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Exploring the Role of Religiosity and Demographic Factors in Shaping Counterproductive Work Behavior

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ABSTRACT

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Ethical behavior in the workplace is an essential component of organizational effectiveness, as it influences both employee well-being and overall productivity. Among the various dimensions of workplace ethics, Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) has received growing attention due to its detrimental consequences, including organizational losses and interpersonal conflict. While prior research has examined various individual and situational predictors of CWB, the role of personal values and moral frameworks, particularly religiosity, remains underexplored in the context of higher education in Malaysia. Religiosity is linked to the four core components of social bonds: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, indicating a potential negative association with CWB. Based on Social Control Theory, this study examined the influence of religiosity, as well as demographic factors such as age and gender, on overall CWB and its two dimensions: behaviors directed at the organization (CWB-O) and at people (CWB-P). Data were collected from 537 administrative staff in Malaysian public universities. Multiple regression analysis revealed that religiosity significantly and negatively predicts all forms of CWB, whereas age and gender did not show significant effects. The findings highlight the protective role of religiosity as a psychological and moral buffer that reduces workplace deviance. The study contributes to management and organizational psychology by demonstrating that fostering value-based interventions, such as promoting religiosity or ethical commitment, may effectively mitigate CWB and enhance workplace ethics.

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1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) are intentional actions by employees that harm organizations or their stakeholders, including theft, aggression, and rule-breaking [1]. Such behaviors impose financial losses, damage morale, and erode organizational productivity. Empirical research attributes CWB to various psychological and situational factors, such as low psychological capital, work alienation, workplace procrastination, and perceptions of injustice [2]. Beyond situational influences, personal values and moral orientations have gained attention as potential buffers against unethical conduct. Religiosity, defined as the strength of an individual's religious beliefs and practices, is widely recognized as a protective factor against deviant behaviors. Highly religious individuals are less likely to engage in violence, substance abuse, or antisocial activities [3,4]. Within organizational settings, intrinsic religiosity has been shown to negatively predict CWB directed toward the organization (CWB-O), with the Islamic Work Ethic mediating this effect [5]. These findings suggest that religiosity enhances moral awareness and internalized ethical standards, thereby reducing tendencies toward workplace deviance. Demographic factors further shape CWB tendencies. Younger and male employees exhibit higher involvement in CWB compared to older and female counterparts [6]. However, a supportive organizational climate can attenuate these effects, particularly among younger and male workers. Age-related differences may also reflect greater psychological maturity and self-regulation among older employees, which discourage deviant behavior [7]. Despite growing international evidence, unethical conduct remains prevalent among administrative staff in public universities [8,9]. These employees are central to institutional functioning and stakeholder management [10], yet empirical inquiry into their behavioral dynamics is limited, especially within Malaysian higher education. Addressing this gap, the present study examines the role of religiosity and demographic factors in shaping CWB among administrative staff in Malaysian public universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Control Theory

Social Control Theory posits that individuals with strong bonds to societal values, people, and institutions are less likely to engage in deviant behavior [11]. The theory identifies four key components of social bonds: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. *Attachment* refers to emotional connections with positive role models or institutions that discourage deviant acts. *Commitment* reflects an individual's investment in societal norms and goals, which decreases the likelihood of misconduct. *Involvement* pertains to participation in socially or organizationally approved activities, fostering stronger social ties that reduce opportunities for deviant behavior. *Belief*, the most critical component, involves accepting and internalizing moral values and societal norms. Individuals who adhere to these shared norms are less inclined to act unethically, whereas those with weak beliefs are more prone to deviance [12,13]. Within this framework, religiosity can be understood as a manifestation of the *belief* component of Social Control Theory, serving as a moral compass that guides ethical conduct. Religious individuals tend to internalize moral standards and social expectations more deeply, which helps deter CWB. Thus, religiosity acts as a social and psychological control mechanism that minimizes workplace deviance by reinforcing ethical responsibility and moral restraint [14,15].

2.2 Religiosity and CWB

Religious belief has long been recognized as an influential factor in shaping ethical behavior, and growing research suggests that religiosity is negatively associated with CWB. Several empirical studies have explored how religiosity functions as a moral and psychological deterrent to unethical or deviant workplace behaviors. For instance, Rizvi [16] examined the role of perceived organizational support and religiosity in moderating the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits and CWB. The findings revealed that religiosity significantly buffered the effects of machiavellianism and psychopathy on CWB, indicating that higher levels of religiosity may reduce the likelihood of deviant behavior among individuals with such traits. Similarly, Kundi *et al.*, [17] investigated how voice climate influences employee work engagement through CWB. Across field and experimental studies, their results showed that a supportive voice climate reduces employees' intention to engage in CWB, thereby enhancing work engagement. Furthermore, both ethical leadership and religiosity acted as boundary conditions that strengthened these relationships. In the context of higher education, Javed and Ishak [18] explored the influence of workplace politics on CWB among academic staff in Pakistan. Their results demonstrated that Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) were negatively associated with CWB, emphasizing the protective function of religiously grounded ethical principles. Supporting this, Zhang *et al.*, [19] found among Chinese employees that the asceticism and anti-leisure dimensions of religiosity were negatively related to CWBs. Interestingly, party affiliation moderated these associations, with stronger negative relationships observed among party members than non-members. Similarly, Akanni *et al.*, [20] investigated the role of perceived religiosity in predicting deviant workplace behaviors among employees in the Local Government Service Commission of Nigeria. Their findings confirmed a negative relationship between religiosity and deviant behavior, with no significant differences between junior and senior staff. Finally, Rawwas *et al.*, [21] examined stress-related predictors such as perceptions of organizational politics and their link to negligent behavior among 260 workers in an Asian country. While perceptions of politics were positively related to negligent behavior, IWE were found to moderate this relationship, reducing the impact of workplace politics on CWB. Collectively, these studies suggest that religiosity serves as a moral and behavioral control mechanism that mitigates deviant workplace behaviors. By reinforcing ethical principles and discouraging unethical conduct, religiosity appears to play a crucial role in reducing employees' engagement in CWB across diverse organizational and cultural settings.

2.3 Demographic Factors and CWB

In addition to religiosity, demographic factors such as gender and age have also been found to influence CWB. Research consistently indicates that gender differences play a role in the frequency and nature of CWB. For instance, Warren *et al.*, [22] reported that men engaged in nearly twice as many instances of CWB compared to women. Supporting this, Mercado *et al.*, [23] proposed that gender may act as a moderating variable, as men and women differ in their motivations for engaging in counterproductive behaviors. Gonzalez-Mulé *et al.*, [24] suggested that men are more likely to engage in interpersonal deviance to assert dominance, whereas women may engage in such behavior when experiencing a lack of self-realization. Empirical evidence from the healthcare sector also supports gender-based differences. Elliethey *et al.*, [25] found that, with the exception of nurses' sex and educational background, there were no statistically significant differences in perceived factors related to CWB across other demographic or professional characteristics. However, male nurses demonstrated higher mean scores for both CWB and workplace ostracism compared to female nurses. Age has likewise been identified as an important demographic variable influencing CWB.

Meta-analytic evidence suggests that older employees tend to engage less frequently in counterproductive behaviors, thereby contributing positively to organizational functioning [23]. Although older workers may not necessarily outperform their younger counterparts in task performance or organizational citizenship behaviors, they typically cause less harm through deviant actions. Furthermore, Szostek *et al.*, [26] found that the relationship between age and CWB is moderated by job satisfaction and work engagement, with older employees showing lower levels of CWB when they report higher satisfaction and engagement. Overall, the evidence indicates that demographic characteristics, particularly gender and age, influence the likelihood and expression of CWB, although these effects may vary across occupational and cultural contexts.

The body of literature collectively contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between religiosity, demographic factors, and CWB. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Religiosity is negatively associated with overall CWB.
- H2: Religiosity is negatively associated with CWB directed at the organization (CWB-O).
- H3: Religiosity is negatively associated with CWB directed at people (CWB-P).
- H4: Age is positively associated with overall CWB.
- H5: Age is positively associated with CWB-O.
- H6: Age is positively associated with CWB-P.
- H7: Gender is positively associated with overall CWB.
- H8: Gender is positively associated with CWB-O.
- H9: Gender is positively associated with CWB-P.

Based on the literature review and relevant theory to develop hypotheses, Figure 1 illustrates the research framework for this study.

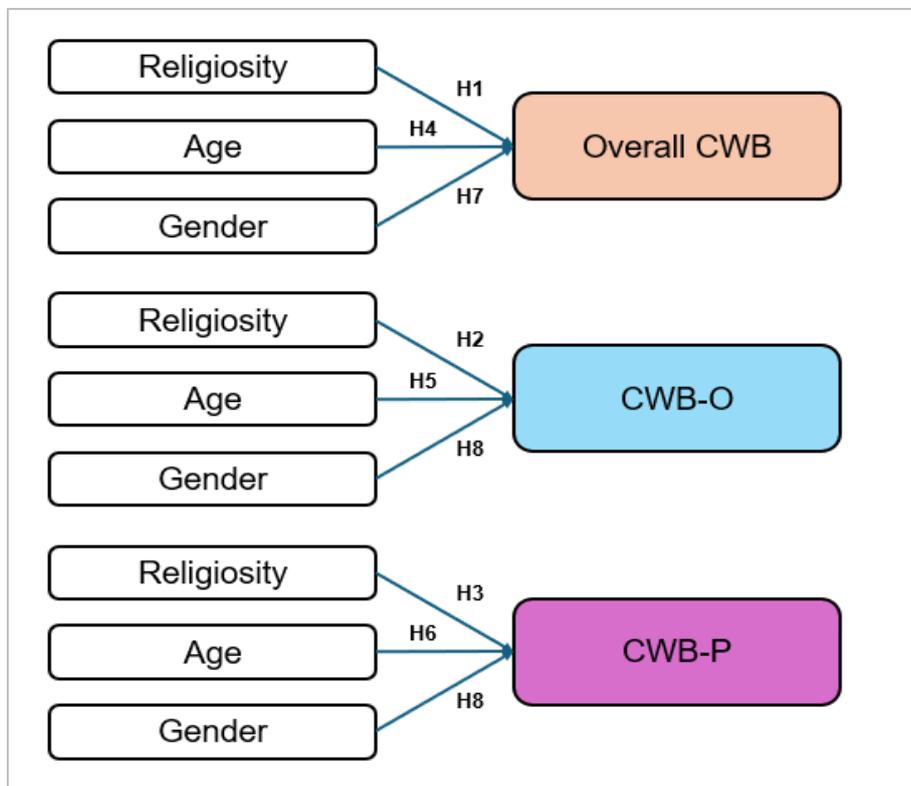


Fig. 1. Research framework

3. Methodology

A total of 537 administrative staff from Malaysian public universities participated in the study, selected through quota sampling [27]. CWB were measured using adapted scales from Abas *et al.*, [28] and Spector *et al.*, [29], comprising five items each for CWB-O and CWB-P (e.g., “Took a sick leave without actually being sick” and “Insulted someone’s job performance”) rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Everyday). Religiosity was assessed using a 10-item scale (e.g., “My religious faith is extremely important to me”) with a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression in SPSS version 27 to examine the influence of religiosity, age, and gender on CWB outcomes.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that participants reported low levels of overall CWB ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 0.48$). CWB-O ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.56$) was slightly higher than CWB-P ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.52$), indicating that behaviors targeting the organization were more frequent than those targeting individuals. Religiosity scores were high ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.43$), suggesting strong regulatory tendencies. The mean age was 3.51 ($SD = 0.87$), and the gender mean of 1.54 ($SD = 0.50$) reflects a nearly balanced male and female distribution.

Table 1
 Descriptive statistics

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Overall CWB	1.5315	.47864	537
CWB-O	1.6372	.55526	537
CWB-P	1.4257	.51934	537
Religiosity	4.6220	.42585	537
Age	3.5084	.86841	537
Gender	1.54	.499	537

The correlation results (Table 2) show consistent negative relationships between religiosity and all forms of CWB. Specifically, higher religiosity was significantly associated with lower levels of overall CWB ($r = -.350$, $p < .001$), CWB-O ($r = -.354$, $p < .001$), and CWB-P ($r = -.268$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that individuals with stronger religious values are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors toward either the organization or individuals. In contrast, age and gender were not significantly correlated with any CWB measures ($p > .05$), indicating that these demographic factors did not play a major role in predicting such behaviors.

Table 2
 Pearson correlation coefficients among study variables (N = 537)

Variables	Overall CWB	CWB-O	CWB-P	Religiosity	Age	Gender
Overall CWB	1.000	-	-	-.350**	-.005	.046
CWB-O	-	1.000	-	-.354**	.031	.070
CWB-P	-	-	1.000	-.268**	-.042	.010
Religiosity	-.350**	-.354**	-.268**	1.000	-.043	-.044
Age	-.005	.031	-.042	-.043	1.000	-.013
Gender	.046	.070	.010	-.044	-.013	1.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Table 3
 Regression coefficients predicting CWB, CWB-O, and CWB-P (N = 537)

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	Std. Error	β (Beta)	t	p
Overall CWB	Constant	3.342	.239	-	13.955	< .001
	Religiosity	-.393	.046	-.350	-8.614	< .001
	Age	-.011	.022	-.020	-0.481	.631
	Gender	.029	.039	.030	0.748	.455
CWB-O	Constant	3.618	.277	-	13.054	< .001
	Religiosity	-.457	.053	-.350	-8.650	< .001
	Age	.011	.026	.017	0.414	.679
	Gender	.061	.045	.055	1.357	.175
CWB-P	Constant	3.066	.267	-	11.481	< .001
	Religiosity	-.330	.051	-.270	-6.473	< .001
	Age	-.032	.025	-.054	-1.292	.197
	Gender	-.003	.043	-.003	-0.066	.947

The regression results (Table 3) provide insights into the contributions of individual predictors to CWB. Religiosity was the only significant predictor across all three outcomes, overall CWB, CWB-O, and CWB-P, with negative beta coefficients ranging from $\beta = -0.270$ to -0.350 ($p < 0.001$), supporting H1 to H3. This indicates that employees with higher levels of religiosity are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors, suggesting that moral and religious values function as internal controls against workplace deviance. In contrast, age and gender did not significantly predict any form of CWB ($p > 0.05$), leading to the rejection of H4 to H9. These findings indicate that demographic factors do not meaningfully influence CWB in this sample. Overall, the results highlight the protective role of religiosity in reducing workplace deviance, emphasizing its importance relative to general demographic characteristics.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that religiosity is a significant negative predictor of CWB, including CWB-O and CWB-P. Employees with higher levels of religiosity are less likely to engage in CWB, supporting the notion that moral and ethical values function as internalized mechanisms for self-regulation. This aligns with Social Control Theory, which posits that strong adherence to societal norms and moral principles reduces deviant behavior [11,15]. Importantly, the present findings extend Social Control Theory within the context of organizational behavior by demonstrating that religiosity functions as an informal and internalized control mechanism, rather than an externally imposed constraint. While traditional applications of Social Control Theory emphasize social bonds and institutional enforcement, this study highlights how personal moral commitments rooted in religious values operate autonomously to regulate behavior in complex organizational settings. In Malaysian public universities, where formal rules and bureaucratic controls are already well established, religiosity appears to complement institutional governance by strengthening self-restraint and ethical accountability.

Religiosity appears to operate as both a psychological and moral buffer, reinforcing ethical responsibility and deterring workplace deviance. From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that religiosity refines Social Control Theory by contextualizing moral internalization within culturally embedded belief systems, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how value-based controls function in collectivist and religiously salient societies. These findings are consistent with prior studies demonstrating that religious beliefs and practices reduce engagement in harmful workplace behaviors by promoting ethical awareness and internalized moral standards [16, 19, 20].

In contrast, age and gender did not significantly predict CWB in this sample. While previous research has suggested that men and younger employees may be more prone to counterproductive behaviors [22,23], the current results indicate that demographic factors may have limited influence on workplace deviance in Malaysian public universities. This divergence may be attributable to relatively standardized employment conditions, strong professional norms, and shared institutional values characteristic of the public university sector, which potentially attenuate demographic differences in behavioral outcomes. This highlights the greater importance of value-driven factors, such as religiosity, over demographic characteristics in shaping ethical conduct.

However, the prominence of religiosity should not be interpreted as diminishing the relevance of other well-established predictors of CWB. Organizational culture, ethical leadership, job stress, workload pressure, and perceived organizational justice have been widely shown to influence deviant workplace behaviors [2,21]. The strong effect of religiosity observed in this study may reflect its role as a personal coping and moral regulation resource, particularly in environments where structural stressors exist but are not directly measured. Future research should therefore adopt integrative models that examine how religiosity interacts with organizational-level factors, rather than positioning it as a standalone determinant of ethical behavior.

Overall, the study contributes to organizational psychology by emphasizing that moral and ethical values play a central role in reducing workplace deviance. By empirically grounding religiosity within Social Control Theory, this study advances theoretical understanding of how informal moral controls operate alongside formal organizational mechanisms, particularly in culturally and religiously embedded institutional contexts. These findings underscore the potential for interventions that foster ethical commitment and promote moral awareness to mitigate CWB.

6. Conclusion

This study provides robust evidence that religiosity is the most salient protective factor against CWB in Malaysian public universities. Employees with stronger religious values are consistently less likely to engage in behaviors that harm the organization or their colleagues. In contrast, demographic factors such as age and gender did not significantly predict CWB, reinforcing the conclusion that internalized moral values grounded in religiosity exert a stronger influence on ethical workplace behavior than demographic characteristics. The findings have important practical implications. While organizations should not impose or privilege any specific religious belief, the results clearly indicate that religiosity, as a personal value system, plays a central role in strengthening self-regulation and ethical restraint. Organizational strategies should therefore recognize, respect, and support employees' moral and religious values through inclusive ethical climates, ethical leadership, and value-based governance frameworks. Such approaches allow religiosity to function as a powerful internal control mechanism without compromising legal or inclusivity principles.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias. The use of a single-source survey raises the possibility of common method variance, while the sector-specific focus on Malaysian public universities limits broader generalizability. In addition, the relatively high level of religious homogeneity in the sample may have strengthened the observed effect of religiosity, suggesting the need for cautious interpretation in more diverse contexts. Future research should prioritize examining religiosity as a core explanatory variable, particularly by exploring its interaction with organizational factors such as ethical leadership, job stress, and perceived justice using longitudinal or experimental designs. Cross-cultural studies are also needed to determine whether the primacy of religiosity in mitigating CWB is sustained across different institutional and

religious environments. In conclusion, this study advances organizational behavior research by establishing religiosity as a primary informal social control mechanism that significantly reduces workplace deviance. By empirically extending Social Control Theory, the findings demonstrate that internalized religious values constitute a critical foundation for ethical conduct in organizations, particularly within culturally and religiously embedded institutional settings.

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