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By:

NUR SYIKRI HARUNI & FATHIYAH ISMAIL²
¹Academy of Language Studies
²Faculty of Business and Management
 Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu
 Corresponding email: nursyikri@uitm.edu.my

“Better three hours too soon than a minute too late”

William Shakespeare

Time’s a finite resource, definitely. We have day light and night. They all count for 24 hours, which’re our daily capital. How time’s spent depends on individuals. Some people have it well-spent in a productive way, which’s worth the time, but many have it squandered and wasted, disappearing into thin air. But the time I’m talking about has nothing to do with frequencies, for instance, “How many times we’ve met?”. Don’t get confused with ‘thyme’, too. It’s all about the clock that’s ticking and the time that’s running.

Some people stick to being ‘punctual’, while some others are rather ‘flexible’ with time. Malays, for example, are a race that’s typically associated with being late; a situation by which people are deemed behind time, behind schedule, not on time, unpunctual, delayed, tardy, and slow. Phrases like “Okay, on the way!” and “Wait wait wait!”

are common ones heard of when it comes to fulfilling promises not at a designated time. ‘Janji Melayu’ or ‘Malays’ Promise’ is a term used when people feel angry and upset with someone or a group of people who’re late in doing something or walking the talk.

Sounds negative? In a way, it does. It carries a negative connotation and bad reputation. But there’s an explanation behind this. According to Dutch social-psychologist Professor Geert Hofstede at the Maastricht University in the Netherlands, time flexibility’s one of the six dimensions developed in his founded Cultural Dimensions Theory. He’s opined that time flexibility exercised by the Malays, particularly, and the Malaysians, generally, has allowed a collective mind to function. This enables us to distinguish who belongs to which group of people that’s relatively different from other groups with different cultures and perceived flexibility of time.

One of the Cultural Dimensions discussed by Professor Hofstede is ‘Uncertainty Avoidance’. Through the lens of the dimension, the effort a society shows to evade uncertainty in the future is reflected. In other words, there’re some societies that hate a sense of ambiguity, improbability, and vagueness in their future. As a result, this has motivated them to organise schemes, schedules, and worst-case-scenario contingency plans beforehand for the use in emergency times and during uncertainties in the future.



Diagram 1 – Cultural Dimensions (Source: Hofstede Inside)

However, according to Professor Hofstede, the Malays or Malaysians have scored 36 per cent in this dimension. This means that the Malaysian society has been popular for being quite ‘relaxed’ and rather ‘flexible’ when it comes to avoiding uncertainty. It could be summarised that time flexibility is favourable, particularly for planning either personal or organisational activities and programmes. According to the psychologist, being late five minutes for a mean of an hour is an act that doesn’t require an apology.



Diagram 2 – Uncertainty Avoidance (Source: Daily Express)

I’m not saying that I’ve over-generalised my perception of time flexibility on all and sundry of the society. There’re many people who give their commitments to keeping promises at designated times. But we’ve seen this deeply immersed in our culture. Seeing is believing. We’ve somewhat thrown ourselves in it. It’s part of our culture. It’s imminent and impending. That’s why the term ‘Janji Melayu’ keeps recurring in making promises, and is commonly heard when someone has failed to honour his or her promise or commitment with others, which would potentially lead to cancelling what’s promised or planned and triggering frustration and anger by some parties. This would scrape off, corrode, and destroy a sense of trust in people. It’s worth to say that fulfilling promises is highly demanded in Islam, notwithstanding what’s promised small or big.



Diagram 3 – 2018 Social Progress Index Rating (Source: Social Progress Imperative)

From a sociological aspect, many studies have been done on punctuality according to races. In general, developed nations are recognised as being tremendously concerned and highly disciplined about punctuality. This can be further reinforced if you happen to be in the Switzerland, Denmark, Japan, the Netherlands, German, and South Korea, according to the 2018 Social Progress Index Rankings. What has amazed me is the Japanese society that’s most serious about this. If you’re late, you’ll risk offending them. But this isn’t my wild perception. It’s indeed a special term in the culture of the Japanese people who care about punctuality. That’s

why public transportation, such as buses and high-speed trains, could be expected to arrive and depart exactly on schedule. The same situation goes to the bus service in England where I've found out that every bus stop – I'm not talking about a 'bus station', okay! – has its own schedule of a double-decker bus arrival and departure, which's absolutely mind-blowing. I've also been impressed by a pair of commuters from two different directions arriving simultaneously at the same commuter station in the Netherlands when I transited in the country for a layover. This transportation-system efficiency wouldn't have been impossible if they won't value time as it should really be.

All in all, we really love time flexibility, be us the Malays or non-Malays, notwithstanding our different religions and cultures. However, when this overly practised flexibility causes trouble to people, it's a moment to retreat and rethink. As a lay individual, I hate waiting. I'm very concerned and worried if I'd cause others to wait for me. In my point of view, I believe that punctuality is not optional but mandatory. Changing the mentality is the must. Altering the way we deal with time is also key. The Malays or Malaysians aren't excluded.

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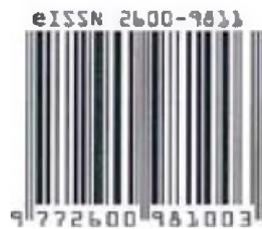
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BizNewz 2023
Faculty of Business and Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun
Sura Hujung, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, MALAYSIA
Tel: +609-8400400
Fax: +609-8403777
Email: biznewzuitm@gmail.com