ali, 2005). And according to Al-Karasneh and Jubran (2010), being creativity does not contradict Islamic principles. Creative work is a responsibility of Muslims as this will allow them to face future challenges successfully. Thinking and knowledge can enhance creativity as emphasized in the Qur'an "*Say: travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation; so will Allah produce a later creation, for Allah has power over all things*" (29: 20). According to Karasneh and Jubran (2010), traveling in this verse can be viewed symbolically as travelling by thinking and by imagining, thus creating new possibilities. Creative work becomes a source of happiness when it produces an achievement. The feel of satisfaction resulting from the creative work light up the spirit in man. However, creative work and cooperation are not only a source of happiness, but are considered noble deeds as well (Ali and Al-Owaihian, 2008). Similarly, the next item on the scale is "*Any person who works is more likely to get ahead in life*". It is a rule of nature that whoever work hard, he/she will be more likely to progress in his/her life. Islam as a religion which is not contradicting the rule of nature also encourages Muslims to work hard in order to succeed in this life. The Qur'an says ". . . no bearer of burdens can bear the burdens of another; . . . man can have nothing but what he strives for . . ." (53:38-9). Likewise, the next item on IWE scale which is "*One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities*" also address the importance of working hard to perform the task. Job is a trust or responsibilities and Muslims should constantly work hard to fulfil the trust as mentioned in the Qur'an (33:72). On the other hand, the seventeenth item on IWE scale is "*The value of work is delivered from the accompanying intention rather than its result*". This item gives emphasis more on the intention. According to Ali (1988) and Yousef (2000), the value of work in IWE is derived from the accompanying intentions rather than from the results of work. This is based on the hadith in which the Prophet SAW has said "*definitely all actions are (based) on intentions*". According to Mohsen (2007) and Mastura (2012), work with the right intention is considered worship and Allah's rewards are based on the intentions as well as the outcomes. This item is clearly differentiating the IWE from other work ethics of other faiths (Ali, 2005). In relations to this, Prophet SAW also said "*God does not look at your matters (shapes) and wealth, rather God examines your intentions and actions*".

Islamic religion as the main influence of IWE has characteristics that uniquely differentiate its believers from other religious beliefs. Due to that, the characteristics and religious inclination as well as ethical consideration of Muslims are distinctively unique from the followers of other faiths. Therefore, for work ethics to be considered as Islamic, it should be tested on Muslims and non-Muslims to see which characteristics they are at variance significantly.

Therefore, the hypotheses of the study are as followed:

H1: Muslims and non Muslims are significantly different at all IWE characteristics

H2: Muslims have statistically stronger association in all IWE characteristics.

Methodology:

Data for the study were derived from the survey questionnaires. The survey was utilized to gather the information from the university students in Malaysia in terms of IWE characteristics. The sample of participants consisted of 347 university students in Malaysia. From a total of 352 questionnaires circulated, the final response rate stood at 98 percent.

Participants:

Of the sample, the majority were aged 18 to 20 consisting of 90.5 percent of all respondents followed by 8.1 percent of aged around 21 to 24. About 78 percent were females and 22 percent were males. Of these 43.8 percent were Malay, 44.4 percent were Chinese, 4 percent were Indian and 7.8 percent were other ethnicities such as Swedish, German, Arab, Thai and Filipinos. In terms of religious composition, 47 percent were Muslims and 53 percent were non-Muslims. Of these non-Muslims, 41 percent were Buddhist, 7.2 percent were Christian, 4.3 percent were Hindu and 0.3 percent were others including eitist. Among the respondents, the majority were management students comprised of 75.2 percent, followed by 23.1 percent were accounting students and 1.7 percent was communication students.

Measures:

The present study uses Ali's (1988, 1989 1992 and 2005) short version of IWE scale to examine whether Muslims and non-Muslims university students had similar or different in terms of their IWE characteristics. In this study, only 16 items were used instead of 17's short version. The item that was not tested is "*work gives one the chances to be independent*". This item was considered as the least important by the author as it measures similar factors as items "*life has no meaning without work, work enables man to control nature*" and "*creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment*", therefore was dropped from further analysis. A seven-Likert scale format which consisting of 1 representing "*strongly disagree*" to 7 representing "*strongly agree*" was used to assess the respondents level of association with IWE characteristics. The scale exhibits a very good reliability score (Cronbach Alpha = 0.84).

Data Analysis:

Independent *t*-test between-group comparisons were used to compare means between group 1 (Muslims) and group 2 (non-Muslims) on their association with the IWE characteristics. A *p*-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results:

Independent *t*-test was performed to test the first and second hypotheses of the study. Results of Independent sample *t*-test show that there are significant differences existed between the means of Muslims and non-Muslims on four IWE characteristics which are "*Dedication to work is a virtue*", "*Life has no meaning without work*", "*More leisure time is good for society*" and "*A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work*". Among these four items, Muslims show significantly higher associations as compared to non-Muslims except on item "*More leisure time is good for society*" which indicated a negative significant difference with the non-Muslims. Specifically, Muslims differed significantly with Buddhists on 6 items which were "*Dedication to work is a virtue*", "*Producing more than enough to meet one's needs contributes to the prosperity of society as a whole*", "*Life has no meaning without work*", "*More leisure time is good for society*", "*Any person who works is more likely to get ahead in life*" and "*a successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work*". When comparing with Christians, 3 items show statistically significant difference as compared to Muslims. These items are "*Work enables man to control nature*", "*a successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work*" and "*the value of work is delivered from the accompanying intention rather than its result*". In this sample, Hindu differed significantly with Muslims on 2 items which are "*One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities*" and "*the value of work is delivered from the accompanying intention rather than its result*". Table 1 depicts the results of the study.

Table 1: Univariate Results.

IWE characteristics	Muslims		Non Muslims		Mean	SD	t-stats
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Laziness is a vice	4.41	1.37	4.67	1.34	4.67	1.34	-1.76
Dedication to work is a virtue	5.59	1.14	5.33	1.13	5.33	1.13	2.08*
Good work benefits both one's self and others	6.17	0.94	6.05	0.90	6.05	0.90	1.30
Justice and generosity in the work place are necessary conditions for society's welfare	5.80	1.17	5.64	1.10	5.64	1.10	1.32
Producing more than enough to meet one's needs contributes to the prosperity of society as a whole	5.43	1.05	5.23	1.06	5.23	1.06	1.69
One should carry work out to the best of one's ability	5.51	1.04	5.54	1.10	5.54	1.10	-0.21
Work is not an end in itself but a means to foster personal growth and social relations	5.73	1.07	5.77	1.08	5.77	1.08	-0.37
Life has no meaning without work	5.20	1.37	4.88	1.54	4.88	1.54	2.04*
More leisure time is good for society	4.97	1.34	5.23	1.29	5.23	1.29	-2.04*
Human relations should be emphasized and encouraged	5.88	0.96	5.93	1.06	5.93	1.06	-0.42
Work enables man to control nature	4.90	1.31	4.63	1.34	4.63	1.34	1.91
Creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment	5.59	1.21	5.55	1.04	5.55	1.04	0.29
Any person who works is more likely to get ahead in life	5.42	1.13	5.21	1.23	5.21	1.23	1.70
A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work	5.15	1.17	4.49	1.44	4.49	1.44	4.57**
One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities	5.55	1.19	5.65	1.09	5.65	1.09	-0.81
The value of work is delivered from the accompanying intention rather than its result	5.05	1.17	5.18	1.15	5.18	1.15	-0.97

*t-statistics are significant at $p < 0.05$, ** t-statistics are significant at $p > 0.01$

Discussion And Conclusion:

The purpose of this paper is to determine the distinctiveness of IWE scale by comparing the Muslims with the non-Muslims. The results of the study indicated that Muslims are not significant difference from non-Muslims on the IWE characteristics. There are some items on IWE scale indicated significant differences with the non-Muslims but on the average, the IWE scale fails to show its uniqueness when comparing against the non-Muslims.

IWE of the short version has been researched in many countries such as United Arab Emirates (Yousef, 1999), Saudi Arabia (Ali, 2001), Kuwait (Ali and Al-Kazemi, 2007), Malaysia (Rusnah *et al*, 2008; Kumar and Che Rose, 2012) and Turkey (Zulfikar, 2012; Arslan, 2003). Ali (1988; 2005) also had verified the scales on many Muslims countries such as UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Undoubtedly, the scales received very well-acceptance with good item-total correlations that considered appropriate by Nunnally (1967) (Ali, 2005). Unfortunately, very least study was found on comparing the IWE scale between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Chanzanagh and Akbarnejad (2011), most of the items measuring IWE which developed by Ali (Ali, 1988, 1989, 1992 and 2005) are like the PWE items. Many western scholars such as (Furnham and Reilly, 1991; Furnham, 1984; Leong, Huang and Mak, 2013) argued that PWE construct did not associated with religious affiliation, instead it reflects individuals work values which believe that work is intrinsically rewarding and not just for the purpose of attaining external rewards.

The finding of the study which showed only items such as "Dedication to work is a virtue", "Life has no meaning without work", "More leisure time is good for society" and "A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work" are significantly different from the non-Muslims may indicate that these items specifically are more Islamic than the other items. IWE as a whole put a strong emphasis on hardworking to earn a living. This hardworking and effort are appropriately accomplished if Muslims regarded dedication to work as a virtue. Dedication to work leads to work-related outcomes such as job commitment. Yousef (2000) found that IWE moderated the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The strongest statistical difference is on the item of "A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work". This is consistent with the Islamic teaching which highly put stress on discipline and meeting deadlines such as praying, taxing (*zakat*) and fasting to cite a few. Overall, IWE deserves a serious inquiry as indicated by Nasr (1984) because it is the ideal which Muslims seek to realize. The Quran also mentions the word '*amal*' in 360 verses indicating the importance of work ethics in Islam. Also, the word of '*fi'l*' (translated as work) is mentioned in an additional 109 verses. All these highlighted the need for work and action by human beings. Therefore, further research and more replications of the study are needed to verify the scale in order to be regarded as explicitly and exclusively IWE. Having said so, this study also needs to be treated with limitation. The most important limitation to note is the sample size of this study. Since the sample is drawn from a single Muslim country, the finding of this study cannot be generalized to all Muslims across the world. Therefore, future study should sample respondents covering various countries, religious beliefs and nationalities.

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