

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# An Exploratory Study of Mental Health Among Muslim Creative Media Workers

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The advancement of technology and an ecological shift in the creative media industry requires managers and TV production workers to adapt to changes to ensure their well-being. Recent development shows a growing concern for the mental, physical and social health of creative media workers that demands a more in-depth investigation. Studies have found that those working in television production are facing long hours of work, poor pay, isolation and insecurity. However, there is little empirical research undertaken on those who work in the Malaysian creative media industry, especially Malay Muslims. Studies of media workers in Malaysia are mostly concerned with news production and the impact of reporting and journalistic challenges. The purpose of this study is to explore how Malay Muslim creative media workers manage and negotiate their mental health and well-being issues. **Methods:** By employing a phenomenological approach, interviews were conducted with seven participants, exploring their experience in the creative media industry. **Results:** The study found four emergent themes: (a) passion and commitment for creative endeavours, (b) work culture, (c) issue on work-life balance, and (d) role of religion. **Discussion:** This study is an attempt towards understanding the mental health of those working in the creative and entertainment realms in Malaysia. Based on the findings, implication for practitioners and future studies are discussed.

**Keywords:** Mental health, well-being, creative media, workers, qualitative.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of research focused on creating and generating well-being at work (1). Many studies have found that promoting mental health and well-being at work encourages productivity (1), performance (2) and organisational commitment (3). Although some literature supports positive relationships between employee well-being and many regulatory outcomes (1, 4), others suggest a failure to address issues of mental health can be potentially harmful to organisational performance (5). Additionally, there is research that suggests addressing well-being, and mental health can influence job satisfaction and performance (5).

### Mental health and well-being

The concept of well-being is comprehensive and involves satisfying and healthy lifestyles. Well-being can be divided into two categories: subjective and psychological well-being. The idea of well-being is related to mental health. Mental health includes

emotional, psychological and social well-being. It affects how one thinks, feels and acts. It also helps determine how one handles stress, relates to others and makes choices. Both the well-being and mental health of workers is essential, especially regarding strategies to promote and enhance them which leads to productive employees (4).

The advancement of technology and an ecological shift in the creative media industry required managers and TV production workers to adapt to changes to ensure their well-being. Recent development shows a growing concern for the mental, physical and social health of creative media workers that demands a more in-depth investigation. Research has found that those working in television production are facing long hours of work, poor pay, isolation and insecurity. However, there is little empirical research undertaken on those who work in the Malaysian creative media industry, especially Malay Muslims. Previous literature covers issues of well-being and mental health of artists and performers but ignores those behind the scenes.

### Malaysian context

Studies of media workers in Malaysia are mostly concerned with news production and the impact of reporting and journalistic challenges. From the

Malaysian perspective, there is still a limited amount of studies on labour in creative media, particularly in television production. Most studies of media workers focus on journalists and freedom of expression. There is research focused on journalistic freedom of speech and its impact on citizens' democratic rights (6, 7). Netto (8) argues that the lack of autonomy among journalists is a result of the complicated relationship between Malaysia's media and government, in which religion and political situations are highly polarised. Other studies focus on the state-media relationship. Tapsell (9) approached journalists who attempted to implement reform in the media industry in the Post-Reformasi era of 1998, which marks Malaysia's political-economic turmoil. His study found that journalists fight for their right to provide detailed news stories that are free from the direct editorial and ruling political intervention, i.e. under the National Coalition (Barisan Nasional).

These articles may address how journalistic work has been controlled by the government and media companies associated with government leaders. They may inform us about the sociocultural and religiopolitical factors that shape journalists' creative autonomy. However, there is still a lack of studies exploring how Malay Muslim creative media workers manage and negotiate their professional challenges, mental health and well-being. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand and explore how Malay Muslim creative media workers manage and take care of their mental health. In other words, the article tries to offer a glimpse into the meaning of mental health among the Malay Muslim creative media workers and how they manage their emotional well-being.

## METHODS

This research utilised phenomenology as its research design. This methodology was chosen because it studied the experiences of individuals and was derived from various perspectives including psychology, education and philosophy (10). A qualitative design involving individual face-to-face interviews was used to gather information regarding creative media workers' views on well-being and mental health. The approval of the University Research Ethics Committee was gained before the research commenced.

### Setting and sample

This study collected data from a select sample of participants. The participants were creative media workers aged 25 years or older during the time of this study. Creative media workers in this study refer to those involved in production filming processes including producers, creative managers and technical employees. To elicit a broad range of responses and identify relevant issues for various groups, participants of both genders were selected from one TV company to ensure diverse responses and to detect the pertinent

problems to different groups. They were also chosen to gather multiple perspectives regarding the topic studied and thus, not generalisable.

### Participants

By employing a phenomenological approach, interviews were conducted with the participants to explore their experience in the creative media industry. Participants were recruited through personal contacts. Recruitment procedures involved potential participants receiving prior information on the research and being invited to participate. Informed consent to take part in the study was gained from all participants. A total of seven participants were interviewed.

### Data collection

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants using open-ended and semi-structured questions. These provided an opportunity to explore in-depth the participants' perspectives (11). The participants shared their views about well-being and mental health related to their workplace. Most of them were very open and involved in the interviews. Each interview was conducted within 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and, to ensure the confidentiality of participants, acronyms were given to each of them.

### Data analysis

The transcripts were transferred into a qualitative software for data management and analysis. The data were coded per the guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (12) where patterns (themes) within the data were identified, analysed and reported. Repeated patterns of meaning were compiled, compared and contrasted from the interviews. This process included an ongoing discussion with the research team and the grouping of the data into categories and modifying themes. The process continued until data was saturated. Trustworthiness of the study was established using triangulation of data to ensure it was derived from different participants playing different roles within the organisation, reviews by peers involving research team members and colleagues not directly involved in the study, and audit trails from reviews of co-researchers on the data analysis procedures (13).

## RESULTS

Characteristics of the participants' profile are reported in Table I. Creative media workers in this study refer to those involved in the filming process include producers, creative managers and technical employees. Participants were a mix of both men and women and were selected from one television company to ensure the data consisted of different responses and different issues. All participants were Malay Muslims, 25 years of age or older, and were creative media workers at the time of this study. Other characteristics of the participants are presented in Table I.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the participants

Participant number	Gender	Ages	Current employment	Employment status	Year(s) of experience
P1	Male	48	Channel manager	Permanent	10 years
P2	Male	46	Producer	Permanent	10 years
P3	Female	35	Writer	Contract	7 years
P4	Male	28	Sound engineer	Contract	5 years
P5	Female	29	Assistant director	Contract	8 years
P6	Male	40	Technical manager	Contract	10 years
P7	Female	26	Broadcast journalist	Contract	3 years

The utilisation of the phenomenology design was aimed at understanding the meaning that creative media workers associated with well-being and mental health. Existing literature found that workplace well-being and mental health were often misunderstood. (14) Based on the responses in this study, well-being and mental health appeared to encapsulate the four emergent themes as follows: (a) passion and commitment for creative endeavours, (b) work culture, (c) issue on work-life balance, and (d) role of religion.

#### *(a) Passion and commitment for creative endeavours*

The participants shared how creative autonomy and freedom were experienced in their work environment. Some examples include:

“I am given the freedom to work from home. I feel I work faster at home. At the office sometimes the work environment is not helping, it’s noisy because of too many teams. But I will inform the producer upfront if I need to work from home... and there’s no limit to creativity, but of course, there are certain guidelines.” (P3).

“Yes, they will hear me out, hear my ideas, allow me to be creative. They are very open. If it’s good they’ll use it but no word of thanks or appreciation for what I have contributed.” (P5).

“We are given the freedom and autonomy to determine how we are going to develop or create the assigned task, but within certain time limits.” (P7).

It can be concluded that even though participants are provided with autonomy and freedom to express their creativity, these are governed by guidelines, constrained by deadlines and, at times, lack of appreciation.

#### *(b) Work culture*

Many of the participants talked about the stressful work culture they have to face; meeting deadlines, feeling unappreciated and lack of motivation all affected them. Below are some examples of how negative work culture affects their well-being and mental health:

“Before I worked at this Islamic channel, I often felt stressed. There are times when we don’t even have time for lunch nor prayer. Of course, we are still given space to be creative, but deadlines have to be met.” (P4)

“Previously I feel demotivated, all over the place... especially a difficulty to perform so late at my old workplace.” (P7)

“In my previous job whatever it is you have to deliver. They will use bad words, call names...they don’t care about you. Very stressful and at times it affected my mood.” (P3)

However, participants also discussed the positive sides, which included teamwork, support, and belonging regarding collegiality:

“We help each other out. If I had to come in late or if I’m having some health issue, I’ll call in or make sure everything is in place before I take leave. And my director can help my part for me so that the team will not be affected.” (P5)

“We have teamwork. Teamwork is important. If you can work together, you can accomplish anything.” (P4)

“At times we eat together, and we feel like a family.” (P6)

“I have a lot of support from the team. Alhamdulillah, if we fight today about work, we can kiss and make up the next day. Like family. Somehow I admit my mistake. Fights are normal. The next day we are back together...like a family.”

These experience of work culture relate to both interpersonal and intrapersonal exchanges with superiors and peers affecting participants’ emotional well-being and mental health. Hence, a supportive environment is seen as one of the significant elements in the meaning they give to well-being and mental health.

#### *(c) Issues of work-life balance*

Even though discussions of income and rates of pay are often raised, participants stated that they still need to proceed with work as it comes despite the responsibilities already on their shoulders. Examples of the related quotes are as follows:

“At the end of the day, you have to still go on even though the money is not that great and the stress is high. You need to think of your family; get food on the table, pay bills.” (P5)

“Not only the deadlines but also financial. We have to use our money first then claim later...and

then salary...they usually pay us late." (P7)

"Previously very tiring because no time to rest. Tired body causes stress in our minds. When stress [sic] and I'm already immune to it, so I will ignore and keep it all in my heart... But at the Islamic channel, they give us longer breaks." (P4)

The participants shared how their organisation provides support to help with workers' issues of well-being and mental health.

"The team [superior] will provide us with encouragement and support whenever conflict, stress or dilemmas occur to fulfil the job. Luckily, because we work in an Islamic programme, we also have support from religious leaders (Ustaz)." (P5)

"It is good to be involved in Islamic programmes because at times when we feel stressed, facing conflict, or when we feel down, we will receive help and support from the management to resolve the issues." (P7)

The participants in this study relate work-life balance to their basic needs which include the physical body (resting time), financial constraints (salary) and family. A positive aspect that can be observed from what the participants shared was the awareness on the part of the organisation to take care of the employees' well-being and mental health by providing some avenue to support them and resolve issues.

#### *(d) Role of religion*

The findings show that religion plays a role in helping the participants cope with their work environment. This can be seen from the interviews:

"Although the payment is low for those working at the Islamic channel, when involved in Islamic programmes you also learn things, increase your Islamic knowledge. So, it balances back – you'll get a salary, but at the same time, you'll also get knowledge... When working at the Islamic channel, you got to adapt. Became more conscious about what you wear, your relationship with co-workers of a different gender, limit what you post on social media...to take care of the channel's image." (P2)

"Working at the Islamic channel needs the individual to have strong will internally. You keep going on because you have responsibilities to your workplace, family and you want to contribute to the other Muslims." (P5)

"The industry work is very harsh – every mistake there is no turning back...you have to be alert at all

times, scared of making mistakes. But I coped with it. When I feel down, I will tell myself that it's okay, there will be hikmah behind all that has happened. Think positive and recite Surah al-Fatihah." (P7)

Despite the challenges and limitations faced by the participants, many of them utilise religion as a coping strategy. Positive thinking by looking at things from another perspective and putting others first appears to allow the participants to get through life and maintain their well-being and mental health.

Being in an Islamic work environment also resulted in some changes happening among the participants. Most of the participants shared how religious content from the Islamic programmes they worked on helped them grow into better people:

"A profound change was money [barakah]. Before I joined the Islamic channel, my salary was almost RM8000 but then no savings. My salary is meagre here at this Islamic channel, only RM3000. I have a house and a car, and I have children. But RM3000 seems to be enough. The feeling is so different – more relaxed, happier." (P3)

"The change was unintentional. When doing Islamic programmes, you tend to be attracted to what is being presented and at the same time follow automatically. I then see that I became more spiritual and calmer... The team also changes, they sometimes do their work without being asked." (P6)

"Compared to previous jobs, working at the Islamic programme I feel calmer, the work here is more structured...lesser sins. Before I'll be rushing to perform my daily prayer and there are days where I skipped daily prayer because my team also does not pray... I received more religious knowledge [when involved in Islamic programmes], and this makes me have a more positive outlook in life." (P7)

The changes that the participants experienced were felt and noticed by them. Participants experience calmer and more structured work environments when religion becomes the focal point of their work. Religion also plays a vital role in shaping the participants' feelings and behaviour.

## **DISCUSSION**

This qualitative study explored creative media workers' views on the meaning of mental health in the workplace, which were both complex and dynamic. This study involved (a) passion and commitment for creative endeavours, (b) work culture, (c) issue on work-life balance, and (d) role of religion.

Creative jobs might be seen as providing higher levels of autonomy than other positions. If employees can freely choose their work activities or the content and output of their work, they are more likely to find their work meaningful, as opposed to viewing it as an obligation (14). Gill (15), for example, demonstrates how new media industries are regarded as non-hierarchical and egalitarian. Autonomy is said to exist in both working practices and the output of creative work. Creative work is seen as less conventional and more open to change and innovation (16, 17), which again might have an impact on job satisfaction and well-being. According to Deci and Ryan (18), autonomy has been identified as a significant predictor of an individual's optimal functioning in the workplace. It has been shown to impact on the domain and global well-being scores, and both autonomy and competence satisfaction has been shown to be related to well-being regarding vitality, life-satisfaction, self-esteem and less ill-being as reflected in measures of anxiety, depression and somatisation (19). In Erdogan (14) meta-review of the literature, autonomy emerged as a significant predictor of job control and life satisfaction (20). This is also supported by De Cuyper et al.'s study (21).

It should be noted that Gill (15) argues that despite their image of autonomy and creative freedoms, creative industries also suffer from many entrenched patterns of gender inequality, access to work, job insecurity, long hours and low pay. Studies suggest that possessing autonomy within creative media can be both good and bad for workers. While Hesmondhalgh and Baker (22) regard autonomy as characterising good work, Banks (23) argues that 'the seduction of autonomy' is strong enough for workers 'to deny the hardships of individualised work and to eclipse the feelings of exhaustion and despair'. In such a context, creative autonomy can function as a double-edged sword for creative labour. For example, having a certain degree of creative autonomy increases worker satisfaction because they operate free from influence while making creative decisions. By having a certain degree of creative autonomy, television production workers can also be overworked or self-exploited, which subsequently affects their work-life balance. In such cases, workers tend to self-exploit to maintain the freedom (creative autonomy) that they struggle for (23). Employees emphasise the importance of relationships with the organisation as well as with superiors and peers.

There are also Islamic channels in media social works. It seems that the payment from Islamic channels to their workers is lower than other channels. Muslim workers may prefer not to be demanding because they believe that the job is part of their 'ibadah' or submission to God. The participants claimed they feel calmer and more relaxed even though they receive less pay. For them doing the job related to religion gives them the blessing of Allah. It is stated in (24):

*"And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favour]; but if you deny, indeed, my punishment is severe.'"*

The God (Allah) asks Muslims to be grateful to Allah for everything that they possess including wealth, health, status, intellectual abilities and life. The God promises when Muslims are thankful, they will receive blessings from Allah and find calmness and happiness in life. Besides learning to be grateful, working in an Islamic channel has taught them to be better Muslims. They learned and improved their understanding towards religion through their interactions, especially with co-workers of different genders.

It is apparent that specific characteristics of the creative work environment may contribute to mental health issues among workers. To cope with a challenging and stressful situation, media workers may use positive or negative coping strategies. For example, a report issued by the Ulster University and well-being charity Inspire in the Northern Ireland (27) suggests the vast majority of their study participants (85.5%) would talk to their friends if they were worried about their mental health, while 16% reported suicide attempts. Another study conducted by Entertainment Assist (29) in association with Victoria University on 2,904 media workers in Australia reveals levels of depressive symptoms among respondents are five times higher than the general population, while levels of anxiety symptoms are ten times higher than the general population. Some had suicide ideation, plans and attempts to cope with their mental health issues.

The findings of this study indicate that the Islamic environment plays a role in helping Muslim workers manage their mental health issues. Through the programme they are involved in they learn and improve their Islamic knowledge. Following Islamic teaching, they try to be strong internally because they realise the assigned jobs are their responsibilities and contributions to other Muslims. Even though the situation is challenging it also helps them learn a better way to handle issues from an Islamic perspective. Despite facing some limitations, for example, lower wage, they use Islamic coping strategies including learning to be accepting and grateful to ensure positive mental health.

On the contrary, non-Muslim media workers who are affected with mental health-related issues tend to develop anxiety, depression and have suicide ideation and attempts. Evidence shows these individuals tend to use negative coping strategies. It can be suggested that Muslim creative workers attempt to make use of their existing resources to cope with the mental health issues.

The findings also indicate that a positive support system is crucial in the work environment. Participants



stated that support from their superiors as well as co-workers help them manage work stress. This is in line with good practice recommended by the International Work Organisation (28). The organisation recommends employers to provide proper mental health practices in the workplace. By creating positive working environments, employers learn how to identify workers with mental health issues. To influence the promotion of creative media workers' mental health, it is recommended that a multi-faceted system is introduced that involves education about elements of workplace well-being and mental health. Additionally, programme and intervention designs should also give proper consideration to catering to different workplace settings and environments.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide context and a deeper understanding of mental health among Muslim creative media workers. Their experiences and roles shaped the perceptions of the participants in this study within the workplace. Because the results are qualitative in nature generalisation of the data was not possible beyond the scope of the participating sample in this study. The perspectives shared may not be illustrative of creative media workers from other companies. However, insights resulting from this study may aid researchers, creative media companies, organisations, practitioners, unions and other departments to develop some awareness and action from employers in creating more positive changes for creative media workers' well-being and mental health to help them maximise their potential in all aspects of their lives.

Overall, data from this study suggests that organisational changes can be small but effective. Findings show elements of the maqasid being present for the well-being of media workers — for example, the importance of preserving the religion, intellect and property. Well-being relates to five purposes of Islamic Law (maqasid al-shari'ah) that aims to promote the well-being of television workers. The five foundational goals of the shari'ah (maqasid al-shari'ah) include the preservation of 1) religion/faith (deen); 2) life (nafs); 3) lineage/progeny (all); 4) intellect ('aql); and 5) property/wealth (mal). These five elements of maqasid alshari'ah appear to be holistic and significant to Muslim television workers, managers, corporations, audiences and society as a whole (26). Perhaps there is a need for further research to look at how other elements including life and progeny are also related to media workers' well-being.

Future research should be conducted to include a more significant sample of creative media workers in the industry. Research could also use a quantitative method related to testing and measuring the themes that emerged in this study to further enhance the knowledge on effective management of creative media workers and

the implementation of active workplace well-being and mental health programmes, policies and initiatives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article is part of a research project supported by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Fundamental Research Grant Scheme Code No: USIM/FRGS/FKP/32/50916.

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