

Islamic Work Ethics, Ethical Leadership, Proactive Personality and Innovative Work Behaviour in Malaysian Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the direct relationships among Islamic Work Ethics (IWE), ethical leadership, proactive personality, psychological safety, and innovative work behaviour (IWB) among academicians in Malaysian public universities. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory and Social Learning Theory, the study focuses on three direct-effect research questions: the relationships of IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality with IWB; the relationships of IWE and ethical leadership with psychological safety; and the relationship between psychological safety and IWB. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among academicians at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. After data screening and removal of four multivariate outliers, 177 responses were retained. Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0. The results show that IWE ($\beta = 0.215$, $t = 2.785$, $p = .003$), ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.170$, $t = 2.286$, $p = .011$), and proactive personality ($\beta = 0.551$, $t = 10.159$, $p < .001$) were positively related to IWB. Proactive personality had the largest effect ($f^2 = 0.577$), compared with IWE ($f^2 = 0.063$) and ethical leadership ($f^2 = 0.041$). Neither IWE nor ethical leadership was significantly related to psychological safety. Psychological safety was significantly but negatively related to IWB ($\beta = -0.082$, $t = 2.351$, $p = .009$; $f^2 = 0.027$), contrary to the hypothesised direction. The model explained 73.6% of the variance in IWB and 19.1% of the variance in psychological safety. The findings highlight the dominant role of individual proactivity in academic innovation while suggesting that ethical values, leadership, and psychological safety operate differently within the Malaysian higher education context.

Keywords: Islamic Work Ethics, Ethical Leadership, Proactive Personality, Psychological Safety, Innovative Work Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education institutions operate in an environment characterised by rapid technological change, intensifying competition, evolving stakeholder expectations, and increasing pressure to produce impactful teaching, research, and innovation (Zhu et al., 2022). In such an environment, innovation is not limited to technological inventions or commercial products. It also involves employees identifying opportunities, generating useful ideas, promoting those ideas to others, and implementing new approaches within their work roles. This set of employee-level activities is commonly described as innovative work behaviour (IWB) (Janssen, 2000). In universities, IWB can involve redesigning teaching practices, developing new research approaches, improving administrative processes, introducing digital solutions, and creating new forms of collaboration (Zhu et al., 2022).

Although IWB is important, it does not emerge automatically from organisational investment in technology or formal innovation strategies. Employees decide whether to generate, promote, and implement new ideas, and this decision may be influenced by ethical values, leadership behaviour, and personal characteristics (Janssen, 2000; Li et al., 2022). Ethical leadership is particularly relevant because leaders who demonstrate fairness, integrity, trustworthiness, and concern for employees may create conditions in which innovation is encouraged (Banks et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2005). At the same time, Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) provides a value-based perspective that emphasises responsibility, diligence, justice, honesty, and the social value of work (Ali, 1992; Murtaza et al., 2016). These principles may encourage employees to view work not merely as a contractual obligation but as a meaningful responsibility.

Individual characteristics are equally important. Proactive personality describes an individual's tendency to take initiative, identify opportunities, and persist in creating change rather than simply responding to environmental demands (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Proactive employees may be more willing to challenge established routines, develop new solutions, and pursue the implementation of ideas (Mubarak et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). Psychological safety is another potentially important condition because employees who feel safe to express opinions and take interpersonal risks may be more willing to experiment and propose new ideas (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). However, the strength and direction of these relationships may depend on organisational and cultural contexts. Research in higher education and non-Western settings has also examined these relationships, although the evidence remains context-specific (Zhu et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the relationships among Islamic Work Ethics (IWE), ethical leadership, proactive personality, psychological safety, and innovative work behaviour (IWB) among academicians in three Malaysian public universities. Specifically, the study investigates: (i) the relationships of IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality with IWB; (ii) the relationships of IWE and ethical leadership with psychological safety; and (iii) the relationship between psychological safety and IWB.

Although ethical leadership, proactive personality, and psychological safety have each been linked to employee innovation (Ahmad et al., 2023), fewer studies have examined these influences alongside IWE within the same empirical model, particularly among academics in Malaysian public universities. This study addresses that gap by bringing a value based ethical orientation (IWE), a leader-based condition (ethical leadership), and an individual agency factor (proactive personality) into one direct-effects framework for IWB, while also testing whether IWE and ethical leadership are directly associated with psychological safety. This study therefore contributes contextual evidence on whether ethical values and leadership practices translate into IWB and psychological safety in a higher-education setting, rather than assuming that relationships established in other sectors or cultural contexts will operate in the same way.

Research Questions and Objectives

The study addresses the following three research questions:

- RQ1: What is the relationship between IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality on academicians' IWB?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between IWE and ethical leadership on academicians' psychological safety?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between psychological safety and academicians' IWB?

Correspondingly, the objectives are to examine the relationships of IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality with IWB; examine the relationships of IWE and ethical leadership with psychological safety; and examine the relationship between psychological safety and IWB.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Innovative Work Behaviour

Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) refers to a set of behaviours through which employees generate, promote, and realise new ideas in their work (Janssen, 2000). Unlike creativity, which is often associated primarily with idea generation, IWB encompasses the broader process of moving from identifying a problem or opportunity to gaining support and implementing a useful idea. This distinction is especially important in universities, where innovation may depend not only on academic creativity but also on the ability to secure support, coordinate resources, and translate ideas into practice. The IWB measure adopted in the study was based on Janssen's unidimensional scale and captured idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation.

Islamic Work Ethics and Innovative Work Behaviour

Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) represents a set of work-related principles rooted in Islamic teachings, including hard work, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and the social value of productive activity (Ali, 1992). The literature suggests that ethical work orientations can shape employees' attitudes toward effort, responsibility, cooperation, and organisational contribution. IWE may therefore support innovation by encouraging employees to regard improvement and productive contribution as meaningful responsibilities.

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, employees who perceive their organisational environment as consistent with ethical and fair principles may reciprocate through positive work behaviours (Blau, 1964). Social Learning Theory also provides a useful explanation because employees observe and internalise behavioural norms within their work environment (Bandura, 1977). In a university context, IWE may therefore encourage academics to seek better ways of teaching, researching, collaborating, and solving organisational problems. Based on this reasoning, the study proposed:

H1: Islamic Work Ethics is positively related to academicians' innovative work behaviour.

Ethical Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour

Ethical leadership involves the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, communication, and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders are expected to act fairly, provide clear ethical standards, listen to employees, and discipline unethical conduct consistently. Such behaviour may influence IWB because innovation often requires employees to depart from established routines and to invest effort in ideas whose outcomes are uncertain.

Previous studies have linked ethical leadership with IWB through mechanisms such as knowledge sharing, psychological empowerment, organisational support, and employee identification (Javed et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2021). In higher education, ethical leadership may be particularly relevant because academic work combines professional autonomy with institutional rules and performance expectations. Leaders who model ethical conduct may strengthen employees' willingness to contribute ideas and improve existing practices. Accordingly:

H2: Ethical leadership is positively related to academicians' innovative work behaviour.

Proactive Personality and Innovative Work Behaviour

Proactive personality reflects a stable tendency to take initiative, identify opportunities, and persist in creating change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Proactive employees are not merely responsive to organisational demands; they actively attempt to alter their work environment. This orientation closely aligns with the behavioural requirements of innovation because idea generation and implementation require initiative, persistence, and willingness to overcome obstacles (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Li et al., 2022).

Empirical research has consistently associated proactive personality with IWB and related outcomes (Mubarak et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). Proactive individuals may also be less dependent on external prompts because they

are intrinsically inclined to search for improvement opportunities. This makes proactive personality particularly relevant in academic settings where employees often have considerable discretion over teaching, research, and knowledge-transfer activities. Therefore:

H3: Proactive personality is positively related to academicians' innovative work behaviour.

Islamic Work Ethics, Ethical Leadership and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to the perception that individuals can express themselves, ask questions, voice concerns, and take interpersonal risks without fear of humiliation or negative consequences (Kahn, 1990). Ethical leadership has been proposed as a potential antecedent because fair, trustworthy, and supportive leaders can reduce uncertainty surrounding interpersonal risk. Recent evidence also suggests that ethical leadership may influence psychological safety through trust and open communication (Bano et al., 2025).

Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) may also have implications for psychological safety. Ethical principles such as justice, respect, responsibility, and cooperation can contribute to interpersonal trust and a more predictable social environment (Murtaza et al., 2016; Khan & Gul, 2020). However, the relationship should not be assumed to be universal. In organisations where ethical values are already embedded or where formal hierarchies remain strong, employees may interpret ethical conduct differently from the way it is conceptualised in Western psychological-safety research (Khan & Gul, 2020). The present study therefore tests direct relationships empirically rather than assuming that ethical values necessarily translate into psychological safety.

H4: Islamic Work Ethics is positively related to employees' psychological safety.

H5: Ethical leadership is positively related to employees' psychological safety.

Psychological Safety and Innovative Work Behaviour

Psychological safety has traditionally been viewed as an important condition for innovation because employees who feel safe can experiment, learn from mistakes, and voice unconventional ideas (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). Studies have reported positive associations between psychological safety and IWB, particularly where leaders actively support learning and experimentation (Zhang & Cheng, 2011). Nevertheless, psychological safety does not necessarily guarantee innovation. Employees may feel comfortable and secure without feeling motivated to challenge established routines. The organisational context may also shape whether psychological safety is interpreted as permission to experiment or as permission to maintain harmonious relationships without taking risks (Edmondson, 1999; Zhang & Cheng, 2011).

These considerations are especially relevant in Malaysian higher education, where institutional structures, respect for authority, and collective norms may influence how employees respond to psychological conditions (Zhu et al., 2022). The present study therefore tests the relationship directly and allows the empirical direction of the association to emerge from the data.

H6: Psychological safety is positively related to employees' innovative work behaviour.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The study is primarily informed by Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). SET explains organisational relationships in terms of reciprocal exchanges (Blau, 1964). When employees perceive fairness, support, and ethical treatment, they may respond with positive behaviours that benefit the organisation. In this study, IWE and ethical leadership represent value-based and leader-based conditions that may encourage employees to reciprocate through IWB.

Social Learning Theory (SLT) proposes that individuals learn through observing others, particularly influential models such as leaders (Bandura, 1977). Ethical leaders can therefore shape behavioural expectations by demonstrating fairness, responsibility, and appropriate conduct. Employees may learn that proposing and implementing constructive changes is acceptable when leaders visibly support ethical and responsible behaviour.

Proactive personality complements these perspectives by recognising that employees differ in their tendency to initiate change. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining how ethical values, leadership behaviour, individual proactivity, and psychological safety relate to IWB.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional research design was employed. The target population comprised academicians working in three Malaysian public universities identified in the study as innovative top-performing institutions: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaya (UM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The sampling frame was based on the study's identified innovation-oriented university context. Convenience sampling was used because respondents were recruited through accessible academic networks and institutional contacts.

The study initially targeted a sample size adequate for a structural model with multiple predictors. G*Power and established sample-size recommendations were considered during study planning. A total of 181 responses were obtained. Following data screening, four multivariate outliers were removed, producing a final dataset of 177 usable responses (Hair et al., 2022).

Measures

Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) was measured using nine items adapted from Janssen (Janssen, 2000), covering idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation. Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) was measured using items derived from Ali (Ali, 1992). Ethical leadership was assessed using the ethical leadership scale developed by Brown et al. (Brown et al., 2005). Psychological safety was measured using three items based on the conceptualisation of Kahn (Kahn, 1990) and the operationalisation by May et al. (May et al., 2004). Proactive personality was measured using four items from Bateman and Crant's proactive personality scale (Bateman & Crant, 1993). The constructs were measured using the response scales specified in the original instrument. The measurement model was assessed in SmartPLS 4.0 after preliminary data screening.

Building on earlier conceptual discussions of ethical leadership, psychological safety, proactive personality, and IWB in higher education (Mozie & Mahadi, 2024), the present study extends this line of inquiry by introducing IWE as an additional value-based antecedent and empirically examining the proposed relationships among academicians in Malaysian public universities. This empirical focus moves beyond conceptual propositions by assessing the strength and significance of these relationships using survey data.

Data Screening and Analysis

Data screening included checks for missing responses, suspicious response patterns, multivariate outliers, and distributional characteristics. The online questionnaire required completion of all items, while hard-copy questionnaires were screened for completeness. Four cases were identified as multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance and were removed. Mardia's multivariate skewness and kurtosis indicated non-normality. PLS-SEM was selected because the study involved a multi-predictor model, emphasized prediction and explained variance, and used latent constructs assessed through multiple indicators. In addition, PLS-SEM is less dependent on multivariate normality assumptions than covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2022). SmartPLS 4.0 was used to assess the reflective measurement model and structural relationships.

The analysis focused on direct path coefficients obtained through bootstrapping. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 5% level. In addition to beta coefficients, t-values, p-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes (f^2) were considered to distinguish statistical significance from practical magnitude. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was also examined for the endogenous constructs.

RESULTS

Measurement Model and Descriptive Profile

The final dataset consisted of 177 academicians, comprised of 62 respondents from UPM (35.0%), 53 from UM (29.9%), and 62 from UKM (35.0%). Female respondents represented 56.5% of the sample, while the largest experience category comprised academics with more than 15 years of experience (35.6%). The measurement model demonstrated acceptable reliability and convergent validity for all five constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.633 to 0.977, composite reliability ranged from 0.823 to 0.980, and AVE values ranged from 0.585 to 0.829. Two indicators, IWE9 and PS3, were removed because of low outer loadings. The remaining indicators were retained where the construct-level AVE and reliability criteria were satisfied. Discriminant validity was supported by the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT results, with the highest HTMT value below the 0.90 threshold. Full-collinearity VIF values ranged from 1.155 to 3.784, suggesting no critical collinearity concern. The final structural model explained 73.6% of the variance in IWB (adjusted $R^2 = 0.731$) and 19.1% of the variance in psychological safety (adjusted $R^2 = 0.177$).

Table 1 Measurement Model

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Islamic Work Ethics	0.957	0.958	0.585
Ethical Leadership	0.977	0.980	0.829
Psychological Safety	0.890	0.924	0.752
Proactive Personality	0.633	0.823	0.705
Innovative Work Behaviour	0.968	0.973	0.798

Table 2 Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t	p	F ² /Result
H1	IWE → IWB	0.215	0.077	2.785	0.003	0.063 / Supported
H2	Ethical Leadership → IWB	0.170	0.074	2.286	0.011	0.041 / Supported
H3	Proactive Personality → IWB	0.551	0.054	10.159	<0.001	0.577 / Supported
H4	IWE → Psychological Safety	-0.017	0.093	0.181	0.428	0.000 / Not supported
H5	Ethical Leadership → Psychological Safety	-0.014	0.105	0.134	0.447	0.000 / Not supported
H6	Psychological Safety → IWB	-0.082	0.035	2.351	0.009	0.027 / Not supported

RQ1: IWE, Ethical Leadership, Proactive Personality and IWB

RQ1 examined whether IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality were related to IWB. All three relationships were positive and statistically significant. IWE had $\beta = 0.215$ ($t = 2.785$, $p = .003$; 95% CI [0.088, 0.340]; $f^2 = 0.063$), while ethical leadership had $\beta = 0.170$ ($t = 2.286$, $p = .011$; 95% CI [0.054, 0.299]; $f^2 = 0.041$). Proactive personality was the strongest predictor, with $\beta = 0.551$ ($t = 10.159$, $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.458, 0.638]; $f^2 = 0.577$). Thus, H1, H2, and H3 were supported. The relative magnitude of the coefficients indicates

that individual proactivity contributed considerably more to IWB than either IWE or ethical leadership in this sample.

The results indicate that IWB among the sampled academicians is associated with both value-based and leader-based factors, but individual proactivity is substantially more influential. The strong effect of proactive personality suggests that academics who naturally identify opportunities and persist in turning ideas into action are more likely to demonstrate innovative behaviour. This finding is consistent with research that positions proactive personality as an important individual resource for innovation (Mubarak et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). The positive IWE relationship suggests that ethical work values may also encourage academics to contribute beyond routine responsibilities. Ethical leadership, while smaller in magnitude, remains statistically meaningful, supporting prior evidence that ethical leaders can encourage innovation through positive workplace processes (Javed et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2023).

RQ2: IWE, Ethical Leadership and Psychological Safety

RQ2 examined the relationships of IWE and ethical leadership with psychological safety. Neither relationship was statistically significant. IWE had $\beta = -0.017$ ($t = 0.181$, $p = .428$; 95% CI $[-0.179, 0.128]$; $f^2 = 0.000$), while ethical leadership had $\beta = -0.014$ ($t = 0.134$, $p = .447$; 95% CI $[-0.189, 0.157]$; $f^2 = 0.000$). Therefore, H4 and H5 were not supported. The findings indicate that, in this sample, ethical work values and perceived ethical leadership did not independently account for meaningful differences in psychological safety.

These findings are noteworthy because both relationships were hypothesised to be positive. The absence of significant direct relationship does not necessarily indicate that IWE and ethical leadership are irrelevant to psychological safety. Instead, it suggests that, within the present sample, neither construct independently explained a significant proportion of variance in employees' psychological safety. One possible interpretation is that psychological safety among academics may be shaped more strongly by other contextual conditions, such as interpersonal trust, departmental climate, workload, autonomy, communication patterns, or organisational support. This interpretation is consistent with recent research indicating that the relationship between ethical leadership and psychological safety may operate through relational processes such as trust and open communication rather than through leadership behaviour alone (Bano et al., 2025).

The result also cautions against assuming that ethical conduct automatically produces psychological safety. Ethical leadership is a broader leadership construct concerned with normatively appropriate behaviour, while psychological safety concerns an employee's perception of interpersonal risk. A leader may be ethical and fair without necessarily creating a climate in which employees feel fully comfortable challenging existing practices or expressing dissenting views. This distinction is important because previous research suggests that ethical leadership can foster IWB through psychological and motivational mechanism, including psychological safety (Liu et al., 2023).

RQ3: Psychological Safety and IWB

RQ3 examined the relationship between psychological safety and IWB. The relationship was statistically significant but negative, $\beta = -0.082$ ($t = 2.351$, $p = .009$; 95% CI $[-0.139, -0.024]$; $f^2 = 0.027$). Because the hypothesised relationship was positive, H6 was not supported. The effect was small, so the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that psychological safety broadly suppresses innovation. Rather, it indicates that the simple direct relationship observed in this sample was negative and that additional contextual conditions may be required for psychological safety to translate into innovative behaviour.

This unexpected direction requires careful interpretation. The data show that psychological safety was relatively high ($M = 4.015$), while IWB was also relatively high ($M = 5.388$). At item level, respondents reported a high sense of being able to be themselves at work, whereas the IWB item concerning obtaining approval for innovative ideas had the lowest IWB mean (5.26). This pattern may indicate a distinction between feeling personally safe to express ideas and having the organisational conditions necessary to obtain approval and implement those ideas. Thus, psychological safety may be present without automatically translating into realised innovation.

The descriptive results in the study provide useful context but should not be treated as causal evidence. Psychological safety was relatively high, with an overall mean of 4.02 on the five-point scale, while IWB was also relatively high. Yet the IWB item concerning obtaining approval for innovative ideas recorded a comparatively lower mean. This pattern suggests a possible distinction between feeling safe to express oneself and being able to move an idea through institutional approval and implementation processes. In other words, employees may feel personally safe while still encountering structural or procedural constraints on innovation.

The result should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that psychological safety is inherently harmful to innovation. Rather, it indicates that the relationship is context-sensitive and that psychological safety alone may not be sufficient to produce innovative behaviour in Malaysian public universities. Future studies should examine how psychological safety interacts with organisational support for innovation, autonomy, leadership support, workload, and institutional approval processes.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide a differentiated picture of the antecedents of IWB among academicians. First, the results support the view that innovation is partly value-driven behaviour. IWE was positively associated with IWB, suggesting that employees who strongly endorse ethical principles concerning diligence, fairness, responsibility, and the social value of work may be more inclined to contribute innovative ideas. This finding is compatible with studies linking ethical work orientations with positive organisational behaviours and knowledge sharing (Murtaza et al., 2016). Within an Islamic cultural context, work may be understood not only as an economic activity but also as a moral responsibility, which can encourage employees to seek meaningful improvements.

Second, ethical leadership showed a positive relationship with IWB. This supports the broader literature indicating that ethical leaders can stimulate innovation by establishing fairness, trust, appropriate conduct, and support for employees (Brown et al., 2005; Javed et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2021). However, the relatively small effect size indicates that ethical leadership should not be viewed as a sufficient explanation for innovation. In academic institutions, leadership operates alongside professional autonomy, individual motivation, resources, research expectations, and disciplinary cultures. Ethical leadership may therefore provide a supportive foundation, while actual innovation depends on additional individual and organisational factors.

Third, proactive personality emerged as the dominant direct predictor of IWB. The $\beta = 0.551$ coefficient and $f^2 = 0.577$ indicate a substantially stronger contribution than those of IWE and ethical leadership. This is theoretically meaningful because proactive personality is closely aligned with the behavioural essence of IWB: identifying opportunities, initiating change, and persisting despite obstacles. In university settings, where academics have considerable discretion over research and teaching practices, individual initiative may therefore be particularly consequential.

Fourth, the two ethical antecedents did not significantly predict psychological safety. This suggests that the pathway from ethical values or ethical leadership to employees' perceptions of interpersonal safety is not necessarily direct. The result is consistent with research that treats psychological safety as a relational and contextual construct influenced by trust, communication, team climate, and leadership processes (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). For Malaysian universities, future work should consider whether psychological safety is shaped more strongly by immediate supervisors, departmental climate, peer relationships, or institutional governance.

Finally, psychological safety showed a statistically significant but small negative association with IWB ($f^2 = 0.027$). The finding differs from research that generally positions psychological safety as supportive of learning and innovation (Edmondson, 1999; Zhang & Cheng, 2011; Liu et al., 2023). The result may indicate that psychological safety and innovation are related through boundary conditions rather than a simple linear mechanism. A comfortable environment can reduce interpersonal fear, but innovation may still require challenge, performance expectations, resources, and explicit organisational support. The result also raises the possibility that employees in hierarchical or collectivist contexts may interpret safety as permission to maintain harmony rather than as an invitation to challenge established practices (Zhang et al., 2023). This interpretation should be treated as a proposition for future research rather than a definitive cultural explanation.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to literature in three ways. First, it provides evidence that IWE has a direct positive association with IWB, extending innovation research through an Islamic work-values perspective. Second, it confirms that ethical leadership is positively associated with IWB in Malaysian public universities, while also showing that its direct relationship with psychological safety was not significant. Third, the strong effect of proactive personality demonstrates the importance of individual agency in academic innovation. The findings therefore complement rather than replace leadership-based explanations of IWB.

The non-significant relationships involving psychological safety also provide a useful theoretical qualification. Psychological safety should not automatically be treated as a universal outcome of ethical leadership or ethical values. Its formation may depend on relational and organisational conditions that are not captured by broad measures of ethics and leadership.

Practical Implications

For university management, the findings suggest that innovation strategies should not focus exclusively on leadership training. Developing employees' proactive capabilities may be equally or more important. Universities can support this through professional development in opportunity recognition, problem solving, idea pitching, project initiation, and innovation implementation.

Ethical leadership should nevertheless remain an important management priority. Leaders can encourage innovation by modelling fairness, listening to staff, communicating ethical standards, and supporting responsible experimentation. However, these practices should be accompanied by concrete mechanisms that allow ideas to be evaluated, approved, resourced, and implemented.

The findings concerning psychological safety suggest that management should distinguish between interpersonal comfort and actual innovation support. Employees may feel safe to express themselves while still lacking resources or authority to implement new ideas. Innovation systems should therefore include transparent approval pathways, innovation grants or seed funding, recognition mechanisms, and time for experimentation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered. First, the study used convenience sampling, which limits the generalisability of the findings to all Malaysian academics. Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Third, the data were self-reported and collected within a common survey context. Although data screening and measurement assessment were conducted, future research could combine employee surveys with supervisor-rated IWB or objective innovation indicators.

Future research should also investigate why psychological safety demonstrated a small negative association with IWB in this sample. Qualitative interviews could help determine whether academics distinguish between feeling personally safe and receiving organisational permission to implement new ideas. Longitudinal studies could examine whether changes in leadership, psychological safety, and proactivity precede changes in IWB. Comparative studies across public and private universities, disciplines, academic ranks, and Malaysian regions would also strengthen contextual understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships among IWE, ethical leadership, proactive personality, psychological safety, and IWB among academicians in Malaysian public universities. The findings indicate that IWE, ethical leadership, and proactive personality were positively associated with IWB, with proactive personality emerging as the strongest predictor. IWE and ethical leadership did not significantly predict psychological safety. Psychological safety was significantly but negatively associated with IWB, leading to rejection of the

hypothesised positive relationship. Overall, the findings suggest that IWB among academicians is associated with a combination of ethical values, leadership practices, and individual agency although the influence of these factors varies across the relationships examined.

The central practical message is that universities seeking stronger innovation outcomes should cultivate proactive employees, maintain ethical leadership, and translate ethical and psychological principles into concrete structures that enable ideas to be approved and implemented. The unexpected psychological-safety finding further demonstrates the importance of studying innovation within its specific institutional and cultural setting.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study purpose and procedures. Responses were treated as confidential and reported in aggregate form. No personally identifying respondent information is reported in this article.

Data Availability

The underlying respondent-level dataset is not publicly available because it contains research participant information and is subject to confidentiality protections.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this article.

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