

## **Exploring How Religiosity Influences Motivation: Lived Experience of Malay Muslim Entrepreneurs**

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### **Abstract**

Survival of entrepreneurs in an increasingly dynamic and complex business environment is difficult. Following this, many studies on entrepreneurial behavior were conducted since it is the main ingredient contributing to the survival of an entrepreneurial venture. Various factors which influence entrepreneurial behavior such attitude and cognitive elements have been largely explored, but they were found as less useful in predicting entrepreneurial behaviors. Thus, scholars have called for the focus on motivation and discovered that religiosity can significantly influence motivation which can drive entrepreneurial behavior. Therefore, using an interpretive phenomenology method, this study examines the lived experiences of how religiosity influences entrepreneurial motivation, contributing to his/her survival in entrepreneurial journey. Based on an in-depth interview with two religious Muslim Malay entrepreneurs, it was found that religiosity does influence entrepreneurial motivation, when the informants held to the beliefs that (1) God is there to help and (2) God is the Sustainer. These beliefs influenced them to regulate their negative emotions and developed optimism. Future research of this kind of study using more participants from different cultures, or different stages of business as well as its impact on performance and well-being would be a fruitful study.

**Keywords:** Muslim Entrepreneurs, Religiosity, Motivation, Behavior, Phenomenology

### **Introduction**

Entrepreneurs are susceptible to failures due to increasingly dynamic and complex economic environment, accelerated by globalization (Bullough & Renko, 2013; Karakas, 2007, 2010a). Creativity and the willingness to face risk which are the key distinctive features of entrepreneur's personality and behavior (Ramadani et al., 2015; Ratten et al., 2017) seems to be insufficient to help entrepreneurs to survive. Based on the Global Entrepreneurship

Monitor (GEM), an entrepreneur who manages to survive for 42 months or longer can be considered as an established or a successful entrepreneur (Autio et al., 2013) and firms which manage to survive for five years can be considered resilient. Only about 44% new businesses manage to survive up to four years (Jamak et al., 2014). On the other hand, entrepreneurial failure will most always linked to the ceased of business (Jamak et al., 2014).

Past studies have shown that entrepreneur's survival or success has been closely associated with entrepreneurial behavior as entrepreneurship requires actions, which can be shaped and changed for better outcome (Bird & Schjoedt, 2009). Since mid-2000s, entrepreneurship researches focus have shifted from concentrating on macro-level areas of study (organizational level outcomes) towards a more individual-based or micro-level areas of study (Balog et al., 2014). Following this, streams of researches on entrepreneurial behavior had been conducted which mainly focused on personality, cognition, emotion, and attitude (Omoredede et al., 2014). Earlier research on entrepreneur personality had largely concentrated on entrepreneurial traits such as risk taking propensity, locus of control (Espiritu-Olmos & Sastre-Castillo, 2015) and the Big Five personality attributes (Leutner et al., 2014). However researches have moved their focused on cognition (Omoredede et al., 2014) since it is able to give better insights into factors that influence entrepreneurial behaviors. The successes or failures of entrepreneurs have been explained by cognitive aspects such as knowledge and skills in management (Ariffin & Zainol, 2014; Jamak et al., 2014), social networking, creativity, level of education (Kiatgan & Almsafir, 2013) entrepreneurial competencies (Arham et al., 2013) innovativeness (Mazzei et al., 2016) and attitudes (Ahmad & Seet, 2009; Beaver & Jennings, 2005). After the mid-2000s, there were growing interests on entrepreneurial emotions (Bautista et al., 2015; Omoredede et al., 2014). Entrepreneurship has been considered as an emotional journey (Cardon et al., 2012) and studies have shown that the intensity of the entrepreneurial emotion influences individuals' intention, judgements, decision (Bankard, 2015; Bautista et al., 2015; Keer et al., 2014). Emotion was also found to be interconnected with cognition and, hence, affecting entrepreneurial behavior (Baron, 2008; Forgas, 2012)

Currently, studies on entrepreneurial behavior have turned their focus on how motivation influences entrepreneurial behavior. This is because; previously entrepreneurial motivation was examined as a part of attitude and assumed to be influencing intention which leads to behavior. Although attitude has shown to influence behavior, most research on attitude used the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as their theoretical basis. However, researches have shown that intention does not always translate into behavior (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). In fact, only 25-39% of the behavior was explained by intention (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Hackman & Knowlden, 2014; Neneh, 2019). Even in other behavioral studies, such as green consumption behavioral studies, researchers have found that intention does not necessarily lead to behavior. Therefore, scholars have called for researches to examine constructs other than attitude and intention in examining what drives entrepreneurial behavior. Motivation has been highlighted as central in examining entrepreneurial behavior (Elfving et al., 2017) .

Researches have looked at values which influence entrepreneurial motivation (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). It was found that different types of motivation lead to different form of entrepreneurial behavior. Entrepreneurs might have different types of motivation since motivation is underpinned by specific set of values which are part of a set of deep beliefs. Values guide what is important to people and influence how people perceive or judge

different acts, people, objects and events as more or less valuable. There are two main sources of values, which are religion and culture (Schwartz, 2015). In societies where religious commitment is salient, religiosity can positively influence entrepreneurial behavior (Balog et al., 2014; Henley, 2016; Parboteeah et al., 2014). It was claimed that ‘the people of South Asia are deeply religious and all aspects of their lives are greatly affected by religious beliefs and values’ (Uppal, 2001) and the adherences to these values were highly dependent on one’s state of religiosity (Aldulaimi, 2016; Almoharby, 2011).

Therefore, this paper explores the influence of religiosity on motivation based on the entrepreneurs lived experience. The question guiding this study is: How does religiosity influence the motivation contributing to the entrepreneur’s survival?

### **Motivation and Entrepreneurial Behavior – Adopting Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010) Proactive Motivation**

Motivation is indeed a crucial factor explaining entrepreneurial behavior (Elfving et al., 2017; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). Generally, motivation can be referred to the 'driving force behind behavior' (Madsen 1974, as cited in Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981) which brings the combinations of energies to initiate, direct and sustain behavior toward a goal and causes a higher possibility that certain behavior will be executed (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981). Parker et al (2010) introduced the concept of proactive actions as self-initiated, conscious and goal directed efforts to making things happen, anticipating and preventing problems, and seizing opportunities (Prabhu et al., 2012). The three key attributes of proactivity as outlined by Parker et al (2010) are; self-starting, change oriented, and future focused. Entrepreneurs can be said as a group of people who fits nicely into the frame of having proactive actions since entrepreneurs usually are persistent in realizing their goals although faced with constraints and uncertainties. In fact, an element which makes an entrepreneurial behavior distinct from other individuals is that they are people who are an agent of change and very much forward in their thinking. Thus, this study adopted this model of proactive motivation when looking at the influence of religiosity. Parker et al (2010) described three motivational impetus or states that drive or are the fundamentals for underlying proactive action. which are; (1) the 'can do' state of motivation which refers to the perceptions of self-efficacy, control and cost of an action (2) the 'reason to' state of motivation refers to the internal driving force to engage in a behavior or the 'why' of an action, , (3) the 'energized to' state of motivation refers to the activated affect which influences more intensely the motivation of an action compared to previous two motivation states.

### **Religiosity and Motivation**

In today’s dynamic world, interest in religion is strong and growing worldwide (Weaver & Stansbury, 2014). People were found increasingly having the desire to integrate religion and work, where faith and work are not compartmentalized (Miller, 2007; Miller & Ewest, 2013). Thus, not only individuals’ competencies, knowledge, skills, and experience are the building blocks of success, but religiosity can also boost motivation, develop resilience and bring success. In this study, religiosity is referred as ‘a belief in the existence of God and a commitment to attending to and complying with rules that members of that religion believe have been defined by God (McDaniel and Burnett, 1990 as cited in Schneider et al., 2011 p.321)’. The concept of religiosity has also been referred as a complex phenomenon consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Schouten et al., 2014). The term

religiosity is being used in this study as religiosity refers to certain degree to which an individual belief and commit to a religion which includes practices in the form of thinking, experiencing, feeling, and behaving (King, 2008).

However, there were also many studies on religiosity, used the term spirituality instead of religiosity and the reasons for their choice were unjustified (Karakas, 2010b). A study conducted by Hyman and Handal (2006) on religiosity and spirituality have shown that both concepts were seen as overlapping whereby religiosity is objective, external, and ritual, while spirituality is internal, subjective, and divine experience or having a direct relationship with God. Spirituality refers to 'the belief in a unifying transcendent power or realm' where the belief is tied or not tied to 'an organized practice or to ritual' (Schaeffer & Mattis, 2012 p. 324). Thus, a religious person can be spiritual at the same time. On the other hand, another person can be spiritual without being religious when he/she denies any connection with any religion and understand spirituality entirely in individualistic, secular terms (Koenig, 2008). For this study, the term religiosity is used which reflects individual commitment to certain religion which also include being spiritually connected to God.

Religion is value-loaded, and these religious values can influence emotion which attach oneself to God and other creations (Sulaiman et al., 2019). The emotions can be in the form of as tranquility, joy and compassion (Miller-Perrin & Mancuso, 2015; Silberman, 2009). Greater religiosity is linked to more intense experiences of such positive emotions (Burriss & Petrican, 2011). Based on previous religion-related psychological studies, these positive emotion can significantly influence motivation (e.g. Abu-Raiya, 2014; Dueck & Johnson, 2016). Thus, religiosity can have positive impacts on motivation, leading to certain forms of entrepreneurial behavior (Sulaiman et al., 2019). For instance, a highly religious person who strongly hold religious values might decide on something which forgoes their short-term commercial interests (Dodd & Gotsis, 2007). A motivated, religious entrepreneur might manifest their religiosity at work in the form of ethical conducts (Miller & Timothy, 2010). A religious entrepreneur with religious motivation might be driven by the ability and desire to give back to their communities instead of maximizing profit (Balog et al., 2014).

To date, the influence of religiosity on entrepreneurial motivation is still underexplored. Therefore, this study is to uncover how religiosity influence entrepreneurial motivation. Since the impact of religiosity on individuals may vary as religion can be understood and practiced differently in different contexts, cultures, individual and historical factors (Belzen, 2010; Belzen & Hood, 2006; Saroglou & Cohen, 2011), an empirical research on the phenomenon within a specific religion, based on lived experience, is needed.

### **Methodology**

This study employed an interpretive phenomenology method to interpret meanings from the lived experiences of the informants involved in the phenomenon of how religiosity influenced their entrepreneurial motivation, contributing to their survival. Philosophically, this study is based on constructivism with ontological beliefs that there are multiple realities which are constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others (Crotty, 2003). The interpretive approach is based on Heidegger's thought which take into consideration the relation of the individual/informant to his lifeworld in the phenomenological inquiry (Heidegger, 1962 as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004).

In the context of this study, two informants were purposively selected. Among the criteria used for the selection of the informants are first, an established entrepreneur who has run the business for more than five years (Autio et al., 2013) and secondly, the willingness of the informant to share their lived experience of the phenomenon. The first informant was introduced by a staff from Muslim Business Network Association of Malaysia (MUBIN). Her name is Erma (aged 48), from Selangor who started a small business in 1998 selling soy products. She moved to a catering business in 2006. To date, she has been doing business for 21 years and her company has grown into an established and well-known caterer in Klang Valley. The second informant, Tina (aged 38) was introduced by a committee member of an International Business Networking Group (BNI Solusi KL). She is married, and started with part time retail business in 2003. She has been doing business for 16 years. She started her retail-baby & children's clothing company in 2012 and to date, the company has expanded with 18 branches throughout Malaysia.

The interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. This will allow the transcription to be read several times to make sense out of the data (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam, 2009). Notes, queries and comments were jotted down. Following this, a coding procedure was developed to categorize the participant's experiences. Then, emergent codes were organized and categorized for further analysis along with field notes and reflections after the interviews. This process was guided by the concept of motivation introduced by Parker et al (2010), which refers to three states of motivation which are "can do," "reason to," and "energized to" that prompt proactive goal generation and actions. Then, themes for religious motivations held by the informant were identified.

## **Results**

In addressing the research questions, how religiosity influences the motivation of the Malay entrepreneurs to sustain the business or to survive, we identified two themes which emerged from the analysis of the interview.

### ***God is Always There to Help***

The informant asserted that having the belief that God will help during difficult situations is important. Therefore, she frequently mentioned on the need to have close relationship with God to obtain strength and become more optimistic to face challenges. For her, when tasks seem too tough, complicated and felt too heavy to bear with, there is a need for supernatural power to help, as it is perceived that a help from other human beings seems insufficient or impossible.

#### ***ERMA (Informant 1)***

*Actually, it is our strength, if we have any problem..., its ok, God is there. Haa ... it's like that, otherwise, we will collapse... You know, when we are tired, having family problems as well, we will feel like "ooo all are in our head !!!"(showing a stressful face). But if we feel ... 'aaa it's ok, God can help, maybe this is the best ... the best, what? the best test that God gives to make us closer to Him...-Actually, our connection with God is stronger because, our task is very tough actually. Catering is very tough, because it is from you, from raw material until you make people eat ... meaning that, we have to take care of aall according to what we've planned., and for this, we have to ask God for help.*

*TINA (Informant 2)*

*When we comply to our religion, we will be safe. That's it. You do it because, we cannot avoid people lying to you (in business affairs), we cannot avoid! ...if God wants that to happen, that's it (it will happen). If people want to rob us, to steal money from us, all are possible. But if we want to be safe, we just follow what God tells us to do ....7 years ago, our sole supplier of our products suddenly closed down..., suddenly we lose everything! Nothing! Zero! ... at that time, I don't know! I felt really different (sad face, resisted from crying) we really just wait for prayer time (laugh a little) .... During that time, we have nowhere to go. We just have God... But then, we are ok now...Alhamdulillah*

**God is the Sustainer**

Erma believed that what she had achieved or gained was not because of her capability, but very much depends on God, as a sustainer. Although the entrepreneurial journey is tough, the perceived capability of the informant is extended with the belief that God is the one who eventually determine the end result, profit or loss. The informant did not rely merely on her own limited capability but to surrender it to God. The informant also gained courage to face competition when she believed that God is the one who determined every person's part of sustenance. For informant, although every business transaction is taken care in a very detailed manner, sometimes it might not help much for the business to grow. It is believed that in the end, God the sustainer, is the one who determine whether the business will grow or not.

*ERMA (Informant 1)*

*I 'll tell you, do you know how many catering businesses in Malaysia? Ooo God! Thousands of them... Around my place, I think, there are already 4 to 5 caterings. Alhamdulillah, 'rezeki(sustenance)!!... what we 've got is actually from God, if God said it belongs to him, then indeed, it's his (rezeki) that God has given him.... Indeed, many of my friends had closed their business, refused to continue, could not stand it. It's true that based on what I have seen, not many entrepreneurs who were really succeed, but many of them closed their business. But it is frequently happened to me... what we got, depends on God's will. It is not because I'm good at it. Actually, it is not because of what I've learned before. It's really because of what God wants to give us, we just use it. We also do not know how far we can proceed... 'rezeki' (sustenance) is not from the hands of the owner, but it's from God. Just work for it...such things were the binding factors, and became my main principle. That is the thing that make me strong...*

*From what I saw, my friends had been very detailed (emphasized). Very...what we can say...the accounts were calculated in a veery detailed manner, exactly calculated. But, what we got actually is what God determines for us, hmmm...the outcome remains the same (the business is not growing)*

Tina believed that whether there are customers for her on the day, it is all God's decision. For her, that is the exciting part of being an entrepreneur as she believes that she must always depend on God and this can bring her closer to God. Tina has also experienced that her hard

work for few years seemed useless as she couldn't see any positive outcomes. However, by believing that God is the sustainer, she did not give up, but continued to work hard and be patient. Eventually, she got what she wants.

*TINA (Informant 2)*

*... it's really fun to do a business. It is because we have to, we have to (emphasized) be dependent on God. We have no choice. If God says no customers will be coming in, the shop will be empty ... what can we do? We have prepared everything nicely, if there is full of customers (in the shop), that is 'rezeki' (sustenance) which Allah has determined for you...*

*...During the first year we didn't even know where we were heading to. For the first three years, we just have only one shop... We work hard ... no matter how hard we worked, we still didn't see any result. We couldn't see... But we know we have to be patient. We saw others (entrepreneurs) already got many things... But when we went into the fifth year, the sixth year, and the tenth year, then we saw the results...So, just wait and be patient!... Just don't compare ourselves to others. If God determined that the sustenance is ours, it is ours*

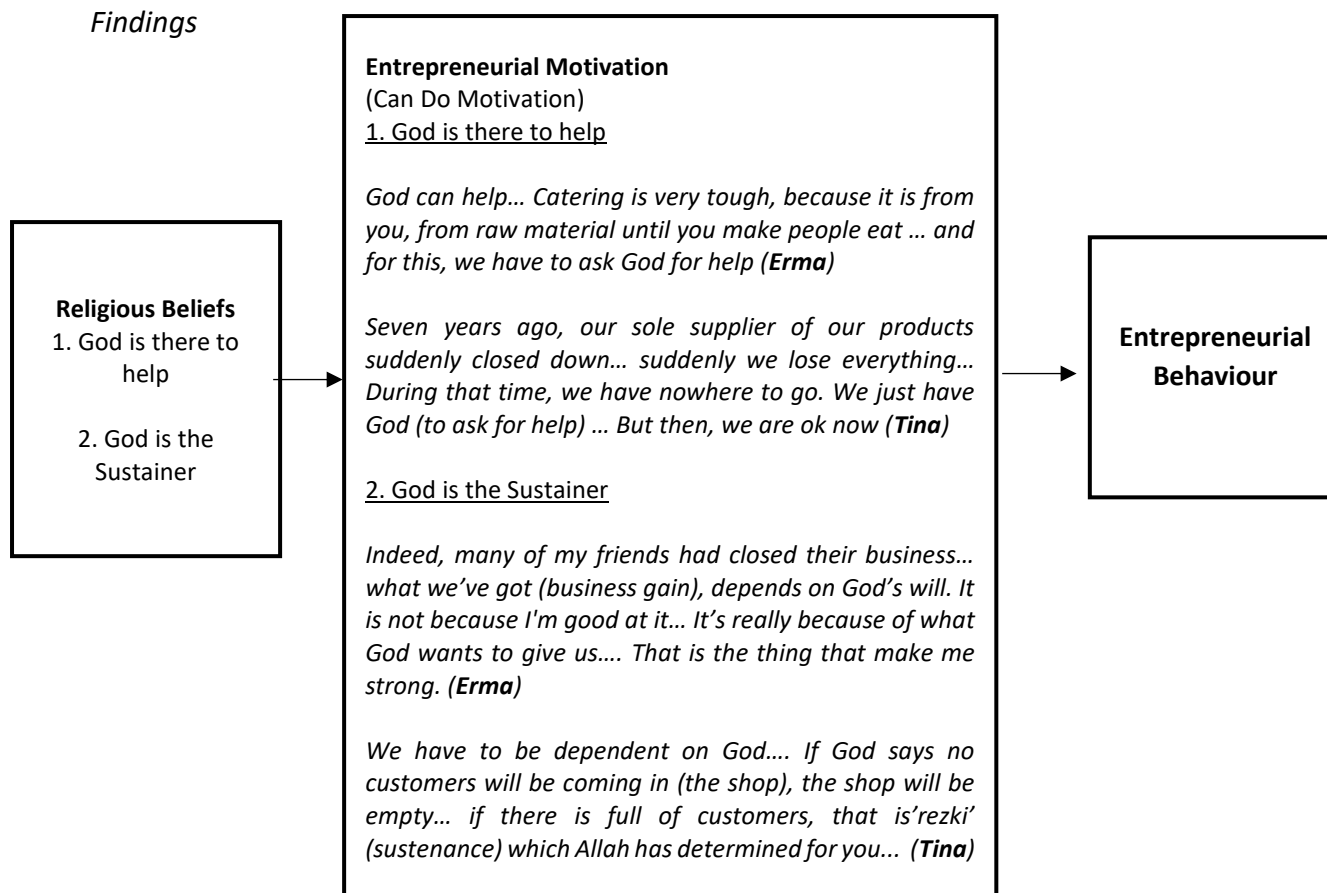
### **Discussions**

Based on the finding of this study (Table 1), religiosity does influence the motivation of an entrepreneur in term of 'can do' motivation. It is associated with the questions of whether the entrepreneur would be able to do it or whether the risks is bearable. Religion has been the source of strength for the informants to face entrepreneurial challenges when the belief in the supernatural power helps them to regulate their negative emotions, builds up courage and optimism, and thus, causes them to remain resilient.

The informants have always borne in their mind that God is always there to help. At times, when it seems that there is no one can help and the difficulties are too heavy or beyond human capability to bear with, they might experience the feeling of fear and worries which might have triggered the entrepreneur to surrender and close the business. However, for the informants, by believing that God was there to help, they obtained courage to move on and be resilient. The emotion of fear has been regulated by having the belief that there was a supernatural power which would help and protect them. The informants thus, obtained extra strength on top of what they believed they can do and moved on to face challenges.

By believing God is the sustainer who determined what they would get, first, they were able to regulate their emotions of frustration and did not give up when the outcome was not as expected. The belief also made them optimistic with the future outcomes, and continued to work hard towards their goals. They believed that God would give them the sustenance, whenever God wants to and they just have to wait and be patient. Secondly, they would not focus on their own strength/ weakness to decide whether to take certain action or to continue the business. They just held to the belief that they need to do things the best they can, and leave the rest to God. They felt that what they managed to do are not from their own capabilities or strength, but it is all given by God as the Sustainer.

Table 1  
Findings



### Conclusion

In the current challenging and dynamic global economic environment, entrepreneurs do not only need to have technical skills, creativity and willingness to face risks, but also have to be psychologically stronger, with higher self-efficacy and resilience (Bullough & Renko, 2013). This study found that religiosity does influence the entrepreneurial motivation, when the informants held to the beliefs that (1) God is there to help and (2) God is the Sustainer. The entrepreneurial motivation refers to 'can do' motivation, which help the informants to regulate their negative emotions of fear and frustration, build up courage and optimism, and thus, remain resilient.

This article makes a contribution, first, to the literature on religion and entrepreneurial behavior and, second, to the literature on entrepreneur's psychology. The findings provide some knowledge input for policy makers, trainers, and entrepreneurs themselves in term of how to develop entrepreneur's psychological capital (e.g., entrepreneurial ability and resilience) based on religion, specifically on how religiosity might influence entrepreneurial behavior and performance through psychological process.

The limitation of the study is that it was based on only two informants as to allow for in-depth analysis. A study using more participants might produce different results. For better understanding of entrepreneurial motivation, we suggest future research of this kind of study using more participants from different cultures, or different stages of business. Knowing that religiosity did contribute to positive psychological strength (Karakas, 2010b), studies on



religiosity, entrepreneurial motivation and its impact on performance and well-being would be a fruitful study.

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