



WOKENESS AS A REACTION TO POWER DYNAMICS IN MALAYSIAN WORKPLACES: AN ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONIALS ON THE MALAYSIANPAYGAP INSTAGRAM PAGE

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ABSTRACT

The term “wokeness” can be understood as an individual’s awareness of social justice issues and a commitment to promoting equality and fairness in society. Traditionally, wokeness is linked to being tools of highlighting unfairness and discrimination in different social settings. This study argues wokeness can also be examined as a reactionary tool to power dynamics in a workplace setting. This study specifically examines the topic of power dynamics in Malaysian workplaces and how the concept of “wokeness” plays a crucial role as a form of reaction using Albert Hirschman’s concept of exit, voice, and loyalty. The analysis of the Instagram page MalaysianPAYGAP, which features testimonials from Malaysian employees who have experienced power dynamics and injustice in the workplace, determines how wokeness motivates affected employees to react either through the approach of exit, voice, or loyalty. Findings of this study suggest that wokeness has enabled Malaysian employees to feel more empowered by reacting accordingly to power dynamics at workplaces. Additionally, this study aims to demonstrate that wokeness is prevalent within the Malaysian context and can be a tool for both employees and employers to better understand their roles. Ultimately, the findings of this article emphasise the need to re-evaluate the notion of power dynamics and its connection to employee loyalty within the Malaysian workforce. This article is thus significant in pioneering a new way of understanding wokeness as a functional and strategic response to workplace power dynamics, rather than simply a cultural buzzword.

Keywords: Wokeness, power dynamics, Malaysian workplaces, Hirschman, MalaysianPAYGAP

INTRODUCTION

There was a time not too long ago in the history of mankind when “windows” were merely spaces filled with glasses in the walls, “Karen” was an ordinary English female name, and being “woke” simply meant not being asleep. As the structure of society becomes more complicated through

the advent of technology and widespread global interaction, these three words can now be taken to mean very differently than how they were once perceived. Being “woke”, in its literal sense, is universally known as being awake or not asleep. Given present day circumstances, the term “woke” can be considered differently, evoking an array of emotions and reactions. Sobande et al. (2022: 1576) argue that being “woke” is now “broadly synonymous with statements on social media that are assumed to indicate an investment in tackling social injustices”. In the Malaysian context, the idea of wokeness still appears to be quite novel as little research has been done. Nevertheless, given the widespread access every individual has to Western influence through social media, popular culture, and media in general, one may argue that it is only a matter of time before the notion of wokeness becomes commonplace in every nook of Asia.

The media is one of the best platforms where wokeness is evidently discernible. The term “wokeness” which was once unknown has now become synonymous with critical social awareness. With its origins deeply rooted in Black consciousness, the notion of wokeness was first introduced through the works of Jamaican philosopher, Marcus Garvey, who in 1923 issued a global call to Black citizens in an effort to urge them to “wake up” and be more “socially and politically conscious” (Romano 2020). The idea to “stay woke” further surfaced in the 1938 song *Scottsboro Boys*, a protest song by musician Lead Belly (Romano 2020). What can be noted is that wokeness in its essence, sprouts from the idea of resistance, challenging expected norms or the status quo, especially within different racial or social contexts. These forms of resistance are further extended throughout the history of various nations, ranging from Cuba’s resistance to the Israel-Palestinian conflict as well as within multicultural contexts as evidenced in places such as India (Shankar 2024).

In the present-day context, wokeness is often tied to being conscious of social problems like racism, discrimination, and inequality. In the context of wokeness, Strachan (2021) emphasises the significance of understanding what it entails and what it does not by drawing upon the Christian perspective. Strachan attempts to explain how some may mistakenly equate fundamental Christian values like interracial marriages, community engagement, and the use of inclusive language with wokeness. However, in reality, the notion of being woke encompasses a much wider range of dimensions. According to *The Babylon Bee* (2021), being woke involves acknowledging the existence of microaggressions in our environment, which requires holding ourselves responsible for our own shortcomings especially where racism, hatred, and inequality are concerned. The concept of critical awareness, which can be traced back to Paulo Freire’s work in the 1970s, also underpins the idea of wokeness (Freire 2017). Here, the emphasis is placed on the analysis of power structures to recognise and address oppression and the call for positive social change. Such recognition is vital in allowing one to take critical actions leading to social transformation.

Over the past few years, Malaysians have been able to witness firsthand how wokeness is slowly spreading its influence in the local scene. In 2021, secondary school student, Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam, decided to call out her teacher’s inappropriate rape joke on social media (Kwok 2021). The 1975 band “on-stage kissing incident” in August 2023 had led some outraged Malaysians to call out the British pop band for displaying the “white saviour complex” (Yeung, 2023). These two are just some of the more memorable incidents detailing how wokeness has indeed infiltrated Malaysian society. Nevertheless, it is crucial to explain what wokeness entails because there is no standardised definition to it. As the concept of wokeness goes beyond its literal definition and is continuously evolving, conducting a research that investigates the nuanced interpretation of wokeness within the Malaysian context is important. Such a study provides a unique perspective on a term that has gained global prominence, offering insights into its changing nature and impact. Being socially conscious is an essential characteristic of active societal participation, evident through the emergence of recent terms such as “cancel culture”, “Black Lives Matter”,

and “gender inclusivity”, which generate both admiration and discomfort. While some view these terms negatively, perceiving them as Western problems, it is essential to recognise how quickly cultural concepts can spread across the world. The incorporation of Eastern foreign cultural concepts, such as the Chinese terms “strawberry generation” and *bai lan* (the give-up generation), suggest that foreign influences have infiltrated Malaysian society, regardless of our willingness to accept them. Therefore, possessing social awareness and relevance is a defining trait associated with active engagement in society.

In a world governed by power relations that take place between those in dominance and those in subservience, some individuals are ever ready to seek more which can enable them to move ahead and remain on top of the hierarchy. More often than not, these individuals are rewarded with better pay scales and positions in line with their acquired power. Power is an idea that can be linked to many settings and scenarios, but for the purpose of this research, power will be examined in terms of how it is played out in the workplace setting. Power itself can be examined from two ends: the ones who hold power and are in control, and the ones who are expected to comply with the orders given by the former. As observed by Young (2020), power is a term that is rarely examined or defined, since everyone is assumed to know what to expect when dealing with it. However, there are also situations in which the study of power can become rather ambiguous, especially with regard to the concept of power dynamics.

Power dynamics can be most easily understood as the power structures that exist between groups or individuals in a particular context as they negotiate their way by influencing or controlling possible outcomes for both parties. When two or more people engage with each other, power dynamics will come into play because there is a set of established structures, both formal or informal, that may dictate how they should expect to behave. In the workplace specifically, power dynamics are usually subdued and accepted unconsciously by most employees because they are most likely to agree with the established system and organisational structures without questioning them (Boonstra and Gravenhorst 1998). As noted by Vaillancourt (2021), there are many types of power that an individual or group of people may potentially possess. In the workplace domain, some discernible forms of power may include legitimate power that is usually attached to a position one holds, coercive power that forces people to do something against their wish, reward power, which is the ability to give others what they need and seek, and expert power that comes as a result of being able to master a unique set of skills that other cannot. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of our place and worth so as to secure the most favourable outcomes as we charter the unfamiliar territories of power dynamics.

As is the case with other nations globally, the culture of work in Malaysia has also experienced eminent shifts in the last decade. Compared to the older generations of employees who seem to have accepted that the “overworked and underpaid” policy is something that comes with the territory of being employed, the new generation of workers certainly hold varying expectations for their professional life. This is evident as most of them are not willing to accept injustices and bias at their workplaces. It should be noted that incidents where employees are forced to work in harsh and uncondusive working environments in Malaysia are not precisely uncommon. For example, as reported by Fazaniza (2022), bullying in the workplace is becoming increasingly serious in Malaysia. Not only does it lead to an unfavourable working environment, it is also shocking to know that both low- and high-rank employees are equally susceptible to workplace bullying due to power dynamics within the office. In addition to workplace bullying, there is a growing number of Malaysians who are becoming increasingly reluctant to accept work beyond their means. As Chan (2023) noted, with a higher critical awareness that could possibly be viewed as “wokeness”, a staggering 50% of working Malaysians are willing to quit their jobs for the sake of a healthier work-life balance. These working Malaysians prioritise good relationships with managers, flexible working hours, and other non-monetary benefits over job and income

stability. It is surely not merely an assumption to claim that wokeness has pervaded the Malaysian workplaces. As published in the *New Straits Times*, in addition to better career prospects and remuneration, many Malaysians, particularly young professionals, are leaving their jobs because of perceived social injustice at work (Shah 2023). As highlighted by Dorall (2022), there has been a shift in the Malaysian workforce where people are willing to leave their jobs because they feel that they are overworked and underpaid. If their employers are not willing to make positive changes in the workplace, they are ready to seek better opportunities elsewhere. These new trends in Malaysian workplaces suggest that Malaysian workers are now more daring and willing to prioritise themselves over their jobs and the needs of their superiors. It is also worth paying attention to the fact that millennials and generation Z (Gen Z) job seekers in Malaysia place greater emphasis on workplace inclusivity when applying for jobs. Above all factors, they give importance to having a workplace that includes, listens to, and supports their views and opinions (Chow 2023). These significant changes are thus crucial to the analysis of the current workforce in Malaysia. Wanting different things is one thing; being expressive about them is another. Upon closer examination, these changes not only mirror how the world has changed, but also how wokeness has subtly pervaded the Malaysian workspace. The present changes and perceptions of Malaysians within a working environment compel us to not only examine these viewpoints but also re-evaluate how power dynamics should be dealt with at the workplace in an era where wokeness looms large.

This study is based on the concept of exit, voice, and loyalty by Albert Otto Hirschman, an influential twentieth century German economist whose works and ideas contributed significantly to the areas of economics and politics. Among his many notable works, his seminal work published in 1970, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations, and States* is considered his most influential in the twentieth century. In fact, this work catapulted him into international stardom because he was invited to speak at conferences in the European nations upon the success of his book (Hirschman 2013). As noted by Adelman (2014), the book became an instant hit because the ideas in it resonated well at the time when companies, government, and organisations were all starting to decline. Faced with such a dilemma, three main approaches, namely exit, voice, and loyalty, were deemed closely relevant to the prevailing societal sentiment at that time. Hirschman's ideas of exit, voice, and loyalty clearly explained how consumers can react when faced with dissatisfaction in an organisation. They can exit by leaving the organisation, voice themselves by negotiating or making their grievances heard, or stay loyal by acquiescing to the declining organisations' plans and directions. Despite being originally presented in 1970, it was not until the 1980s when the same modal was adopted into examining employees' behaviours when faced with dissatisfaction at workplaces.

Keeping in mind past studies, this study intends to examine precisely how employees react towards dissatisfaction via social media. Delving into testimonials presented on the Instagram page, MalaysianPAYGAP (<https://www.instagram.com/malaysianpaygap/>), this study intends to explore the ways in which Malaysian employees express themselves and how in doing so are able to showcase a sense of wokeness. In the Malaysian context, the same modal has been examined in relation to how employees in the private and government sectors react when faced with dissatisfaction at workplaces. Notably, most of these studies focus on the exit and voice strategies with less emphasis on the loyalty part. However, they predominantly examined primary data collected from respondents working in various fields in Malaysia and how they reacted when faced with dissatisfaction at work. The focus of this present study stands apart from those conducted in the past as it analyses secondary data, testimonials on MalaysianPAYGAP, shared by workers who were faced with power dynamics at work and how their decisions to exit from their companies were driven by their wokeness. Besides, rather than solely showcasing that Hirschman's concepts are still relevant in present-day Malaysian workplaces, this study also

examines how wokeness plays a part in motivating their decisions to exit from the companies. In relation to this, wokeness will be studied from the standpoints of inclusivity, discrimination, injustices, self-worth, and work-life balance as key perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to note there is a scarcity of literature on studies that truly discuss workplace dynamics within a Malaysian or even Asian context. Recent literature includes Gentina and Parry's (2020) work which examines Gen Z in the Asian context. Their edited book contains an exploration of Gen Z within the Asian context, with general findings revealing how the Southeast Asian group of these individuals favour the digitalisation of their workplace as compared to the generations before. Another study which attempts to uncover power relations and dynamics within an Asian context was conducted in 2022, focusing on gender dynamics within African and Asian contexts (Oppong and Bannor 2022). Ultimately, what the limited past studies reveal is an underlying gap; there is room for more study on workplace dynamics in relation to the role played by wokeness.

Although wokeness is hardly studied in relation to Asian perspectives, there are numerous academic studies conducted in relation to wokeness and its impact on society in recent years in the West. Sobande (2020) notes that woke elements associating with feminism, Black social justice, and equality have been employed by some brands for the purpose of promoting consumerism. By promoting consumption as a way to attain empowerment, these brands are abusing the woke sentiments for their own gains rather than championing actual change in the unfair system. With regard to how woke can be easily abused by corporations, Warren (2022) asserts that being woke can lead to corporations receiving backlash from the public. This is particularly obvious when their corporate social initiatives do not align with their companies' mottos, thereby conjuring an image of hypocrisy for their companies. Also, as explained by Sobande et al. (2022), wokeness, when it becomes too visible on digital culture, may not necessarily be a good sign as the real values of wokeness can be distorted when certain individuals vie for attention on social media in their course of promoting wokeness. Although these three studies focus primarily on discussion of wokeness in the western contexts, Puchniak (2022) offers a different perspective, highlighting that wokeness has long pervaded the Asian sphere. Thus, the notion of wokeness might compel Asian companies to start paying attention to stakeholders even if these companies may not be sincere in doing so. Meanwhile, while examining how the exit-voice-loyalty theory works in Malaysia, Yee et al. (2018) points out that when communication fails in Malaysian workplaces, most employees would choose to exit and this leads to the loss of capable manpower in an organisation. Using the same theory in measuring job satisfaction in Malaysians working in the public sector, Rajiani and Buyong (2013) found that employees who are more emotionally stable would usually stay loyal to their companies while expressing their dissatisfaction. In contrast, employees who are more sociable are more likely to withdraw from work passively when they feel dissatisfied with their work.

While wokeness and the exit-voice-loyalty theory may seem like two entities that can hardly be examined together, the literature reveals that wokeness is a movement that is closely associated with corporations. Although these studies have seemingly placed wokeness in a negative light, what can be observed is that wokeness is a form of empowerment when advocated correctly. Besides, it can also indicate how corporations realise that wokeness is a force to be reckoned with. Being woke motivates individuals to take actions for justice, and employees, being closely linked to corporations, are most exposed to the notion of wokeness. Their decisions to voice, stay or exit are significantly driven by their exposure to wokeness. Hence, this study of how wokeness

plays a role in influencing Malaysian employees' decisions to quit from their jobs is important as it scrutinises wokeness through a localised lens. In doing so, this study also demonstrates that the impact of wokeness is indeed universally felt.

METHODS

This study uses textual analysis to examine selected testimonials shared on the MalaysianPAYGAP Instagram page. Six testimonials were chosen based on their portrayal of power dynamics and employees' reactions to them. It is important to note that while the MalaysianPAYGAP page contains several posts that often times may come off as rantings, these six testimonials have been specifically chosen out of the lot as they demonstrate the clear indication of power dynamics within different industries, illustrating how these individuals have been subjected to varying power dynamics at work, leading to feelings of dissatisfaction. This selection is also based on the clear depiction of how the affected employees are vocal in expressing their grievances, especially when they are compelled to assume additional responsibilities, endure low wages, and remain silent in the face of the injustice at their respective workplaces. The language used is retained for authenticity. The analysis focuses on how power dynamics often favour employers, pushing employees to the point where they must decide to exit, voice their concerns, or remain loyal. This part of the analysis aims to demonstrate that power dynamics continue to have a significant impact on Malaysian workplaces and significantly influence the mental health and work attitudes of employees.

In response to the power dynamics at work, an additional six testimonials were analysed based on how certain employees chose to leave their companies due to feelings of dissatisfaction. Upon closer examination, their decisions to exit the company were often not solely driven by financial remuneration considerations. When viewed through the lens of wokeness, their decision to leave the companies was influenced by other factors related to workplace injustices. This is intended to highlight that wokeness has indeed permeated Malaysian workplaces and plays a pivotal role in determining how employees may respond to power dynamics in their workplaces. By examining Hirschman's concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty alongside the notion of wokeness, this analysis will offer new insights into how wokeness factors into employees' decisions to leave a company. It is essential to note that the selected testimonies on power dynamics and decisions to exit are not sourced from testimonials shared by the same individuals. Therefore, this suggests that reactions to exit may not be directly linked to the displayed power dynamics, given the limited scope of the testimonials that do not capture both power dynamics and exit reactions simultaneously. This is due to the primary focus of MalaysianPAYGAP, which is to anonymously disclose one's current salary. Most of the shared testimonials include details about how they secured their current jobs and their respective salary amounts. In this context, some individuals recount their experiences of being in disadvantaged positions and receiving non-competitive salaries, while others express their joy at leaving their previous companies, and ultimately securing better employment opportunities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Power Dynamics at Work

Regardless of what industries or fields one may be in, employees are usually not spared from having to deal with the complexity of power dynamics at work. Oftentimes, Malaysian employees find themselves on the receiving end when coping with power dynamics at workplaces.

As evidenced by Excerpts 1, 2, and 3 from the MalaysianPAYGAP Instagram page, anonymous views shared by interns working in three different industries clearly indicate how power dynamics often force them to be in unfavourable positions at work.

By conforming to company culture to working far beyond their job scope, often to the point of extreme exhaustion, these interns appear to have had no viable option to refuse. Their rights to voice out their concerns are either rejected or non-existent. Upon close examination, their circumstances are rather disheartening, resembling that of victims of long-term workplace bullying. Furthermore, despite the employers' relatively covert presence in the three testimonials, entrenched power dynamics within the companies appear to have necessitated unquestioned compliance from employees. An unseen force appears to push them to meet work expectations although they feel exceedingly undervalued and under-appreciated. Evidently, their unfortunate situations at work can be attributed to the existence of power dynamics at their workplaces that favours the employers.

Excerpt 1:

Position: Intern

Not only that, the employer would insult and make fun of the way you look and tell you to get a “trendier” haircut or dye your hair to their liking and even threatened to give a bad review for the intern if the intern would not get a “trendier” haircut or dye their hair.

The employer mentioned that they had an intern once and the intern left without saying anything. Now I understand why.

Excerpt 2:

Position: Government Intern

A rack of *Ridsect* [insect repellent] tin cans full of rodent's litterings [littering] is only an example of one of the racks in the shop that I had to clean off.

Imagine having to go back home during lunch hour just to take a *mandi wajib* [ritual bathing] cuz your clothes are dirty from all the rodents' litterings [littering] for every single day! Examples of other hard labour includes lifting around 20 sacks 20 kg to 50 kg of fertilisers, disposing garbages [garbage] and cleaning the old refrigerators full of ... I guess you know what is - rodents' litterings [littering]. Talking about disposing garbages [garbage], I had to dispose a basket full of maggots that's [that has] been there for three months since I joined the company.

Excerpt 3:

Position: Filming Intern

However, as I joined the workforce, it's only the first week but I am already burnt out.

Our work is 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. 12 hours. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes we have to stay back until 11:00 p.m. or even more. And remember, I said that there are no breaks. I am working like this seven days a week. I can't even leave the dorm and visit my family for at least one day because we're working like this seven days a week.

It is imperative to note that interns are not the sole individuals contending with power dynamics at work. As elucidated in Excerpts 4, 5, and 6, even experienced employers or those who are in managerial or leadership positions are subjected to unjust treatment resulting from power

dynamics at work. As seen in the testimonials, not being sufficiently appreciated by employers is one factor that greatly demotivates them at work. The excerpts further indicate that even with positions such as general manager or leader, one is not excluded from having to make sacrifices that significantly jeopardise their mental and physical well-being. In the context of the aircraft maintenance technician, he/she is seen as putting himself/herself in grave danger for having to handle toxic substances without being supplied the proper safety equipment. In the case of the school general manager, his/her plight is equally disheartening because he/she is expected to play the impossible role of the jack of all trades while not being commensurately remunerated. Lastly, even in a leadership position, the procurement leader has to accept being side-lined at work upon her maternity leave.

A common pattern that can be observed in the excerpts is, due to power dynamics, these employees appear to be walking on a tightrope upon which their lives heavily depend; one misstep will push them right off. The employers do not seem to regard them as individuals with feelings and needs, but rather tools that work for the benefit of their organisations. As a result, the power dynamics become lopsided, as the employees feel undervalued and even dehumanised at work. While these may come off as rantings and mere dissatisfaction, it is imperative to re-evaluate how the position and role an employee plays within a company are oftentimes belittled. What then becomes of the career and trajectory of these employees whose role within a company becomes governed by such power play? Power dynamics often favours the employers and as affirmed by the testimonials shared, having to grapple with power dynamics at the workplace is an inherent aspect for these individuals across different roles.

Excerpt 4:

Position: Aircraft Maintenance Technician

There's a lot of work hazards in this job. Working in height and confined spaces like fuel tank. Handling all types of chemicals daily that is corrosive and may cause cancer. Company doesn't even provide the proper equipment for us to handle chemicals like that. Also, with long term exposure to noise [engine running].

We are always not appreciated and respected by people. One simple mistake of us is deadly. I really hope this industry will get better and the company will acknowledge us for our skills and sacrifices.

Excerpt 5:

Position: School General Manager

It is quite sad for educators in Malaysia. We can't survive for a living being a teacher or an educator. We spent a lot of money to further studies, courses, and training but our salary is lower than average.

As a GM [general manager] in school, you need to do everything. If you are "lucky enough" you are "general worker" as well. I do think we can do better for our education stakeholders. Most importantly we need to envision our national education blueprint and provide assistance to those who passion about education.

Excerpt 6:

Position: Procurement Lead

The company gave me good opportunities however things started going downhill after my pregnancy announcement.

Workload piled up and the top management became hostile. I was dropped off important meetings. I then left for maternity leave. When back, my working arrangement was forcefully changed and my reporting lines changed. I now report to my colleagues who was at the same level as me.

It may be safe to assert that power dynamics are inevitable at workplaces but when employers are given the upper hand, especially within the context of power dynamics, employees are the ones who bear the consequences at the expense of their own mental and physical well-being. Interestingly, with the onset of the new century, more employees including those in Malaysia are beginning to prioritise themselves over job responsibilities and expectations. While many are still willing to stay put and continue dealing with the burdensome power dynamics, there is a growing number of employees who are more courageous to leave their present positions when such power dynamics render their situations untenable. Their decision to quit is not perceived as a sign of defeat but rather, a way of self-expression that gives precedence to self-love and self-worth guided by their heightened sense of awareness that can be directly attributed to the notion of wokeness.

Emancipated by Quitting

As far as workplace wokeness is concerned, the act of quitting also requires close scrutiny as it is relevant to the notion of wokeness in the present social climate. The woke culture has become more pronounced since the break of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to major reshuffling in the structures and dynamics at workplaces globally. The emergence of numerous quitting-related terms such as “the great resignation”, “quiet quitting”, “loud quitting”, and more recently “conscious quitting”, demonstrates how wokeness has been infiltrating workplaces globally, including Malaysia (Yıldız 2023; Liu-Lastres et al. 2024).

As seen in Excerpts 7, 8, and 9, there are Malaysian employees who have opted to quit from their jobs because their workplace cultures do not align with their personal values. Although the testimonials do not explicitly state the reasons for resignation, they indicate that misalignment with existing workplace culture may have substantially influenced the decision to leave. The copywriter’s testimonial is a good example of how some people may choose to leave their jobs if they do not feel included due to one’s sexual orientation, even in Malaysia where queer spaces hardly exist. Instead of looking for a workplace that does not discriminate, the copywriter’s testimonial provides a rational perception of how the queer community may respond to discriminatory workplaces by quitting. After all, there are workplaces where discrimination is not as pronounced. Furthermore, as affirmed by the testimonial shared by the comm & client servicing executive, inclusivity at work is also emphasised as an important factor. Being appreciated and valued by people at work overrides other considerations. Despite having to invest additional hours after work in attending training and workshops, the respondent feels that the hours eventually serve as a form of valuable recognition and are thus worthwhile. This opinion thus proves that the culture, management, and communication at work are given more importance than remuneration per se. Meanwhile, the property realtor’s view suggests that finding a job that aligns with one’s personal values holds great significance. The “naysayers” as mentioned in the testimonial may be a metaphorical reference to those who are too afraid to

break free from the chain of power dynamics at work. The poignant assertion “Yes, it’s a tough world, but it’s where I found my purpose and where my dreams came to life” resonates well with the notion of wokeness, in which one seeks to prioritise one’s own values over workplace expectations. Hence Malaysian employees do not just seek jobs solely based on the factor of financial compensations, they too look for organisations that include value and resonate with their personal values.

Excerpt 7:

Position: Copywriter

If I had any humble advice to give for other queer Malaysians struggling to make a living, know that you will always find community wherever you go, and finding the little things in your work to be positive about is how you can make working a little less sucky.

Excerpt 8:

Position: Comm and Client Servicing Executive

Now, I’m with my second company and everything is really different. The culture, management and communication is beyond my expectation. The workload is bearable, and even if I feel overwhelmed, my superior and teammates are always on standby to guide me through.

I discovered that I must be willing to go somewhere else where I am valued and can be a great asset for the company. And everyone should too!

Note: For my second company, I joined and attended a lot of training and online workshops to get certificates and recognition. It took a lot of my free time, but it was all worth it!

Excerpt 9:

Position: Property Realtor and Manager

It wasn’t an easy decision, and the doubts and criticism from others still lingered. But I knew deep down that I was making the right choice for myself. The property industry had given me more than just financial success; it has enriched my life in ways I couldn’t put into words.

To the naysayers, I now say this; the property industry is my world and I am proud of it. The challenges and misconceptions only fuelled my determination to excel. Yes, it’s a tough world, but it’s where I found my purpose and where my dreams came to life.

In addition to the considerations of inclusivity and appreciation, workplace wokeness can also be examined within the context of anti-hustle culture. As Moran (2022) observes, the hustle culture advocates for employees giving high priority to careers over elements like hobbies, self-care, and family time. Oftentimes, companies endorsing the hustle culture often expect superiors to do the same so that their subordinates feel compelled to adhere to the similar practice. Excerpts 10, 11, and 12 illustrate that while many are willing to put up and embrace the hustle culture as a means to achieving success at work, there are also Malaysian employees who eschew such norms and opt for alternative paths, contrary to the dictates of the hustle culture.

Whether manifested through direct quitting or quiet quitting, these individuals as shown in the excerpts here tend to emphasise mental health, self-priority, and personal sufficiency over lucrative positions whose responsibilities and expectations can greatly take a toll on one’s overall

well-being. In the case of the convenience store assistant, his/her willingness to settle for a job that pays half of what he/she used to earn suggests that there is always an alternative to the hustle culture that many organisations tend to normalise. The excerpt shows that embracing freedom, peace of mind, and simplicity may outweigh the allure of financial prosperity that hustle culture promises. For the financial controller, the hustle culture is merely a temporary prison that anyone can get away from if they are willing to walk away. As seen in his/her excerpt, he/she is of the opinion that there are other things in life worth chasing but will always be elusive to us as long as we play the game of the hustle culture. Undeniably, there will always be voices declaring that hustling is perfectly normal but it is one's own voice that eventually takes precedence. If the hustle culture does not align with one's personal values, there is no harm in walking away. The opinion of the Sr internal auditor may easily be labelled as irresponsible and unprofessional in the eyes of many employers, but when scrutinised closely, such an attitude that prioritises task completion over the pursuit of perfection may precisely be the one's way of ridding oneself from potential deleterious effects of the hustle culture. One is only capable of so much, and not meeting work expectations is not a sign of one's failure; it may simply suggest that one is enlightened enough to see through the lies promised by the hustle culture.

Excerpt 10:

Position: Convenience Store Assistant

Quit for my mental health and now working at a convenience store below my apartment (2 mins walking commute!) and even though my salary is less than half, feeling much better mentally and somehow physically as well.

No more stuck in traffic jams, no more worry about getting calls on any second or chasing deadlines. Once my shift is over, it's over. I even cook more at home now to save money. Even with a cut down salary, somehow managed to live within my means.

Excerpt 11:

Position: Finance Controller

Career Break–The world doesn't end if you NEED to take a career break to recalibrate your life. Just make sure you have it well planned out in terms of finances and how you would like to spend your time (plan that backpacking trip, do that volunteer work you have always been meaning to do, take up that barista course that you have always been meaning to do). Most people like your manager, your older colleagues and parents would tell you otherwise but only you would know what's best for yourself.

Excerpt 12:

Position: Sr Internal Auditor

I treasure my work life balance more than some rank in the corporate world now. I give my bare minimum which is just enough to get the job done well and on time aka quiet quitting. Got money to buy food, pay bills and save for a rainy day is enough for me.

CONCLUSION

When wokeness is examined alongside the testimonials sourced from MalaysianPAYGAP it becomes evident that it has permeated the Malaysian workplace domain, thereby compelling both the employers and employees to respond and react correspondingly. Because of wokeness,

the status quo maintained by the long-established mindset of the working class that dictates one lives to work is now being fiercely challenged and questioned. It remains to be seen if the woke generation will be the underdogs that will eventually upend the power dynamics presence in Malaysian workplaces. While the capitalists may have earned their rights to disregard the needs and demands of the working class and are still resting comfortably atop the hierarchy, perhaps it is time for them to reconsider their positions as wokeness has afforded the latter the freedom to choose and react in the realm of power dynamics.

Although the selected testimonials as presented through the anonymity of a social media platform page only represent a small percentage of what Malaysian employees have to say in relation to their job satisfaction, the presence of wokeness in influencing their decisions to quit their jobs when encountering power dynamics deserves due attention. Wokeness, when scrutinised through this perspective, represents a form of newfound empowerment to the Malaysian working class that was once completely absent. The deeper implications of the findings of this study hint that it is unwise if Malaysian employers continue to rely on the age-old notion that money can be offered in exchange for loyalty within the workplace. A new transformative force is slowly pervading the atmosphere of workplaces in Malaysia, as evidently demonstrated through the Instagram page and possibly other platforms, granting those exposed to it an escalating resistance to the long prescribed “drug”. Similar to a forest fire, it is never easy to contain the woke generation. Ultimately, what this article calls for is a need to reinvestigate employee satisfaction, taking into consideration how employers can engage with new-age concerns that preoccupy the minds of their employees. Such engagement will not only bridge the generational gap, but perhaps encourage employee loyalty and thus improve work productivity within the workplace. While this study dwells on one particular page that documents the accounts of a select few, further studies can explore various other platforms, as well as other aspects of wokeness that are prevalent in other professional settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest was identified during the production of this article.

NOTES

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