

***ULŪ AL-ALBĀB* APPROACH IN SUSTAINING ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY FOR INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR AMONG KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

There is a need to sustain innovative behaviour among knowledge workers in order to achieve competitive advantage for superior performance, *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach provides an ecosystem for community of practice and knowledge workers to create, share, store, and transfer. This paper aims to investigate the influence of *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach in sustaining absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour among knowledge workers in Malaysia. The research aims to explore factors that contribute to absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour in the existing practice. The research also asks in what ways of sustaining absorptive capacity and innovative behaviour through the *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach. The study used personal interview with knowledge workers in Malaysia's ICT sector. The interview questions are accompanied with procedures and protocol that have been validated by experts and practitioners. Likewise, the interview results are analysed with procedures and validated by independent reviewers. The results of the study showed that *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach has been practiced in the community of practice (COP) but without sustainable eco-system. Enhancement of *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach occurs not only at individual and group, but also happens at organizational level. The study recommends *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach to be incorporated into education and training systems.

Keywords: *Ulū Al-Albāb; Absorptive Capacity; Knowledge Workers.*

INTRODUCTION

In this competitive world, the survival and continuity of organizations are depending on the value proposition offers to the world. The value is appreciated by the market for consumption and usage (Mendoza-Abarca & Gras, 2019; Seibel, 2019). The engine to offer good value is innovation (Teece, 2010; Bessant, 2017; 2019). Yet, innovation is depending on the ability of people to generate new idea and make sense of the idea for consumption and usage.

Innovation is always related to knowledge workers who use more mind than hands in performing tasks. The uniqueness about knowledge workers is the work orientation of using mind with fellow knowledge workers (Azudin, Ismail & Taherali, 2009; Wang & Wang, 2012; Ghani, Hashim, & Rahman, 2018). In the circle of interaction among knowledge workers creates the interaction of practice among them (Hernaes & Mikulic, 2014; Akhavan & Hosseini, 2016). In this community of practice, knowledge workers create, share, store and transfer the knowledge into innovative ideas.

Community of practice provides the avenue for interaction for knowledge workers. This community could interact among knowledge workers in the same trade and industry which may not be adequate to be innovative (Smith et al., 2019; Azudin, Ismail & Taherali, 2009). There is a need for eco-system of community of practices for knowledge workers to interact cross disciplines and industries.

In the Islamic practice, the interaction among knowledge workers, or people with knowledge, is based on mutual understanding, respect, and care. The work itself is a form of general worship (*ibadah*). Any acceptable worship requires terms and conditions. Sincerity, integrity, and respect among people are always in the practice (Azudin, Ismail & Taherali, 2009; Wang & Wang, 2012; Ghani, Hashim, & Rahman, 2018). Likewise, the community of practice is a form of congregational worship, whereby people are performing activities congregationally.

Ulū Al-Albāb approach of knowledge management emphasises on activation of thinking into feeling and behaviour of individual, group and society. In the context of community of practice, it refers to the community of *Ulū Al-Albāb* practice (Aziz, 2006; 2012; Ghani, Hashim & Rahman, 2018). In this community, knowledge workers are not just consumers of knowledge, but also producers, caretakers, and handlers of knowledge. With this knowledge quality, it enables knowledge workers to sustain the absorptive capacity to be innovative (Teece, 2010; Seibel, 2019; Smith et al., 2019). In other words, innovative knowledge workers are open to all kinds of exposure, experience and knowledge that could add value to the existing practice. Without the practice, the innovativeness of knowledge workers will be limited.

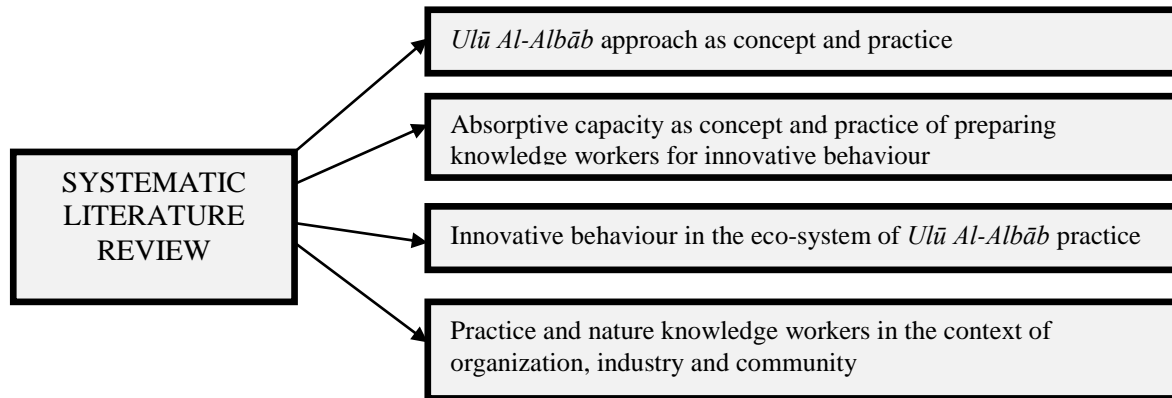
This study aims to investigate the influence of *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach in sustaining absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour among knowledge workers in Malaysia. The research aims to explore factors that contribute to absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour in the existing practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses key constructs and variables of the study. Firstly, it reviews the *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach as concept and practice. Secondly, it reviews absorptive capacity as concept and practice of preparing knowledge workers for innovative behaviour. Thirdly, it discusses on how innovative behaviour could contribute to the eco-system of *Ulū Al-Albāb* practice. Finally, it argues on the concept, practice and nature knowledge workers in the context of

organization, industry and community. Figure 1 shows the systematic literature review with key constructs in this study.

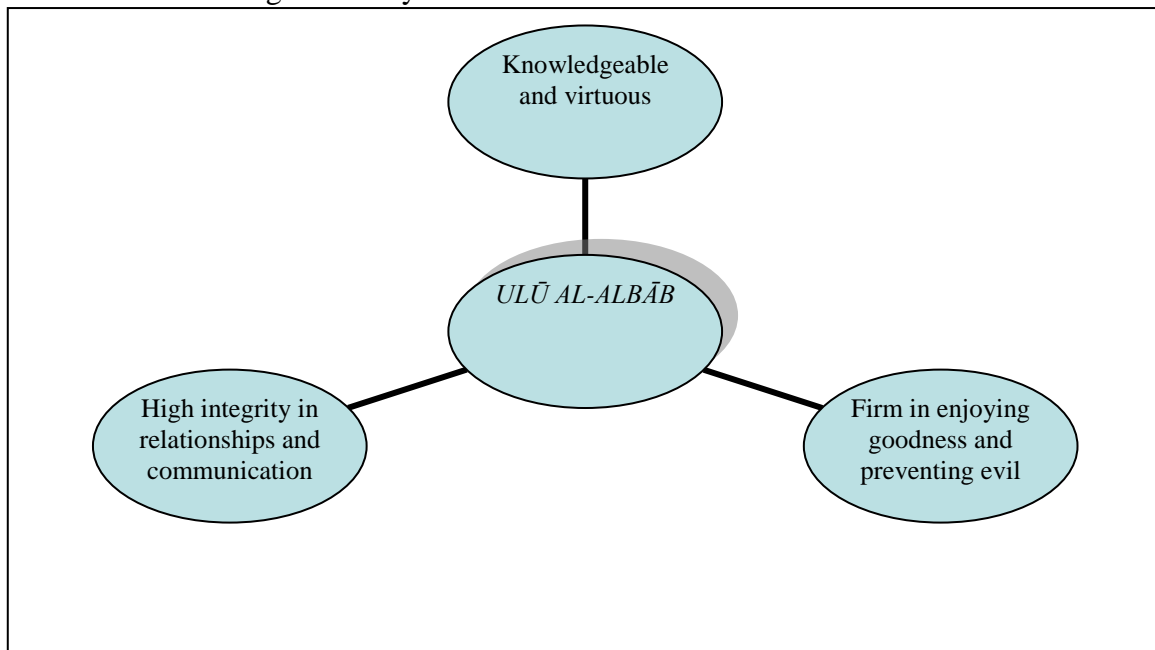
Figure 1: Systematic literature review of the study



Ulū Al-Albāb Approach

Holistic education enables individuals to be equipped with knowledge and virtue to perform and make significant contribution to human society and civilisation. Such quality of individuals is termed as individuals with *Ulū Al-Albāb* or individuals who are knowledgeable, ethical, industrious, and virtuous. According to Aziz (2006), individuals with *Ulū Al-Albāb* quality have a few characters; namely, passionate in seeking knowledge without any limit or barrier, upholding truth and preventing false and evil, active and effective in listening to speeches, arguments, and propositions of others to search for truth, and widespread knowledge for betterment of the society and civilisation.

The measurement of *Ulū Al-Albāb* is in line with the evidence from the Quran. Firstly, *Ulū Al-Albāb* reflects the passion of the individuals in seeking knowledge for the worldly as well as in the Hereafter (Ali Imran, 190). Secondly, *Ulū Al-Albāb* are individuals who have the ability and willingness to differentiate truth and false, virtue and evil without compromise (Al-Maidah, 100). Thirdly, *Ulū Al-Albāb* are effective in listening on speeches, arguments and proposition of others for the sake of truth, enjoying goodness and preventing evil (Az-Zumar, 18). Fourthly, *Ulū Al-Albāb* are always ready to widespread knowledge to improve human race and civilisation of the society (Ibrahim, 52; Ar-Ra'du, 19-22). Finally, *Ulū Al-Albāb* are individuals who have high integrity in relationship with Allah, with fellow human, and other creatures (Al-Baqarah, 197; At-Talaq, 10). Figure 2 illustrates key attributes of individuals with *Ulū Al-Albāb*.

Figure 2: Key attributes of individuals with *Ulū Al-Albāb*

Ulū al-Albāb also is manifestation of individuals' understanding about life and how they view this life and the requirement in this life from Divine *Tawhidic* paradigm. According to Mohd Kamal Hassan (2010), individuals with *Tawhidic* paradigm or *Ulū Al-Albāb* will reflect life with objectives and expectations as servants of Allah (*'ibād al-Rahmān*), vicegerents (*khulafā' fī al-ard*), and true believers (*al-mu'minūn*) to contribute to the betterment of mankind (*khayra ummatin ukhrijat lil-Nās*) (Qur'ān, 3:110) and 'balanced community' (*ummatan wasatan li-takūnū shuhadā' 'alā al-nās*) (Qur'ān, 2:143).

Likewise, Al-Faruqi (1992) manifests *Ulū Al-Albāb* as individuals with deep understanding about true meaning of life ready to fulfill the Divine trust (*al amānah*) and obligatory duties (*al farā'id*) that are prescribed by the revelation (Qur'an and Sunnah) and execute the duties with reasoning and human unique capability (Qur'ān, Surah Hud, 11: 6 and *Sura Az Zumar* 39: 41).

Absorptive Capacity

Innovation allows for operationalization and customization of knowledge and experience into the required practice for improvement and performance. The ability to operationalise and customise knowledge and experience requires ability and capability to absorb knowledge and experience to transform them into capacity.

In fact, learning for innovation mediates the ability to absorb learning and operationalise it (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) and to make organizations dynamic (Zahra & George, 2002). In the meantime, the absorptive capacity is operating with the strategic agility of organizations. (Bigelow et al., 2019; Kale, Aknar & Basar, 2019).

Absorptive capacity requires various drivers and sources. Technically, the ability to absorb knowledge, experience, and virtue is a result of social networking, technical know-how and making uniqueness ready for leverage (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Zollo & Winter, 2002).

Innovative Behavior

Innovative behaviour is essential in encouraging for innovation and organizational performance. Unlike manual workers, knowledge workers use more mind and interaction with other knowledge workers for work improvement as well as personal growth (Wang & Wang, 2012; Teh & Sun, 2012). The driver for innovative behaviour is very related to organizational practices and professionalism (Ghani, Hashim & Rahman, 2018; Ibrahim, Hashim & Rahman, 2018).

Trust and socialisation among knowledge workers contribute to innovative behaviour. When knowledge workers are staying together, they have more chances for face-to-face interaction. This is essential for innovation capability (Presutti et al., 2019). In the proximity context, it encourages knowledge transfer and innovation within organizations as well as with other organizations (Tsai, 2001; Van Wijk et al., 2008).

Knowledge Workers in Malaysia

Knowledge workers and innovation are closely related. The learning aspect in knowledge workers' interaction enables innovation to be formalised and operationalised (Azudin, Ismail, Taherali, 2009; Akhavan & Hosseini, 2016). In fact, the knowledge workers' characters are related to work behavior, task, and social characteristics (Hernaus & Mikulic, 2014).

Professionalism and integrity are basic governance in knowledge workers' interaction for innovation. Knowledge workers share knowledge and experience for work enhancement and capacity building (Lin, 2007; Wang & Wang, 2012; Teh & Sun, 2012). In such sharing context, trust among knowledge workers is paramount in every socialisation and networking (Akhavan & Hosseini, 2016).

Knowledge workers who use more mind than hands have been existing in Malaysia since its knowledge-based economy (Mustapha & Abdullah, 2004). The contribution of knowledge workers is very closely related to its economic growth (Ahmed, 2012). Unlike the manual workers, knowledge workers are socialised and shared information, knowledge and experience through informal channel (Azudin, Ismail & Taherali, 2009). Nevertheless, they are loyal to both professions and organizations (Ghani, Hashim & Rahman, 2018) due to good practices (Ibrahim, Hashim & Rahman, 2018).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research aims to explore factors that contribute to absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour in the existing practice. The research also asks in what ways of sustaining absorptive capacity and innovative behaviour through the *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach. The study used personal interview with knowledge workers in Malaysia's ICT sector. The interview questions are accompanied with procedures and protocol that have been validated by experts and practitioners.

The main reason for using qualitative personal interview method is due to the nature of qualitative research and its paradigm. As realism paradigm, qualitative research allows data to speak in detail and with meaningful understanding (Mason, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the context of exploring the factors that contribute to absorptive capacity for innovative behaviour in the existing practice through the *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach is phenomenal. The use

of semi-structured interview protocol and manual recording allows for the informants to provide their understanding about the context of the research. In fact, personal interview explores the understanding of the informants and context without generalising them (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Charmaz, 2014).

Qualitative interviewing is an art of making data heard and made sense in the reality (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). The study used interview protocol to conduct the personal interview with validated and reliable interview questions and the step by step procedures. The qualitative interview met both validity and reliability requirement (Mason, 2017; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Prior to the interview, the study developed interview questions based on desktop literature review and then validated by two experts who are familiar with similar studies. A pilot study also was conducted to ensure the interview questions and timing is acceptable in the contexts of knowledge workers in Malaysia's ICT sector. The selection of the knowledge workers is based on convenient sampling among knowledge workers who are registered with the authority in ICT industry.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study used personal interview with five knowledge workers in ICT industry in Malaysia. The interview session took 20-30 minutes. The study used probing technique in the interview session. Prior to the actual study, the informants were approached and informed consent was obtained. Note taking was used due to the request of the informants. The transcript of interview was sent to the informants for verification. The whole analysis was also referred to independent researchers for reliability of the interview results.

UA 1 argued that knowledge sharing among the knowledge workers was on mutual cooperation for mutual benefit. It was deep discussion among them at workplace as well as outside workplace.

“When you are intensified in the discussion that has strong interest in you and you have strong passion in it, you will dive into it. We are doing that not for work anymore, but for our mutual benefit. By sharing, we feel better. Otherwise, we felt guilty. At our workplace, we have weekly religious talk that reminded us to share even a single word with others. In our case, we share both worldly that is related to our work, and also how to make sense of our work in the context of the hereafter.”

The mutual aspect in knowledge sharing is essential. In fact, Kale et al. (2019) argued that innovation occurs in a very dynamic manner. The absorption of knowledge and translates them into performance requires passion and capability. According to Presutti et al. (2019), innovation capability is embedded into the contexts of sharing among workers. Besides dynamism and capability, agility of the workers' knowledge and organisations are paramount for survival and sustainable performance (Bigelow, Nickerson, & Park, 2019).

UA 2 contended that knowledge sharing is not just limited to capacity building for work and other purposes.

“We don't pretend in our knowledge sharing. We are doing that for our own mutual benefit. By sharing, you are making yourself better as well as others. For more than 20 years in ICT industry, very fast moving and dynamic industry, we survived with our

knowledge sharing for innovation. Innovation is the key for us to have an edge in the industry.”

The passion to share knowledge is not just limited to innovation, but also personal development. According to Ghani et al. (2018), organisational climate or *biah solehah* is important to make people comfortable to share and develop capability to think and work. In addition, good practice or *amal soleh* is another factor that contributes to the capability for innovation (Ibrahim et al., 2018).

UA 3 made very important point about the value of thinking and sharing in the context of ICT industry as knowledge-based industry.

“We have been in the knowledge-based industry for many years. We have to share our knowledge and experience for our own benefit within our eco-system. It has to be natural and conversant to our work. Anything superficial or pretending is not sustainable in knowledge sharing. The encouragement from the management of the company is very important. Merely asking people to share, will not happen without having the support and passion of the knowledge workers.”

The value of thinking and sharing within innovation eco system contributes to the capacity to be innovative. According to Seibel (2019), innovation system with good environment and practice provides the space for knowledge workers to share deeply and meaningfully. In fact, it has to be part of the business model of organizations (Smith et al., 2019; Teece, 2010).

UA 4 argued that knowledge sharing requires passion.

“Knowledge is in our mind. We have to translate them into words that can be understood by people. When we are so occupied with work, we have limited time to share with others. Gradually, our knowledge will be gone.

UA 5 pointed that the power of congregation or jamaah is powerful.

“Collective decision is better than individual. Just like us in performing prayers. We have the imam as leader and the makmum as followers. The essence of prayers is about collective manner or congregational. It tells us to do our work in jamaah. We will get more power from the jamaah.”

The interview results showed that knowledge sharing for innovation through *Ulū Al-Albāb* approach in the context of ICT industry in Malaysia requires more passion to think and make sense into all aspects of life (Aziz, 2012) and also passionate about making knowledge and practice into reality (Ismail, Zahrin & Azizan, 2018). This approach is more sustainable (Zainuddin, 2010) with the emphasis on thinking comprehensively and conclusively (Baru et al., 2014; Ubale, Abdullah & Abdurrahman, 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study showed that *Ulū Al-Albāb* Approach has been practiced in the community of practice (COP) but without sustainable eco-system. Enhancement of *Ulū Al-Albāb* Approach occurs not only at individual and group, but also happens at organizational

level. The study recommends *Ulū Al-Albāb* Approach to incorporate into education and training systems.

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