

GENDER ISSUES: THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENCES IN INTERACTION STYLES BETWEEN GENDERS AND GENDER ROLES ON WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Issues related to gender in the workplace are quite a common and debatable issue in Malaysia considering that male employees dominate the working world in general. Gender issues at the workplace has become a problem in the workforce which in return brings negative impacts on the organisations involved as well as the victims themselves without regarding the gender. Given this situation, this study aims to explore the differences in the interaction styles between gender and gender roles in which we would look into how they affect the workplace communication. In addition, workplace has been a war field for female against gender issues. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents with a working experience regardless of their employment status. A total of 33 questionnaires were completed by the respondents. This quantitative study used descriptive analysis approach in analysing the frequency which was presented in percentage. According to the results obtained it was revealed that most of our respondents agreed with our statements which aligned with our previous researches. Future researches should be conducted in order for these aspects in the issues to be included and discussed holistically.

Keywords: Interaction Styles, Gender Roles, Work Communication,

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Issue

Gender issues at the workplace has become one of the significant issues that bring consequences in the long run to the victims as well as an organization regardless of the gender. In the effort of putting gender issues under the spotlight, the researchers decided to look into several aspects in term of the issues that correlated with genders occur at the workplace which are gender roles and interaction styles. Females' contribution in the workforce is valid and apparent nowadays however, it can be seen that several issues regarding the inequality and discrimination of gender are constantly happening.

These two issues which are gender roles and interaction styles are thoroughly discussed and observed. Several scholars have conducted studies in regards with these issues in the past. This study was conducted in order to discuss and observe thoroughly regarding the gender issues that revolve at the workplace.

This research revealed the findings of the effects and influence of certain aspects on the issues mentioned through questionnaire that were distributed to the respondents. However, this study was restricted to a small size of sample as well which influences the results obtained in this study. It is crucial for further researches to be done in order to investigate different aspects of this issue which will be beneficial in the future.

1.2 Objective of Study

To study gender issues and how they affect the communication in workplace.

1. To study the effects of the differences in gender roles on workplace communication
2. To examine the effects of differences in interaction styles between gender on workplace communication.

1.3. Research Question

1. How do the differences in gender roles influence the communication at the workplace?
2. How do the differences in interaction style influence the communication at the workplace?

2. Problem Statement

Diversity in organizations is celebrated as it helps to create an accepting and welcoming environment for the existing and potential employees. However, introducing new ideas related to creating varieties in any angles might be tricky as people are not familiar with them and they might require time to adapt to the changes. The evolution of women's involvement in the workplace was a bit delayed in our historical timeline, Fernández (2013) explained that women's involvement in the workplace is heavily affected by the period of when they were finally accepted to sign up for fully validated degrees in universities which was towards the end of the year 1947. Going along with this, women's delayed involvement in the professional sector had put them through decades of inequality compared to men which still happens up to this very day. Furthermore, other than women's delayed involvement in the workforce, the existence of gender differences between men and women in their way of communication have brought disadvantages for women. Merchant (2012) stated that women are at a disadvantage due to the view that women are inferior compared to men mainly because of the past historical events of inequality among gender.

Based on Merchant (2012), humans have learned on the gender stereotypes through the social construct since early childhood. "These stereotypical gender roles act as guidelines for workplace conduct as they subconsciously dictate how a person is to communicate and act based on their gender." (p. 27). Schneider (as cited in Merchant, 2012) stated that both female and male have different stereotype traits. Women are perceived as affectionate, emotional, friendly, sympathetic, sensitive, and sentimental meanwhile men are perceived as dominant, forceful, aggressive, self-confident, rational, and unemotional. Based on these stereotype traits, it can be seen that the stereotype traits of women reflect the lack of quality that the society relates with efficient leadership skills and communication skills such as the emotional and sensitive traits. In contrast, the stereotype traits of men reflect the quality of an efficient leadership such as self-confident, rational and unemotional in which these traits are also needed in achieving effective communication at the workplace. This can be clearly seen where according to Andrews (2013), the number of men as leaders in the business field outnumber the total of female leaders.

Hence, due to the differences of gender roles and communication style, it will affect the communication at the workplace. According to Mohindra and Azhar (2012), they stated that some researchers found out men utilized the instrumental style of communication which it refers to "focus on identifying goals and finding a solution" meanwhile women used the expressive style of communication where they believed that communication involved emotion and being sensitive towards others' feelings. An example of the application of the communication style by both men and women is that based on Mohindra and Azhar (2012), "Men can have disagreement, move on to another subject and go get a drink together" (p. 20).

Meanwhile, as for women, when they are facing with disagreement, it tends to affect the overall relationships. This shows how men and women communicate differently at the workplace and the different effects of their communication style at the workplace whereby men are seen as rational and women are seen as emotional will lead to gender discrimination. In recent years, a number of scholars and journalists have agreed on the discrimination that women face in the professional sector (Grosser & Moon, 2005; Badgett, 2007; Agars, 2004). Ismail and Ibrahim (2008) mentioned that the research that they had carried out did not cover the other issues of gender discrimination in workplace aside from the barrier of career progression experienced by women. The differences in gender roles and communication styles may affect the productivity at the workplace if these differences are not being approached in the right way. Thus, with the gaps found in previous studies, this research will attempt to fill in the gap and cover the issues that are not yet answered by past researches.

3. Significance of the Study

This study will redound to the communication enhancement between the genders considering that proper communication plays an integral part for gender equality to be achieved in result, gender discrimination could be diminished. Furthermore, this study will be beneficial for organizations regardless of the industry in order for them to consider an action in regard to gender discrimination that arises at the workplace as the root of the issue is emphasised in this study. Other than that, the study is also conducive to employees regardless of the gender as it is crucial for the employees to have a professional workplace environment as well as efficient without being discriminated due to a person's gender. Thus, this study assists the employees in an organization to be able to oppose against discrimination by taking a proper action in order for problems that have been mentioned regarding this issue to be prevented. As the result, a professional environment at the workplace hinders numerous problems which revolve around the issue thus, the employees are able to be efficient and their performance will not be interfered.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Gender Roles

Even with the current development and modernization, some organizations still have the same mindset and practise the same ideology. Workplace has been a war field for female against gender roles. This ideology is so deeply ingrained in our workplace culture and it sees men as the better performers compared to women. Gender roles, such as differences in trustworthiness and work acknowledgement, are failing our society from achieving equality as women will always be seen as the inferior gender compared to men.

Gender roles are something that feminists have been fighting for to create the true and full equality between the genders. However, they are indeed the common issues in a workplace. Based on Bibi (2016), women are said to be able to perform well on a task only because either they are lucky, or the task is too easy while men are credited for their own ability and skills in performing if they executed a task excellently. Bibi (2016) also mentioned in her article that if failures were to occur during tasks, men are often assumed to fail because of their bad luck or they just did not put enough effort while female will get blamed to not be skillful enough for the task. This ideology proves the inequality in stereotyping that women are often seen as the less capable gender compared to the men.

Aside from that, women are often unable to participate in these male dominated fields because of the gender stereotypes created since decades ago that do not give the females any trust to work alongside with males (Alesina et al, 2013). It is also mentioned that in history, women are seen as the role to take care of domestic matters, stay inside their homes and not bothering the outside world, while men are the ones who are responsible to do all the hard labor and deal with issues outside of the house which shows that women are seen as the fragile, less capable and unreliable gender.

Gender roles that are mirrored in common workplace culture often see women as the less reliable gender that do not deserve acknowledgement as they are not as skillful as men. These stereotypes are preventing women from reaching their true potential as they are not given the right platform that they deserve. With time and effort to educate the society, it is not impossible to reach equality in a workplace setting and abolish the stereotypes towards any gender that can cause any issues or disadvantages to anyone.

4.2. Interaction Style

Issues related to gender in the workplace are quite common in Malaysia considering our country is male dominated in the working world generally. A survey done by (Celine, 2016) in Malaysia, who is a part of Hays Specialist Recruitment found that 89 percent of the people who responded, of both genders, mentioned that the most experienced employee within their organization are males (Celine, 2016). Meanwhile, 59 percent highlighted that their line manager is also male. Christina Wright who is the Managing Director of Hays in the Asian region talked about how we have celebrated a lot on International Women's Day across Asia, however, many argued that the progression towards workplace gender equality is disturbed by the lack of people, who are of the female gender, who fail to see any problem (Celine, 2016). It is a fact that most people in senior leadership roles are still men, it is hard to see how gender equality can be accelerated when many of the people in the positions that have influence do not see any inequality to begin with (Celine, 2016). One of the elements that influences and relates to gender issues in the workplace is communication style. The different communication styles contribute to the differences in interpreting the message and the way the different genders view how communication work.

Communication styles are different between male and female. According to Bem and Merchant, as stated in (Timko, 2017) men's ways of communicating are task-oriented and assertive while women's ways of communicating are relationship oriented and expressive. Furthermore, the writer highlighted that female leaders are more engaging as compared to the opposite gender. There were also various features of communication style that were highlighted representing both genders. Some of the features were that women are more invested in the process of communication and making connections. Whereas men see communication as a tool for a set of goals and to portray dominance. When men communicate, they think about delivering information and to establish status. Opposite to men, women think of delivering information and to build connections. (Mohindra & Azhar, 2012). Furthermore, Mohindra and Azhar (2012) stated that women avoid using aggressive language that are threatening despite their position in the workplace and they tend to discuss more personal issues like feelings and relationships. There are also features categorized as report talk and rapport talk where report talk focuses on the content and the knowledge on the subject matter that is being discussed by parties involved while rapport talk is used as a tool to establish relationship and make people involved in that relationship to feel closer as mentioned by Mohindra and Azhar (2012). It has also been stated that there are various communication behaviours that differentiate between men and women which have features such as reason and logic for men and feeling and empathy for women (Mohindra & Azhar, 2012). Lastly, other than the mentioned features, there are also different levels of communication between the interaction of different genders. The points highlighted above are the communication style of men and women.

In conclusion, gender issues in a workplace are the issues that have to be taken seriously. This is especially important to take note of the things that may contribute to the issues. As highlighted in this particular journal, the issues are about gender roles and the different communication styles between genders. Both of these issues have the potential to grow into a bigger problem if they were to be taken lightly.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is the quantitative approach. Quantitative approach is an approach that has numbers as the base of the analysis of results of the study to be generalized in relation to a phenomenon (Regonial, 2015). The justification of the choice of method used is that the study carried out and the research questions can be answered using quantifying methods. Due to the specificity of the question asked in relation to topics. Opposite to qualitative method that has narrative quality when describing its findings, quantitative method is chosen because numbers are able to be extracted from its findings.

5.2 Population and Sample

Population refers to the total amount of the items or cases that act as the subject of a research (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). The population of our study are the people who have experience in the working field. This research used the purposive sampling which is also known as the judgement sampling. The sample of this study includes the participants who have working experience whether the respondents' are employed or unemployed in the present time. This is because our focus is to highlight the opinions that people have on the issue that we have chosen. Hence, the population is not specified or focused on a certain group of people but as long as the respondents have or had the experience in the working world. However, for the sampling of the study, we managed to gather 33 responses. The responses came from people of different background and views on the issues highlighted.

5.3 Instrument

The instrument used for this study is a survey. The survey consists of twelve (12) questions. It consists of three (3) sections. One of which is a section on the demographic information of the respondents. The other two (2) sections are sections that consist of questions that represent each of the topics in our theme which are gender roles and interaction style and both sections have four (4) questions. All the questions formed were answered using the Likert scale ranging from options strongly disagree to strongly agree.

5.4 Method of Data Collection

The data was collected by distributing the online survey to the respondents by using the Whatsapp application. The researchers posted the link that led the respondents to the Google Form page where the online survey was located in the Whatsapp application. After reaching 33 respondents, the online survey was closed to further conduct the case study with the data that was successfully gathered from the online survey.

5.5 Method of Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected from the online survey was done by using the descriptive analysis method. Based on Zikmund (2003), descriptive analysis refers to the change of "raw data into a form that will make them easy to understand and interpret; rearranging, ordering, and manipulating data to generate descriptive information". The data was tabulated into bar charts to analyze the results. The analysis of data was done by focusing on the frequency in which it was presented in percentage.

Next, the comparison of the percentages of each options which was the Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree in every statement was done to study the options that were prominent and which options were less prominent. This was done to come out with a conclusion on which options received many votes from the respondent to see whether the findings match with the previous research on the gender issues at the workplace topic.

6. Findings

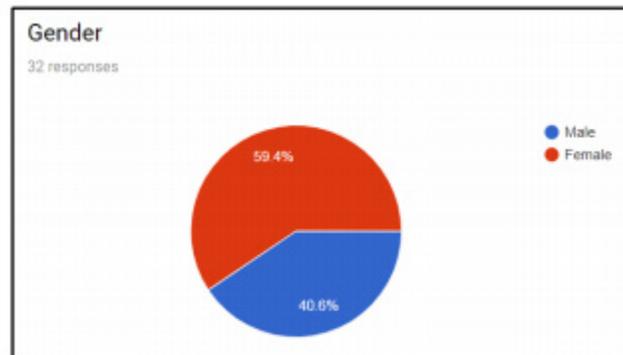


Figure 1 - Gender

Based on figure 1, the results showed that majority of the respondents were female with a percentage of 59.4%. The total of male respondents were 40.6%. This showed that there were more female participants in answering the online survey regarding the gender issues at the workplace.

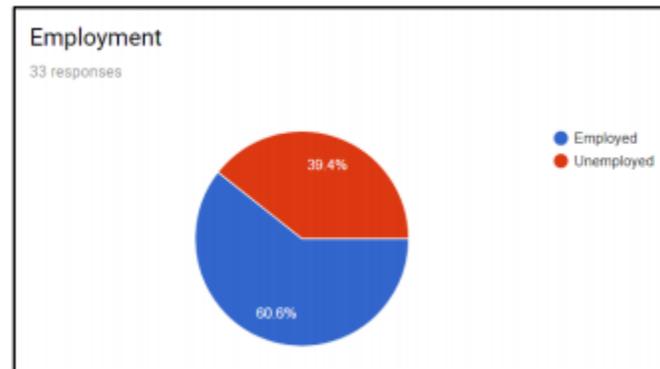


Figure 2- Employment

Figure 2 shows the results of the respondents' employment status. Based on the pie chart, it can be seen that majority of respondents with a percentage of 60.6% were employed and 39.4% of the respondents were unemployed. Since this study aimed to focus on gender issues at the workplace, the employment status of the respondents were reliable as most of the respondents were working. In addition, as for the unemployed respondents, they might answer the survey based on their past internship or working experiences.

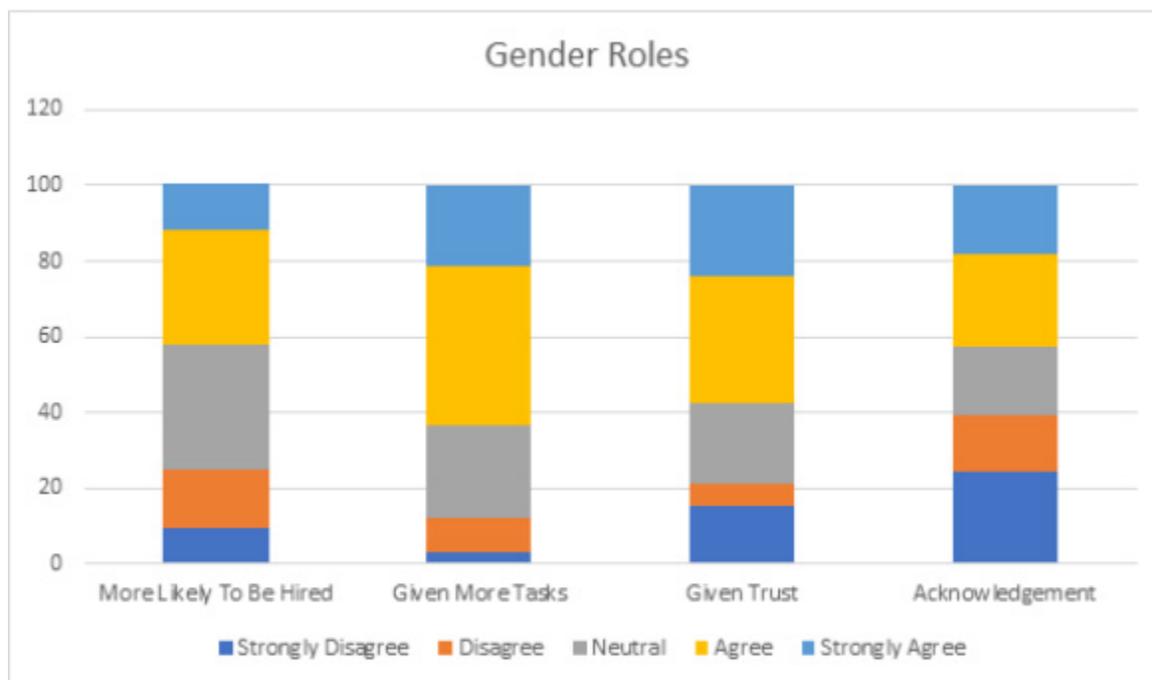


Figure 3 - Gender Roles

Figure 3 - Gender Roles

In answering the first research question of this study which is how do the differences in gender roles influence the communication at the workplace, the outcome of the process of analysing the data of this research, shows that in response of the question “Are men more likely to be hired compared to women?”, 9.1% of the respondents had strongly disagreed while 15.2% disagreed. 33.3% of the respondents had neutral feelings about this matter, 30.3% agreed and 12.1% of them had strongly agreed. Given that the total percentage of respondents that agreed on this matter is 42.4, which is 18.1% more than those who disagreed, the researchers can boldly say that the data is sturdily supporting the statement made by Alesina et al (2011) that women are given less career opportunity compared to men because they are assumed to be less capable compared to the gender of Adam. The second focus that was questioned in this section is whether men actually are given more tasks in terms of the amount and also the significance of the assignments compared to women also has the same expected response as per what Alesina et al (2011) had written in her journal, which the data had numbered the respondents that answered with “strongly disagreed” as 3% of the whole sample, 9.1% answered with “disagreed” and 24.2% with “neutral”. In contrast, a significant amount of respondents which is 42.4% of them agreed and 21.2% strongly agreed to the statement. Next question in this section is about women not being trusted with certain tasks while men usually have the dominant power when it comes to executing projects acquired the collection of answers that weighed more towards agreeing with a number of 15.2% people answered with “strongly disagree”. 6.1% with “disagree”, 21.2% with plain “neutral”, 33.3% with “agree” and 24.2% with “strongly agree”. Given the weight that is placed more on agreeing with this statement, it can be seen that it actually appeals to the idea introduced by Zaman et al (2011) which translates to men seeing themselves as the dominant gender and also with how women are seen as the weaker gender which in most case, resulting to the struggle that women need to go through just to get promoted or acknowledged. Deaux and Farris (1977 as cited in Zaman et al, 2011) posited that in certain workplaces, when women achieve anything significant or managed to perform the tasks that they are assigned to excellently, those accomplishments are viewed as their good fortune or the tasks are easy.

This statement gained an almost balanced jumble of answers which 24.2% of the respondents strongly disagreed to it, 15.2% disagreed, 18.2% felt plainly neutral, 24.2% agreed and 18.2% strongly agreed. Even though the responses are leaning more to the crowds agreeing to it, the difference of one extra person agreed to the statement is considered as too little to make any remarkable decision about.

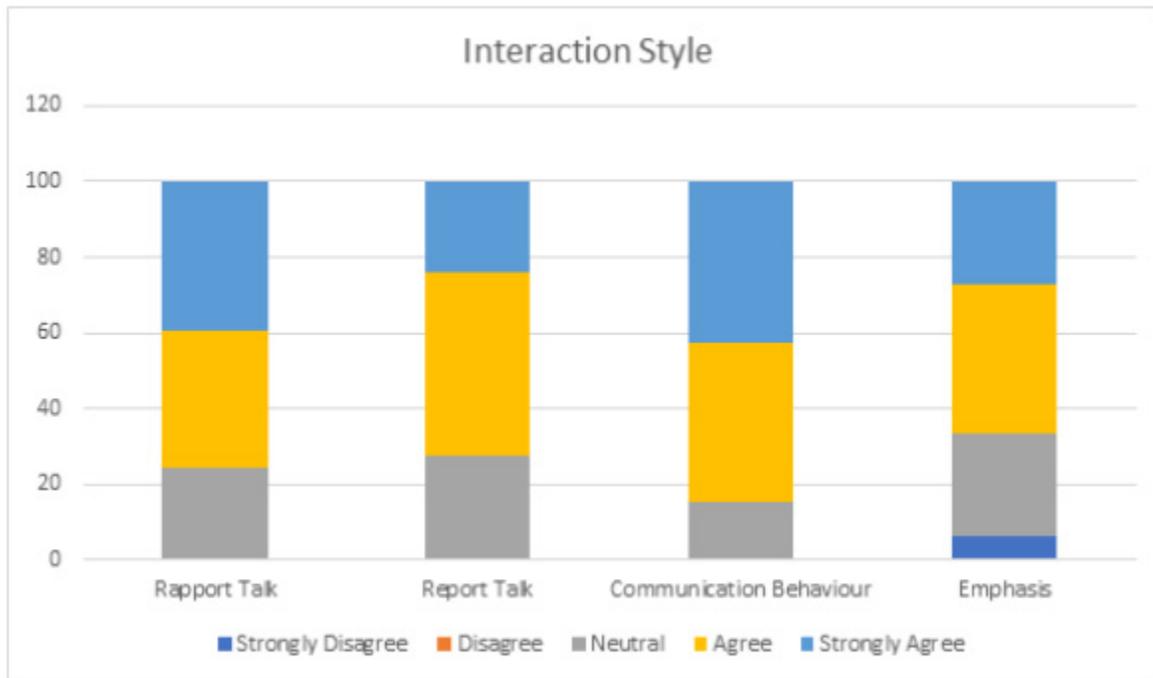


Figure 4 - Interaction Style

For the second research question, in which the differences in interaction style influence the communication at the workplace were questioned, it can be seen through the graph above which highlights the issue of interaction style of the different genders it can be seen that in rapport talk section, with the statement “rapport talk is a tool used to establish relationship” the selection “neutral” has 24.2%, “agree” with 36.4% and “strongly agree” with 39.4%. This particular finding is supported by Kamarul Zaman Ahmad (2014) when he found that females express their emotions and do not hesitate to express it to others and it directly correlates to the fact that being able to express yourself to someone does help you to build a relationship. Next, for the report talk section, with the statement “report talk focuses on the content and is used to demonstrate knowledge” 27.3% had neutral responses on the issue, 48.5% agreed with the statement and 24.2% respondents strongly agreed with the statement. This result is supported by another literature review from Mohindra and Azhar (2012) that stated when men communicate, they think about delivering information and to establish status which relates to the statement in the questionnaire where report talk focuses on the content and for demonstration of knowledge. Furthermore, for the communication behaviour section with the statement “communication behaviour plays an important role in delivering the message effectively”, 15.2% responded with “neutral”, 42.4% equally for both the responses “agree” and “strongly agree”. This finding was also supported by World Health Organization (2017) stating that message design has an influence on the effectiveness of a message which also means that how you deliver a message is important. Last but not least, the statement about women emphasising on the emotional aspects and men emphasising on the status and dominance at different levels of communication, 6.1% of the respondents reacted with strongly disagree while 27.3% responded with “neutral”. 39.4% reacted with “agree” and 27.3% with “strongly agree” This is also a way to differentiate between men and women which have features such as reason and logic for men and feeling and empathy for women (Mohindra, Samina Azhar, 2012)

In conclusion, through the analysis that has been done in order to answer the first research question, the results were gathered to show that most of the respondents agreed to the statements that are concurring to the fact that gender roles do exist in the seams of common workplace settings. Aside from other effects that might come along with the presence of gender roles, it also affects the communication at the workplace as the consequence of the dissatisfaction caused by discrimination faced by women. Thus, it is safe to say that gender roles do influence the communication at the workplace. Shifting the focus onto the second research question, the results of the questionnaire were translated to show that interaction style does contribute to gender issues at workplace. Majority of the respondents agreed that rapport talk and report talk have their own roles and it is reflected in the findings that each type of talks is used by the specified gender. The differences in these two types of talk have the possibility to cause other issues to rise from misinterpretation of message and so on.

7. Discussions

This section will highlight the significant findings and its implications. For the section highlighting about gender roles, the first issue in question was relating to hireability of men and women that men is more likely to be hired than women and 33.3% of the respondents had neutral feelings about this matter. The higher hireability rate that men enjoy resulted to the limited conversations joined by women in the working industry, making men the dominant gender to participate in workplace communication. Through this, it also can be seen that men would have the majority say in discussions as their gender make up most of the employees. The second focus that were questioned in this section is whether “men actually are given more tasks in terms of the amount and also the significance of the assignments compared to women” where a significant amount of respondents which is 42.4% of them agreed. Next question in this section is about “women not being trusted with certain tasks while men usually have the dominant power when it comes to executing projects acquired” which recorded the highest number of responses with the selection of “agree” at 33.3% and for the final statement “when women achieve anything significant or managed to perform the tasks that they are assigned to excellently, those accomplishments are viewed as their good fortune or the tasks are easy”, it gained an almost balanced jumble of answers which 24.2% of the people strongly disagreed and agreed to it equally, 15.2% disagreed, 18.2% felt plainly neutral and 18.2% strongly agreed. Both of these data show that men are given more trust to execute tasks. Ergo, it portrays the credibility of women’s voice in an organization (i.e. in major meetings, women are often not given the authority to have the final say in any crucial issues.)

Based on the research question two which was “how do the differences in interaction style influence the communication at the workplace?”, there were a few things that can be highlighted from what was found. The major findings that showed that there were differences in interaction style between both genders. It can be seen from the findings that it has an impact on communication at the workplace. Based on the first and second question which were “rapport talk is a tool used to establish relationship” the selection “strongly agree” has the highest percentage with 39.4% and “report talk focuses on the content and is used to demonstrate knowledge” with 48.5% agreeing with the statement . These two questions are linked to one another as rapport talk and report talk are the different styles used by the different genders to communicate. It does have an influence on the communication at the workplace because both styles have different functions. (Tannen, 2007) stated that report talk is all about relaying information about things that are not personal which is frequently used by men. It was also stated that men talk more in a setting that is formal and public context like meetings. This goes to show that report talk is used more frequently in a formal setting. Unlike report talk, (Tannen, 2007) mentioned that rapport talk acts as “glue” that bonds people together and it is probably the reason why women are considered as the more active speakers. Hence, referring back to the research question above, it can be said that the interaction style does influence the communication at workplace due to its different functions. When the functions of both style is different, the organization might not be able to reach the goals set. This may be due to misunderstandings that may occur due to the inability to communicate efficiently.

The goal of communication is different between genders as highlighted in the literature review and the discussion itself where females focus on the emotional elements while communicating and males focus on getting the task done when they communicate at the workplace.

8. Conclusions

The first research question that was sparked in this study is “How do the differences in gender roles influence the communication at the workplace?” In answering this question, the researchers managed to come to a conclusion where gender roles do contribute to the imbalance of workplace communication which leads to gender inequality. Hale (1999) mentioned that it is indeed a typical situation to see the male dominating the conversations and all decision-making dialogues. This is due to the subconscious cues that exist in traditional workplace setting that allows men to hold more power than women. Most women are found helpless in these situations as this traditional mindset of ‘men should be in charge for most things’ are also practiced by some women, thus decreasing the amount of support can be collected in order to encourage and give women the same opportunity as men - diminishing gender inequality in workplace. To briefly conclude our findings based on the second research question which was “How do the differences in interaction style influence the communication at the workplace?”, generally, the two different interaction styles of both gender do have an effect on workplace communication. Due to the different functions of the report talk and rapport talk, it contributes to the issues of communication in the workplace. The impact that an organization may experience due to the different interaction styles is the inability to reach certain goals because of the failure to communicate efficiently. This statement is well supported by (Brenner, 2017) stating that failure to communicate on a daily basis may result to a bigger problem in the future such as losing their purpose and unable to reach their goals. Both females and males, through the different communication styles which are rapport talk and report talk focus on different things such as the emotional elements for women and getting the task done for men.

9. Implication of study

The results obtained from the questionnaire revealed that they were aligned and correlated with previous researches, thus, these results can be used in order to strengthen those researches. The outcome of this study has the credibility to provide a platform for future researchers to conduct the same study but on a bigger scale, which the findings would actually be able to assist future employers to build a better environment for their employees.

10. Suggestion for Future Research

Researchers that are going to use this research as their starting blocks for future research should use a wider sample for their respondents and more experienced workers should be approached as they have more experience in the working field which promises the fact that they would have more contact with such issues mentioned in this research. Since this research only focuses on the impact of the issue, studies on the reasons and causes of this matter itself should be looked into.

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