Religiosity as a Source of Influence on Employee Engagement: A Study of the Malaysian Finance Industry

Abstract

The majority of employee engagement studies have been conducted in a quantitative approach with limited attention to the institutional and social context. Meanwhile, the role of religion in shaping people’s philosophy and behaviour in life and work has been gaining attention from management researchers. A number of studies have revealed the positive impact of religiosity on a number of human resources and organizational outcomes. However, few studies treat religious belief as a job resource from a human resource management perspective. This study fills part of this research gap by focusing on the relevant factors that may or may not affect employee engagement in the Malaysian Islamic context. Drawing on data from 41 semi-structured interviews with mid-ranking professionals in the finance sector, this study responds to calls for more focus on context and for deeper qualitative investigation into individual dynamics that concerns religiosity and employee engagement. It provides evidence that religiosity plays an important role in employee engagement at work. It has implications for people management in organizations with a diverse workforce and multiple religions.

Key words: employee engagement, finance industry, job resources, Malaysia, religiosity, training
Introduction

The notion of employee engagement has sparked growing research interest since the late 1990s (e.g. Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen, & Schaufeli, 2001; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Saks & Gruman, 2011; Trust, Shantz, Soane, Alfes, & Delbridge, 2014). While research findings vary slightly, most of these studies share a similar conclusion: that engaged employees is an important source of organizational competitiveness (Teng, Huang, & Tsai, 2007; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2008), there are at least four reasons why engaged employees perform better than non-engaged employees. First, engaged employees often experience positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy and enthusiasm). Second, engaged employees experience better health. Third, engaged employees create their own job resources and personal resources. Fourth, engaged employees transfer their engagement to others.

In spite of skepticism and critiques (e.g. Guest, 2013), there is now a general consensus from extant studies that employee engagement affects productivity, profitability, employee retention and customer services (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009; Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009). The primary focus of extant studies was to test whether and the extent to which certain HRM practices may be positively associated with employee engagement which may lead to other HR or organizational outcomes such as the level of performance and job quit intent (e.g. Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Juhdi, Pa’wan, & Hansaram, 2013). By contrast, much less research attention had been given as to how best to stimulate employee engagement (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Equally, the majority of employee engagement studies have been conducted in a relatively context-free manner with quantitative approach as the main method of data collection. This is in spite of the fact that
the importance of context in HRM in general, and employee engagement specifically, has been noted by a number of scholars (e.g. Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Cooke, 2009; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013; Kahn & Heapy, 2013; Sanders, Shipto, & Gomes, 2014). These are important gaps in the study of employee engagement, particularly in the Asian context because workforces in this region may be engaged through different job resources than their counterparts in the western societies. Asia is expected to remain the world’s fastest growing region over this decade and is expected to generate one third of the world output by 2015 (International Monetary Fund, 2011). This rapid transformation will contribute to increasing Asia’s financial and economic potential and will intensify the pressure to compete globally. However, human resource management (HRM) issues may be a main stumbling block to the region’s economic growth and global competitiveness. For instance, a recent study by a global consulting firm found that 40 per cent of employees surveyed are not engaged worldwide (AON Hewitt Report, 2012).

In parallel, the role of religion in shaping people’s philosophy and behaviour in life and work has been gaining emerging attention from management researchers (see Gundolf and Filser, 2013 for a comprehensive review). A number of studies have revealed the positive impact of religiosity on a number of HR and organizational outcomes. For example, Parboteeah, Paik and Cullen’s (2009, p. 51) survey of 44,030 individuals in 39 countries that investigated the influence of the world’s four major religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam on extrinsic and intrinsic work values found that ‘all four religions show a positive relationship with intrinsic work values’. The study by Sikorska-Simmons (2005, p. 65) of 307 paraprofessional and professional staff in assistive care facilities in the US also found that greater religiosity ‘was associated with higher job satisfaction and greater organizational commitment among paraprofessional staff.’ Scholars have argued that understanding how religions relate to work values and workplace behaviours are important
for organizations with diverse workforces not only for legal compliance but also for more effective people management (e.g. Parboteeah et al., 2009; Lynn, Naughton, & VanderVeen, 2011). However, the majority of these studies deploy quantitative methods in investigating whether and the extent to which specific religions impact people’s work values and behaviour (e.g. Lynn et al., 2011; Parboteeah et al., 2009; Osman-Gani, Hashim, & Ismail, 2013). Few studies treat religious belief as a job resource from an HRM perspective.

This study fills part of this research gap by focusing on the relevant factors that may or may not affect employee engagement in the Malaysian finance sector. We choose Malaysia for study because it is a highly religious country which may provide a high context for research on HRM practices in general and employee engagement specifically. We focus on the finance industry because Malaysia has a rich history of financial sector reforms (Yusof et al., 1994). The Asian financial crisis in 1997 caused the sector to undergo a series of financial restructures to improve financial systems. Domestic banks and finance companies were merged into a smaller number of groups which provided a platform for a more efficient and competitive financial industry (Ang & McKibbin, 2007). The financial sector is now one of the largest contributors to GDP in the services sector, making an 11.8 per cent contribution in 2011 (Economic Report, Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 2012). According to the Malaysian Economic Report (2012), the financial sector employs about 7 per cent of the workforce. This places the financial sector among the four major sectors, which absorb nearly 60 per cent of the country’s workforce. The Financial Sector Blueprint 2011 cemented Malaysia’s leadership in Islamic finance to develop Malaysia as an international Islamic financial centre. With the restructuring of the financial institutions and the focus on the new Islamic financial system, a committed workforce is deemed necessary in assisting with the development of the country. However, research evidence (Tower Watson, 2010) shows that only 28 per cent of the
Malaysian employees surveyed were engaged. The rest remained either disengaged, disenchanted or only in the state of enrolment (i.e., only physically present).

This study aims to identify factors that may affect employee engagement. In particular, it addresses two research questions:

1. What role does religiosity play in relation to the level of engagement at work in the Malaysian context with particular reference to the Islamic belief?

2. In what ways religiosity may underpin HRM practices in Malaysian organizations?

Drawing on data from 41 semi-structured interviews with mid-ranking professionals in the finance sector, our study responds to Kutcher, Bragger, Rodriguez-Srednicki and Masco’s (2010) suggestion for ‘deeper qualitative investigation into individual dynamics’ that concerns religiosity and employee attitudes and wellbeing. It also provides evidence that religiosity plays an important role in employee engagement at work.

**Job Resources and Employee Engagement**

Research studies of employee engagement has often drawn on the Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) model, which is informed by the three-dimensional framework proposed by Demerouti et al. (2001; also see Bakker & Schaufeli, 2004). The model focuses on two sets of work conditions: job demands and job resources. Job demands represent characteristics of the job that potentially evoke strain. Job demands refer to the physical, social and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (i.e. cognitive and emotional) effort on the part of the employee, and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs(Bakker et al., 2007). Job resources, on the contrary, refer to working conditions that provide resources for employees. Specifically, job resources are those physical, psychological, social and organizational aspects of the job that
may reduce job demands and the associated costs, are functional in achieving goals and stimulate development (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

Underpinning the JD-R model is the conservation of resources theory which was introduced by Hobfoll (1989; 2002). Conservation of resources theory is based on the assumption that various resources are salient factors in gaining new resources and in enhancing individuals’ well-being. The theory claims that resources are what people value and therefore strive to obtain, retain and protect. The theory assumes gain spirals between job resources and engagement, which implies that both could reciprocally strengthen each other. When employees are provided with job resources, they could become more engaged over time, and engaged employees are inclined to be more energized to take advantage of existing job resources and consequently more motivated to create new resources. This energy and attention inherent in engagement allow employees to bring their full potential to the job.

The bulk of previous studies have consistently shown that job resources such as social support from colleagues and supervisors, skill variety, autonomy, performance feedback and learning opportunities are positively associated with employee engagement (e.g. Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Job resources are found to enable goal achievement and play intrinsic and extrinsic roles in a person’s motivation. Intrinsically, job resources foster employees’ growth, learning and development, and thus fulfil basic human needs such as the need for autonomy and competence (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). Extrinsically, job resources are influential in achieving work goals. In this case, work environments that offer many resources could increase dedication and effort at work (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). In such an environment, it is likely that tasks will be completed effectively. Job resources can exist in different areas such as the organization (e.g. pay, training and career development), social relations (e.g.
supervisor and co-worker support), the organization of work (e.g. participative decisionmaking) and tasks (e.g. skill variety and autonomy).

Although these studies have shown how HRM support in the organization may be positively associated with the engagement of individual employees, the HRM practices examined are often informed by the western ideology and is largely individual and organizational focused with limited reference to societal cultural values. Further, due to the nature of psychological studies, the bulk of engagement studies has been construed positivistically, with a few exceptions such as Kahn’s (1990) work. This means that the examination of employee engagement has been predominantly cross-sectional and quantitative in nature (see Kim, Kolb, & Kim, 2012). Recent developments in work organization have heightened the need for a grounded research exploration in psychological-related studies (Biggerstaff, 2012). Instead of generalizing from cross-sectional studies, the emphasis should be on human experience and social life by taking into account matters such as history, language and context. Indeed, a number of authors in the management field have argued for a more context-sensitive approach to studying organizational management issues, particularly in the Asian context (e.g. Abdullah, 2001; Meyer, 2006; Tsui, 2006; Whetten, 2009). Such an approach offers greater explanatory power in understanding how societal rules, norms and routines may become established as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour through which to make sense of organizational phenomena and employee behaviour (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2008).

This study responds to calls for a more culturally and contextually sentitive approach to examining the role of job resources in employee engagement. In particular, we examine whether and how religion as a dominant societal value may play a part in informing organizational HRM practices and individual employees’ level of job resources and work engagement in the Malaysian context.
Religiosity and HRM

The globalization of the world economy has posed dilemma to developing countries like Malaysia on the need to adopt western management practices on the one hand, and the desire to maintain strong religious prescriptions and norms on the other. Similarly, increased diversity of the workforce in a number of western countries that rely on immigrants for their human resource supply means that religiosity plays a role in people management in organizations. However, the potential association between religious beliefs, management practices and organizational outcomes has been largely ignored in mainstream HRM research (Mellahi & Budhwar, 2010). Despite the broad consensus that cultural issues play a dominant role in shaping HRM practices in different countries, the issue of religiosity, part of the cultural component, has not emerged until recently. As Lynn et al. (2011, p. 675) argued, ‘[r]eligiosity can significantly impact human behavior yet little is known about how religious belief and practice integrate with work.’

Bloom’s (2012) review of literature on religion showed that religion is an evolution and a solution to the problem of bringing together communities of people; religious beliefs and practice exist to instil cooperation and group feelings, to motivate kindness and compassion to other members of one’s tribe. He further asserted that religious beliefs motivate how people think and act. This suggests that religion is related to human nature and guides the way people live. Religiosity, according to Sedikides (2010), is an orientation, a behavioural set and a lifestyle. Seeing work as meaningful is a critical feature of being religious. Religion facilitates an implicit form of self-regulation among individuals who are intrinsically committed to their religion, and this allows those individuals to strive for high standards in continuing to uphold their emotional well-being (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010). Further, prayer in the form of meditation can act as a coping mechanism (Baker, 2008). It can be argued that work behaviour motivated to some degree by religiosity
may result in employee engagement and consequently greater performance at work. Hence, the issue of religiosity warrants more serious attention in the field of HRM research.

Indeed, there is now an emerging body of research on the role of religiosity and HRM (e.g. Metcalf, 2007). For example, Kutcher, Bragger, Rodriguez-Srednicki and Masco’s (2010, p.331) study found that religious practice ‘is related negatively to work related stress and to burnout’ and that religion practising employees are more likely to be engaged in organizational citizenship behaviours than non-practising organizational members. These findings led the authors to believe that there ‘may be not only a human case, but also a business case, for accepting and encouraging the expression of faith and religion at work’ (Kutcher et al., 2010, p. 335). Similarly, Osman-Gani et al.’s (2013, p. 370) study of 30 organizations in Malaysia showed that ‘religiosity and spirituality have a significant positive relationship with job performance for all employees (i.e. Muslims and non-Muslims), and religion moderates the relationships’. Branine and Pollard’s (2010) study found that part of the reasons for the lack of progress in Middle Eastern countries is to do with the lack of understanding of the Islamic values of international managers. They further argued that understanding Islamic management principles ‘could help to develop a more appropriate type of management best practice in Arab and Islamic countries’ (Branine and Pollard, 2010, p. 712).

In their analysis of Islamic challenges to HR in modern organizations, Ali et al. (2000) argued that HR issues in organizations have their foundations in religion. For instance, all religions call for justice in treating employees. The ten commandments in Christianity urge management to treat employees equally and reward them accordingly (Hashim 2008). Similarly, Islam urges all Muslims to promote and practise justice. The Quran also requires leaders to be consultative and just (Branine & Pollard, 2010). In order to maintain an organization of justice and equality, there should be a sense of humility among leaders.
Employees should be treated and rewarded equally and justly. In an experimental study by Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek and Finkel (2008), it was found that meditation practices increased the daily experience of positive emotions and, in turn, produced a rise in personal resources such as mastery and self-acceptance eight weeks later. This form of resource may be an important factor in employee engagement at work.

A number of studies on Islamic management have found relationships between organizational commitment and Islamic management styles (Hashim, 2010). For example, Hashim’s (2010) study found that when leaders demonstrate ethical and religious behaviour, employees’ commitment increases. Similarly, Yousef’s (2000) study showed that Islamic work ethics have a positive relationship with employee behaviour such as organizational commitment, satisfaction and loyalty. Ali and Kazemi’s (2007) study also found that Islamic work ethics are positively related to loyalty among employees in Kuwait. This loyalty may also provide a foundation towards an employee’s level of engagement at work.

Nevertheless, Hashim (2009) found in another study that even in the case of Malaysia, which has purposely attempted to strengthen the Islamic approach to business and government conduct (see below), many employees remain unsure about Islamic HRM practices. Thus, the relationship between Islamic religiosity and HRM practices cannot be taken for granted and its impact on employee behaviour at work remains uncertain. In addition, a number of studies have revealed the uncomfortable marriage between western-imported HRM practices and existing ways of doing things in Islamic countries (e.g. Branine & Pollard, 2010; McLean, 2010).

**Religiosity and Positive Work Behaviour in the Malaysian Context**

Organizational practices and workplace behaviour in Malaysia should be comprehended in the context of the nature of its Asian culture. In spite of the fact that Malaysians comprise of
people with different religions, rituals and symbolic expressions, they have common values such as respect for the elderly, collective orientation, harmony, concern for face-saving and a religious orientation (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). Similar to China, the culture in Malaysia is generally characterized by traditional values such as collectivism, with an emphasis on harmony, respect for hierarchy, reciprocity, loyalty and the important of ‘face’ and guanxi (see Cohen, Cohen, & Stephen; Kaur & Metcalfe, 1999; Abdullah, 2001; Sloane-White, 2011). The concept of guanxi places high importance on interpersonal relationships and the reciprocity between subordinates and their superiors. Selvarajah and Meyer (2008) called for a high degree of sensitivity to local culture and Abdullah (2001) highlighted the need for flexibility in managing HR issues in Malaysia. The central argument was to ‘Malaysianize’ western-based management practices so that they would harmonize with local ways of doing things. For most Malaysians, the idea of development means being able to retain and preserve the richness of their ethnic heritage and still be able to incorporate work values which can promote productivity in the workplace.

The multicultural Malaysian population consists of over 61 per cent of Muslims, nearly 20 per cent of Buddhists, over 9 per cent of Christians and 6 per cent of Hindis (Department of Statistics, 2012). Given the fact that the majority of the population is Muslim Malays, Islam has been the most important factor in Malay identity as a source of solidarity and a form of ethnic differentiation from non-Malays (Gomes, 1999; Holst, 2012). The prevalent Islamic faith can be observed particularly by the rapid increase of Islamic places of worship, the establishment of Islamic laws to replace the secular legal system, the inclusion of Islamic teaching in schools and universities, and the attention given to youth groups that are based on Islamic values. It is these values that form individual identity at work and how work is perceived.
The fact that the majority of the population in Malaysia are Muslims and Islam is the national religion may provide significant evidence as to how religiosity may play a role in individual behaviour at work. ‘Islam’, an Arabic word, means submission to the will of God in all aspects of life. In Islam, human resource development refers to the development of both spiritual and human virtues (Alam & Muzahid, 2006). Striving to meet both types of virtues is seen as an obligation of each individual. Unlike other Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Yemen and Bangladesh, which have experienced a high level of uncertainty and destabilization (Chernov-Hwang, 2009), Malaysia has experienced a relatively stable and peaceful Islamic engagement. The fact that Malaysia has a long history of peaceful activities coexisting with the peaceful proliferation of Islamic activities has influenced the institutionalization of the finance sector. Indeed, a Muslim state can and does influence – through its policies and institutions – the behaviour of its human resources (Yousef, 2000).

The phenomenon of Islam Hadhari (Civilizational Islam), introduced by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, has contributed to the way Malaysian organizations are managed (Hashim, 2009). The institutionalization of Islam began in the 1980s with the introduction of Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Murni (The Application of Pure Values) as a policy guideline for the incorporation of Islamic ethics in governance. We propose that employees’ attitudes to work are very much affected by their religious resources, and thus how much employees are engaged is very much predicated by the amount of religious belief they hold in the Malaysian Islamic context.

**Methodology and background of the sample**

As noted earlier, employee engagement studies have been conducted with quantitative methods predominantly, with a few exceptions (e.g. Kahn, 1990). A number of authors have recently called for more attention to the social dimension of employee engagement and the
relational context (e.g. Kahn & Heapy, 2013; Truss et al., 2013). In order to explore the role of religiosity in employee engagement in the Malaysian context, this study adopts a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection. This approach is deemed necessary due to the lack of prior studies on the topic and that indepth information is needed to understand the issues being investigated (Yin, 2003). According to Hatch (2002), most qualitative study is rooted in the principles of phenomenology. The philosophy of phenomenology focuses on subjective human experiences and descriptions of meaning (Polkinghorne, 1989). Essentially, the subjective meanings of experiences are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (Creswell, 2012). The phenomenon of the role of religiosity in employee engagement fits well with this model since it is through the interactions of participants at the workplace that individuals have developed their views and sentiments about the phenomenon understudy. Participants were probed with regard to their personal resources relating to engagement. In order to avoid bias, direct questions on religiosity were not asked. However, each participant was asked to talk about their personal resources as a means for higher engagement at work. Most, as will be elaborated in the next section, referred to religiosity as their personal resources. Participants were then probed on how religiosity impacted their level of engagement.

The sample for this study was drawn from two of Malaysia’s major urban areas: Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. The selection of locations is based on several important factors. First, these locations are well-developed urban areas where the financial sector plays a prominent role. They are deemed cities by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Sultan) of Malaysia. The requirements for a place to be named a city include having a centre of business and industrialization and having strong financial institutions (Local Government Act, 171 1976). Secondly, in terms of population distribution, these locations are amongst the most saturated
ones and are acknowledged as two of the largest cities in Malaysia (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2012). The third motive for choosing Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru was the large labour force in the financial sector in each location: 47,600 and 26,200 employees respectively (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2012). This large labour force is reflected in the high number of financial institutions and insurance agencies which are concentrated in these locations.

Semi-structured interviews were used as research method for data collection in this study as a means to get closer to the subjects and see the world from their perspective. Open-ended questions were used to reduce the amount of tainting or leading the interviewee in a particular direction. This allows each interviewee to tell their story in their own words without bias from the interviewer. In total, 41 face-to-face interviews were conducted with employees from ten organizations from the finance sector. Although data was saturated after 20 plus interviews, further interviews were conducted to validate the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interviews were conducted in both Malay and English according to the comfort of the interviewees. As English is the second language of Malaysia, many interviewees were quite comfortable in answering the questions in both English and Malay. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes in general.

Participants of this study were recruited using two means: random sampling and snowballing. The research started with an e-mail list from the Central Bank of Malaysia which provided a list of all the organizations in the financial sector: banking and insurance. Each of the organizations listed was contacted by e-mail and those that replied were further probed for the contact references of mid-ranking managers. Each of the mid-ranking managers interviewed also provided further contacts, hence the use of the snowballing technique. In order to review the suitability of the questions for the interviews, a pilot study
was conducted with four Malaysian bank employees by one of the authors to assess the validity, language and relevance of the questions included in the interview protocol.

The majority of the interviewees were educated to the university degree level (see Table 1). They have worked for the organizations for more than five years, therefore, they are relatively familiar with the organization’s procedures and practices. In terms of job position, the executives and managers were reported to hold the same level of job position, i.e. mid-ranking managers. However, these positions differ only in terms of their grade level, i.e. executive were deemed as holding the junior grade level and manager at the senior grade level. These interviewees were interviewed as employees and not as managers, because their job title mainly reflects their grade rather than managerial responsibility. Of the 41 interviewees, 61 per cent are females; 93 per cent are Malay and 7 per cent Chinese. While the percentage of Malay interviewees was slightly above the ethnic make up of the Malaysian population, we believed that this was advantageous because one of the purposes of this study was to explore the concept of religiosity and how it was perceived by this group of employees. As Islam is the official religion of the country and Malay is the dominant Muslim population, the sample in this study was deemed appropriate to address the research questions. Three Chinese employees were included in the study to serve as an indicator as to whether or not religiosity plays a role in their engagement at work.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for content analysis. NVivo 9 (QSR International, 2011) software was used to analyse the data. To ensure that all transcripts were generated systematically, the transcripts included mispronunciations, slang, grammatical errors and nonverbal sounds (McLellan, MacQueen, & Neidig, 2003). The data were coded
following suggestions by Miles and Huberman (1984) to ensure intra-code reliability. This required the researcher to code some segments of data at two different periods to confirm that the coding of data from the first round was similar to the coding during the second round. Specifically, the interview content was coded to develop rubrics in the light of the insights specific to the topic of this research (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was reached early in the process, as there was no need to adapt the major themes after half the analysis had been done. For the themes identified (see Figure 1), example quotes were chosen from the transcripts to illustrate the points made and to facilitate clearer insights. One key theme emerged from the analysis: religiosity as a personal resource appears to be a driver for employee engagement.

Insert Figure 1 about there

Findings

Religiosity as a personal resource

Our analysis clearly shows that religiosity is a personal resource in their engagement at work. Six sub-themes were found important (see Figure 2): treating work as a moral obligation, being happy, being proactive, focusing on positive matters, having high internal control and consciousness, and connecting with others (the concept of Islamic ummah).

Insert Figure 2 here

Specifically, the concept of religiosity was discussed by 23 employees and generated 63 coded references (see Table 2).
High internal control and consciousness

Eleven employees claimed that being religious assists them in maintaining high internal control and consciousness. This form of control eventually aids them to be more engaged and less stressed at work. The more religious these individuals think they are, the more they emphasise the social justice aspect of work and, to them, working is a virtue. In a sense, individuals could regulate their self-reflection and, in turn, influence their learning effort at work.

…that’s how I inculcate religion in my work. So that we are not that far from you know…(far from God and being religious). We can do a lot of things but make sure the principles and the rules of Islam is there, you need to take care of that. I think this is what that builds my character (#34, Female, 40, executive, commercial bank, 17 years tenure)

Work as moral obligation

Fundamentally, work is seen as a moral obligation to God that must be fulfilled to earn a place in this life and the hereafter. According to Brewer (2001), the highest nature of work obtains when individuals work because of God and express their true selves at work rather than working to earn fame or money. Interviewees found that they are obligated to do what is right at work and believing that certain rewards will be rewarded in the next life. As one interviewee described:

Another thing that makes me engaged at work is my ibadah[moral obligation to God]. If we are talking about pay, I’m at the maximum pay already, unless if I got promoted to a new level. But that doesn’t slow me down because to me I come to
being engaged in my job and to be engaged with people (pause)... to make a different, I try to do that for myself as well as for other people. It’s more of *ibadah*. (#34, Female, 40, executive, commercial bank, 17 years tenure)

**Being Proactive**

Nine employees further claimed that being proactive is central to their attitude towards work. They further accentuated that having a proactive attitude indirectly affects their happiness and satisfaction level at work. This has significant implications on their engagement level. One interviewee stressed:

> When it comes to work, the most important thing is religion. Doing something is just part of life so it is not a problem at all for me to come here and work and be engaged. In fact it is a bonus to work, if you are hardworking, that is, proactive, you can help the department achieve its target. You will eventually get your compensation later. So it's not a loss that I work here, but you have to work hard (#28, Male, 26, executive, cooperative bank, 5 years tenure)

**Connecting with others (‘ummah’)**

According to nine employees, the notion of work should include the concept of *ummah*, that is, connecting with others. In Islamic religion, *ummah* represents the worldwide community of Muslim believers. *Ummah*, as mentioned in the *Quran*, refers to people and specifically to Muslim people with a common ideology and culture(Denny, 1975; Hassan, 2006). Khatab (2004) argued that the term *ummah* has been the driving force of Muslims’ political, social, economic, intellectual and moral lives. Islamic values put much emphasis on building good relationships with other people. Thus, working with colleagues provides satisfaction as it increases the sense of *ummah*. 


The strategy that we often use is by being spiritually ‘close’ with that person. We often see the person face-to-face, formally, and asked them where did he or she go wrong. Once we found out what, we give them the motivation as well as the spiritual motivation that they needed. It's normal to have up and downs in this line (#12, male, 30, executive, insurance company, 6 years tenure)

Focus on Positive matters

Seven of interviewees explained that being religious helps them to focus on positive matters and to be better equipped to cope with challenges at work. Having faith at work means that a person should be dedicated on their job and always see the positive side of things. Focusing on positive matters, it seems, may keep an employee happy and successful in their daily task.

I’m dedicated in my job because I know it is part of my worship. I work due to ibadah (worship). And not only that, I work to take care of my family. And I think I’m not the type of person who can sit at home and do nothing. I like to work because it makes me think and learn new things, to stay positive (as part of ibadah) (#26, Female, 45, executive, commercial bank, 20 years tenure)

Being Happy

Religiosity, it seems, brings happiness to these individuals. Having faith in a person’s religion is connected to feeling committed at work. Indirectly, this seems to have a large impact on individual level of happiness. As one individual reported, work is not something a person should pretend to do. Instead, commitment to work (being engaged) brings happiness not only to yourself but also to other stakeholders.

Well, it is not just a responsibility, that is just one thing. It is also you know, your commitment. We knew for a fact that work is part of worship. If you don't do it
correctly, eventually you will not get what you want, for instance you will not be happy in a job. We could salary and we get bonuses, so we need to work because we are rewarded for it. We need to work as honest as possible, not something that you pretend to be or pretend to do. Because when you are that committed, you know that your clients will be happy and subsequently you will be happy as well. So that is a form of reward for us well. Seeking satisfaction from that (#11, Female, 36, executive, insurance industry, 11 years tenure)

In contrast, the non-Muslims interviewees (the three ethnic Chinese employees) gave no indication that religiosity may play a large role in their job. Nevertheless, deeply rooted within the Chinese culture is the belief in Confucianism (Cooke, 2009), such as saving face, respect for others, a sense of group orientation and humility. These norms are also values that prevail in the Islamic values. Although the Chinese employees did not relate their religiosity to work, the culture that derives from their beliefs appears to be embedded in their mindset.

**Religiosity as part of the organizational training program**

Interview data shows that the training program in these organizations consists of a mixture of technical skills, soft skills, leadership skills, and religious understanding. Among these, religious forms of training seem to have the greatest effect on employee engagement. Thirteen employees (32%) claimed that a spiritual form of training motivates them to go further. The spiritual forms of training include Islamic motivational training where organizations invite an *Ustaz* or *Ustazah* (the teacher in Islamic teachings) to give a motivating talk. Another form of training mentioned by the employees involves understanding the practices of Islam such as the proper way to conduct a prayer and the ways in which to be a good Muslim in the office. AlTalib (1991) reasoned that Islamic training and development is all encompassing, beginning from the moral and spiritual development of a
person and manifesting eventually in physical development. Islam considers work to be a pertinent element in a person’s life. It not only encourages individuals to work, but also motivates individuals to seek excellence in what they do.

In nine out of the ten organizations where the interviewees worked, religious forms of training (e.g., how to pray accurately, building spiritual habits) are treated as an investment, and some organizations start work with a morning prayer ritual. For these employees, religious forms of training, even if not related to issues at work, are seen as significant forms of motivation. As two informants revealed:

She [the manager] will brief us for a week on that particular issue. We have morning briefing, my branch has been practising this for 17 years. First we will start with a prayer, then we have to update everyone on the circular, e-mails, new product because we have new product often. And if things that do not run smoothly, our leader will brief us for the whole week. (#5, Female, 38, executive, commercial bank, 17 years tenure)

For me, the training helps a lot. Because when we attend, there are many things we learn. And from being stress at work, the training does motivate us. But it depends on the type of training as well. I have gone for two types of training program. The first one is the induction. The second one is on religious praying program. And when I attend this religious program, I felt the effect after the training. Like when we do not know in great detail about certain thing, particularly in this case, on Islamic prayer, and when I learn, I truly feel spiritually refreshed [to go back to work]. The training here is not necessarily about improving your technical skills, but also in terms of motivation, team building, etc. (#4, Female, 33, executive, cooperative bank, 3.5 years tenure)
Discussion

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Yousef, 2001; Braine & Pollard, 2010; Rokhman, 2010), this study found that Islamic religiosity seems to be evident in the moral reasoning and the management of behavior of these employees. The Islamic work ethic emphasizes working hard as enhancing personal growth, self-respect and satisfaction. This study reveals evidence that religiosity provides a context in which some employees, particularly those with rewarding jobs, come to think of their job in spiritual terms, not just in economic terms. As mentioned earlier, life without work has no meaning and engagement in economic activity is considered an obligation to God. The *Quran* puts great emphasis on discouraging laziness, which explains, at least partially, why religious employees are generally engaged in their activities at work. In a study by Mitroff, Mitroff and Denton (1999) on religiosity and spirituality at the workplace, it was found that those who believe in the higher power of God feel more empowered while at work. In essence, employees who view religion as integral to their identity tend to have a holistic view of life, that is, their faith is related to everything they do in life, including at the workplace.

As far as Malay Muslims are concerned, being religious is part of daily life and routines. Thus their daily habits at work incorporate Islamic values. These values assist these employees in being motivated at work. The centrality of work in Islamic thinking encourages Muslims to engage in economic activities with energy and determination (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008). The *Quran* instructs Muslims to persistently pursue whatever work is available whenever it is available. Muslims believe in the preaching of their Prophet Muhammad that perfection of work is a religious duty. He also asserted that work is a form of worship to God (*Allah*) and failure to perfect work while expecting rewards is clearly an injustice to the individual. As the Prophet Muhammad advocated, there must be an emphasis on discipline and commitment, not only to highly influence the essence of work but also to link faith and
work, and eventually steer the Muslim individual towards becoming an economically and politically viable entity (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008). Clearly, being religious has important implications for employees’ level of engagement among these Malay Muslims.

In predominantly Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Islam, through national culture, influences organizational behaviour. From the interview data, it can be concluded that religion plays an important role in influencing HRM practices and employee behaviour. This research provides evidence that the Islamization of institutions (i.e. facilitating Islamic practices in society) extends to these organizations in the financial sector. This can be seen by the allocation of a long lunch break for Friday prayers, the provision of prayer rooms and shorter office hours during Ramadhan (fasting month of the Muslims). The data from the interviews suggests that being religious is a work-related matter in Malaysia because Islamic principles and teachings are embedded in an individual’s way of life. The Wall Street Journal survey report corroborates this finding by showing that Muslims in South East Asia are the most devout in comparison to Muslims in other parts of the world (Bellman, 2012).

Conclusions
This study makes a number of related contributions to the research on HRM in general and employee engagement specifically. First, it responds to the call for broadening the scope of engagement studies (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014) to include societal and relational contexts (Truss et al., Kahn and Heapy, 2013). Second, the study adopts a qualitative method in order to uncover factors that may influence employees’ job resources and engagement. In doing so, the study reveals that religiosity constitutes an important part of employees’ work routine; and where religion-related HR support is provided at the workplace (e.g. praying time and space and training intervention for religious understanding), Muslim employees may experience self-enhancement (i.e. ‘spiritually refreshed’), motivation and an improvement in their work
role, which ultimately influences their level of engagement. Religiosity seems to act as an important driver towards employee engagement. While existing studies on religiosity and HRM have argued the role of religiosity in influencing people’s work behaviour, few studies, if any, have treated religiosity as a job resource that may enhance employee engagement. At a macro level, the study shows that where national institutions (e.g. the Malaysian government and the Malaysian financial institutions) play a significant role in engendering religious values in social life and business domain, such values are more likely to be embedded in the thinking and behaviour of employees who share these religious beliefs. This finding indicates the limitation of western-developed HRM practices, that are often de-contextualized and largely societal culture free, in enhancing employee engagement in countries like Malaysia. It further suggests that not only can the role of job resources but also the motivational processes be triggered by cultural or contextual sensitivity. Accordingly, we argue that it is the relationship between these institutional and cultural forces and management choices that shapes HRM practices which may in turn affect employees’ acquisition of job resources and level of engagement.

Third, this study contributes to extending the knowledge of HRM in Asia, using Malaysia as a locale for example. Inspired by Meyer’s (2006) influential paper, which urged Asian management scholars to have more confidence in investigating local businesses and sparked subsequent global scholarly discussion, this study contends that too little attention has been paid to the role of societal contexts in HRM practices and its effect on employee engagement. This gap is perhaps not surprising given that HRM studies in the last decade or so have been leaning towards organizational behaviour and conducted in a positivist tradition (e.g. Barry and Wilkinson, 2015; Godard, 2014). The bulk of the research on employee engagement has been conducted in western countries and assumes a behavioural similarity in the generalization of its findings (Bakker & Van Emmerik, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2008).
The pertinence of societal context in high-contexted countries such as those in Asia is often ignored (Tsui, 2006).

This study has practical implications for HRM not only in countries where religiosity underpins people’s behaviour, but also in (western) countries with diverse workforce, particularly those that rely heavily on immigrant to fill their skill shortages, such as Australia and Canada. It helps managers to understand why employees are engaged or disengaged at work and tailor HR interventions to improve employee engagement. The study also helps raise organizational awareness, particularly multi-cultural and multi-religious organizations, that religiosity is not something individual employees hold in private, but may form an integral part of HRM at the workplace. As a result, better support may be provided by having a greater understanding of what motivates religious employees at work and what HR/organizational support they may desire.

This study contains a number of potential limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small with 41 interveiwees, though we feel that information became saturated before we reached this number. Second, interveiwees are primarily mid-level employees who may demonstrate a higher level of self-motivation and engagement to reach that position. Without examining what contributes to job resources and engagement from other categories of employees, particularly those at the junior level, we are not able to ascertain if religiosity plays an equally important role. Third, our study relies on one level of source. Without interviewing their peers and line managers, it is unclear if our data may suffer from self-serving assessment biases. As other authors argued, certain religious individuals may not be as virtuous as they think they are(e.g. Sedikides & Gebauer 2010; Chan-Serafin, Brief, & George, 2013). Fourth, a relatively large proportion of the sample in this study are Malay Muslims, which may have skewed the findings and made it difficult to identify if there are distinct patterns of job-resources and engagement across different ethnic groups in Malaysia.
Future research should focus on studying the different ethnic groups in Malaysia to examine different views in regard to employee engagement. In particular, many ethnic groups have different beliefs and religiosity, such as Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism and Christianity, among others, and thus need to be further explored in terms of their religiosity and likely impact on engagement. Fifth, this study focuses on the finance industry in Malaysia only; it is unclear if our findings are generalizable in other industrial and national settings, even with similarly strong religious values. Sixth, this study takes a snap shot approach to capture interviewees’ thinking at one time. It is unclear whether, and if so to what extent, individuals’ perception about their level of job resources and engagement may evolve over time. As demonstrated in previous studies (e.g. Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009), individuals may not be equally engaged at work every day. Assessing the general level of engagement might perhaps ignore the dynamic and configurational aspects of the engagement phenomenon. Thus, investigating daily levels of engagement over a period of time and during a number of periods may provide evidence for different causal factors of engagement. Future research may use a diary study of employee engagement. Finally, while existing studies have concluded that religiosity may have a positive impact on employee work values and wellbeing and in turn organizational outcome, studies also need to be conducted to examine if religious beliefs may be a source of (hidden) tension at the workplace and a negative factor to organizational performance.
References


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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Between 41 and 50</td>
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<td>Between 6 and 10 years</td>
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<td>Between 11 and 15 years</td>
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<td>16 years and over</td>
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<td>Insurance agencies</td>
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Table 2. The role of religiosity in employee engagement

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<th>Coded references</th>
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<td>High internal control and consciousness</td>
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<td>Work as moral obligation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being proactive</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concept of ‘ummah’–connecting with others</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on positive matters</td>
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<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being happy</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
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Figure 1. Phases of category analysis for the study

First-Order Codes

**Personal resource:** ‘I work because it is part of my worship to God.’

**Personal resource:** ‘I feel more energised to participate after attending religious programs prepared by my employer.’

**Personal resource:** ‘I think this (religion) is what that builds my character.’

**Personal resource:** ‘The strategy that we often use is by being spiritually ‘close’ with that person.’

**Personal resource:** ‘If you don’t do it (worship) correctly, eventually you will not get what you want, for instance you will not be happy in a job.’

**Personal resource:** ‘I’m dedicated in my job because I know it is part of my worship...to stay positive.’

Second-Order Codes

- Moral obligation
- Being proactive
- High internal control and consciousness
- Concept of ‘ummah’ – connecting with others
- Being happy
- Focus on positive matters

Categories

Religiosity
Figure 2. The role of religiosity in employee engagement
Source: Compiled from the interview data