Cultural impact on e-service use in Saudi Arabia: 

The need for Service Oriented Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a mixed method approach to answer: To what extent do cultural values impact on e-service use in Saudi Arabia, and if so how? This paper will firstly, introduce the importance of culture and define the aspects of Saudi culture with focus on our scope: the need for Service Oriented Culture. It will then, briefly, describe the method used and present the qualitative and quantitative findings related to the need for Service Oriented Culture. This research aims to cover a gap in the literature by investigating to what extent the presence of Service Oriented Culture, as one of Saudi Arabia’s cultural values, impacts on e-service use in Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly, the tested hypothesis was rejected: the presence of Service Oriented Culture is not a positive predictor of Intention to Use e-services in Saudi Arabia. It is evidenced that consideration of the impact of the cultural values will mainly contribute to the enhancement of ICTs implementation and use.

Keywords

Culture, Cultural impact, Service oriented culture, e-service, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Culture has become a very important factor in Information and Communication Technology improvement. Definitions of culture in general entail the observation of rules, customs, responsibilities, and morals, which are affected by a range of levels of culture such as language, sexual characteristics, race, belief, geography, and employment. These aspects all influence interpersonal deeds (Ali, Brooks and Alshawi, 2008).

Cultural sensitivity may cause impediments, and require companies and governments to exert themselves to find a practical way to implement e-service. Culture is identified as an impediment to IT use by many researchers. It is a major factor, especially in Eastern countries who have interpersonal relationships exist even in business (Siriluck and Mark, 2005). Additionally, culture has been identified as a barrier to e-commerce by 62% of 89 Small and Medium Enterprises in 17 countries (Chappell and Feindt, 2000), and linked at 93.8% as a barrier to e-business adoption in construction (Aranda, Stewart and Stewart, 2005).

The unique feature of IT from other fields is its flexibility, which can result in similar products being implemented with very different forms and functions in different organisations (Cooper, 1994). However, much of the technology is designed and produced in developed countries, and the result is that it is “culturally-biased” in favour of their social and cultural values (Straub, Loch and Hill, 2001). Consequently, developing countries encounter cultural and social obstacles when attempting to transfer technology, created abroad, into practice at home. The culture of a country or region greatly affects the acceptance of technology through its beliefs and values about modernization and technological development.
The sensitivity to cultural diversity plays an essential role in the success/failure of e-business (Kundi and Shah, 2007), and a successful system interface the design should consider cultural values, and keep in mind national culture. Since culture plays a vital role influencing technology implementation and use, this paper, as part of a full study, discusses the method and results of a mixed method study to measure the values of Saudi culture.

SAUDI CULTURE

There are many principles that form Saudi’s culture, based firstly on religion, then the tribal system. Saudi Arabia has a unique position in the Islamic world since it is home to the two Holy Mosques for Muslims. Islam plays a significant role in Saudi’s culture by defining the social manners, traditions, obligations, and practices of society. Kinship and tribal systems still impact on the individual’s place in society and could affect their success or failure, both in the traditional and in the new areas of activity. In fact, the tribal system considered a major impact on the work place (Al-Shehry, Rogerson, Fairweather and Prior, 2006).

Islam, as the first element of Saudi culture, sets the moral principles and behaviours in society through the Koran (the holy book) and the Sunna (the sayings and practices of the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him). The Koran has been a unifying force that significantly impacts and acts as a driver to create a common culture and legal system, Sharia, in the Arabic countries. Equality is ensured for all regardless of their health or wealth or any other criteria since the Muslim community is a brotherhood. The widespread statement is that morals come from religion (Hofstede, 1998).

Family is a highly valued part of the Muslim society, and its significance can be perceived from high to non-educated people in all types of living; Bedouin, rural, and urban. In these societies, self-interest comes after the family-interests (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002). Family importance has been emphasised by the Koran and the Sunna. Individuals are expected to sustain good relations with their relatives and provide help when needed rather than being generous to others. This interdependence in a network of relationships offers security to individuals through attachment and commitment to their groups, more than separateness and privacy. As part of the strong values towards group and family collectivism, leaders are expected to behave in a “paternalistic” (p.51) style and provide employment opportunities and privileges to the in-groups, family members, and relatives of their own and employees. Many managers are criticized for providing privileges to their followers who are totally unproductive, which is regarded as an unethical conduct. The person who is in a more powerful position solves many personal problems of the dependents, like helping in finding job opportunities, a place in a hospital for family members or personal business in a police station (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002).

Arab culture is the second source that forms Saudi culture and a strong predictor of resistance to IT transfer (Straub, Loch and Hill, 2001). Hill, Loch, Straub and El-Sheshai (1998) described the key characteristics of Arabs as: fatalism, culture of mind versus culture of heart, open versus closed mind, and vertical versus horizontal values. Different from their believes, individuals in vertical societies view the self as differing from others along a hierarchy; they accept inequality and believe that rank has its privileges. Religion, family, and national traditions often negatively affecting the acceptance of new innovations. The Arab culture stresses the importance of home and the traditional nature of its influence on adopting new technologies; culture sets the agenda for people’s social lives. Straub et al. (2001) contend that Arab societies (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the Sudan) negotiate their technological issues within the context of their culture. Cultural conflicts between the organisation and management style of Western and Arab business leaders and workers have influenced the system development process and result in unsuccessful approaches to computer use and policy.

SERVICE ORIENTED CULTURE

It is extensively acknowledged that successful organisations need to have a customer-oriented business culture. This culture helps understand customer needs, which consequently lead to their satisfaction and increase in the organisation’s productivity (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Service oriented culture is essential especially for firms in the service sector (Dimitriades, 2007).

Our concept of service orientation is to put the customer as the focus in each step an organisation undertake. Similarly, there are various definitions for service orientation. It is “a set of basic individual predispositions and an inclination to provide service, to be courteous and helpful in dealing with customers and associates” (Cran, 1994; p.36). Another defined it as “the satisfaction of customer needs at the level of the employee-customer interaction” (Dimitriades, 2007; p.470). Relatively consistent with the latter, Hogan, Hogan, and Busch (1984) view service orientation as “a set of attitudes and behaviours that affects the quality of the interaction between the staff of any organisation and its customers” (Hogan et al., 1984; p.167). It also “refers to the extent to which an organisation and the individuals within an organisation focus their efforts on understanding and satisfying customers” (Huff and Kelley, 2005; p.97). Some described service culture as “a willingness to go above and beyond or to go the extra mile” (Brady and Cronin, 2001; p.243). “Gronroos (1990) defined service culture as a culture where an appreciation for good service exists and where giving good service to internal as well as ultimate, external
customers is considered a natural way of life and one of the most important norms by everyone” (Zerbe, Dobni, and Harel, 1998; p.168). Service orientation differentiates “between the maximum amount of effort and care that an individual could bring to his or her job, and the minimum amount of effort required to avoid being fired or penalized” (Berry et al., 1988; p.38).

Culture is a major determinant of service quality as one aspect of service orientation. Furrer, Liu, and Sudharshan (2000) argue that perceptions of service quality are different from one culture to another. They developed a Cultural Service Quality Index (CSQI) that evaluates the relative importance of the most commonly used five dimensions of the service quality measure SERVQUAL (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, and empathy) as a function of the five cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede. 21 out of 25 of their hypotheses supported that culture has an important influence on service quality expectations and the relative importance of its five dimensions (Furrer et al., 2000).

Huff and Kelley (2005) investigated the impact level of national culture on developing relationships between an organisation and its external partners. They have used one dimension of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (individualism/collectivism) and then proposed hypotheses regarding national differences in the level of four measures: organisational members’ propensity to trust, internal and external organisational trust and customer orientation. They found that managers in the US have higher levels of trust and customer orientation than their counterparts in six Asian countries (South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia). Two surprising findings: Malaysia was almost the same as the US in customer orientation level and Japan was the lowest between the six countries (Huff and Kelley, 2005). People from collective cultures (those who usually behave as groups (e.g. family, tribe … etc.) and not as individuals) may struggle to develop good relationships with customers they do not personally know who are regarded as members of out-groups (those from different family, tribe, country etc.). This study shows variation between the seven studied countries on all of the measures, “and shows that organisations from individualist countries may have inherent advantages because of their culture in developing customer orientations and external relationships” (Huff and Kelley, 2005). However, this is not the case in collectivist countries. The common stereotype of jobs, especially in the public sector, in Saudi Arabia, is considered to be a financial source to cope with life expenses and not a way improve customer service.

Berry et al. (1988) provided recommendations on how to improve service orientation culture and contend they can be implemented through “a systematic step-by-step journey” (p.42). Organisations should state their service standards based on customer expectations, then transform ideas provided by either employees or customers into reality, which in turn motivates companies to always keep service improvement in mind. Performance should be measured through all of those standards and exceptional performance should be acknowledged. These steps, if implemented as a never-ending process, would increase the employees’ capability and willingness to perform. They conclude that attitudes, habits, knowledge, and skills of human beings cannot be rapidly changed, however intelligent business leaders can foster this change process by building a service-oriented culture (Berry et al., 1988).

**METHODS USED TO MEASURE SERVICE-ORIENTATION**

Measurement of service orientation is a challenge especially in the non-profit sector, which is our focus. Compared to the profit sector that uses measures like Return On Investment (ROI), non-profit sector relies on non-quantitative measures (Gainera and Padanyi, 2005). Hogan et al. (1984) wrote on how to measure service orientation in practical selection contexts. They have developed a measure of service orientation that mainly considers aspects of job performance like those unrelated to technical competence, but critical for maintaining good customer relations. The measures were derived from a personality inventory (Hogan, 1983) that is based on a theory of human performance. They inferred that “service orientation is a syndrome containing elements of good adjustment, likeability, social skill, and willingness to follow rules” (Hogan et al., 1984; p.173).

Brady and Cronin (2001) argue that assessing customer orientation of an organisation should be driven by its customers. They have implemented this in their study by measuring customers’ opinion about two dimensions: “value and physical goods quality and customer orientation” (Brady and Cronin, 2001; p.244).

According to Cran (1994), Hogan et al. in 1984 introduced the Service Orientation Index (SOI) that contains 92-item extracted from the 310-item Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI). The scale is now compromised of 14 items classified under three subscales:

1. **Empathy**: a measure of ease and grace in interpersonal situations
2. **Virtuous**: a measure of prissiness and perfectionism
3. **Sensitive**: a measure of interpersonal sensitivity (Cran, 1994).
Dimitriades (2007) measured service orientation culture using the following seven items:

1. “I am assisting co-workers to deliver high-quality customer oriented services”.
2. To serve my customers, I volunteer for things that are not required.
3. I make innovative suggestions to improve customer service.
4. I expend considerable energy to come up with creative ways to assist customers facing problems.
5. I attend functions that are not required but that help customer service.
6. I exchange ideas with colleagues on how to improve customer service.
7. I deal restless with customer problems until they are resolved” (Dimitriades, 2007; p.478).


Zerbe et al. (1998) surveyed a sample of airline employees who directly interact with customers. They focused on the kind of service culture the company has and the employees’ self-reported service behaviour between various other aspects. They reported that “the use of this self-report measure relies on the honesty of respondents in describing their behaviour toward customers. Employees may choose to describe their behaviour toward customers in unrealistically positive terms so as to appear to be good employees” (Zerbe et al., 1998; p.171).

In conclusion, service orientation is found to produce beneficial outcomes either for profit or non-profit organisations. Many researchers refer to the importance of a service culture but few have formally defined or put the construct into operation (Zerbe et al., 1998). The presence of service orientation is considered as a means of retaining and satisfying customers (Dimitriades, 2007; Parasuraman, 1987) and should be prompted within organisations. This kind of cultural change requires time and tangible actions rather than only written policies (Parasuraman, 1987; Fertman, White and White, 1996). “It would be predicted that employees who have a greater sense of obligation toward a firm would provide higher quality of service” (Zerbe et al., 1998; p.174). High quality service will increase with respect to an increase in the willingness of Saudi employees to use e-services. Thus, we propose the following:

**The presence of Service Oriented Culture is a positive predictor of intention to use e-services in Saudi Arabia.**

The expected outcome of this hypothesis is that the more a participant scores on the service oriented culture items the more likely s/he intends to use e-service as a result.

**CONSTRUCT’S FOUNDATION**

This study aimed to measure the cultural impact on e-service use in Saudi Arabia. Since most of the cultural studies conducted in Saudi Arabia used the existing global cultural indices (e.g. Hofstede, GLOBE), culture here was measured with special attention to the Saudi context through using new constructs. These constructs were built after conducting Focus Groups in Saudi Arabia with two different categories. The first category was e-service general users, and the second was experts from the Saudi e-government program (Yesser); the government organisation that plays the role of enabling the implementation of e-government in Saudi Arabia. Both categories were divided into two groups with respect to their age (30 years and below, and 31 years and above). Thematic Analysis was undertaken to analyze the Focus Groups data and resulted in fifty-five key issues; only four of them were specific to Saudi culture (Figure 1) and needed more investigation, while the remaining confirmed what have been discussed in the literature. Our scope in this article is only one construct: the need for Service Oriented Culture. The following paragraph states the construct’s foundations:

This construct assumes that organisations in Saudi Arabia are not service oriented as most of the public sector employees see their job as a financial source to cope with their lives and not as a way to contribute to society and this is one of the reasons they do not care about serving customers as indicated by the Focus Groups participants.

Most of the focus groups participants expressed dissatisfaction with the Saudi public sector organisations. One said: they “are not customer focused; they do not have organisations as the service oriented culture”. Simply put, the customer is the last thing they think about.
Reasons behind the lack of service orientation in Saudi organisations in general and public sector specifically are various. One is the disrespect of “work conduct”. Another as stated by one of the participants is that:

“People who have authority are not interested in implementing e-services because whatever business they need, they can do it easily by abusing their position. As a result, they do not care if e-business is implemented correctly or not, what they care about is that their and their relatives’ business is done”.

Most public sector employees see their job as the financial source to cope with their lives and not as a way to contribute to society and thus they do not care about serving customers. Government could be responsible for the latter reason since it appears to citizens that one of its “obligation is to recruit 70% of its people”, an Expert participant said. Equally important is the lack of strategic goals of some organisations that has enhanced the issue. One participant said “that we are operational culture; we come to work without knowing what goals need to be achieved and strategies need to be followed, so today is exactly as yesterday and tomorrow will be the same”.

Maintaining good quality customer service is an important issue when doing business either traditionally or electronically. One participant mentioned an example about the advanced experience in e-service use of Malaysia by saying:

“I’m not talking about a developed country; if I’m a Malaysian organisation that issues driving licenses for citizens my aim will be the way citizens receive the service. This is the kind of culture we miss in Saudi Arabia and if we continue not to have it, we might only have been partial but not the full success”.

By contrast in Saudi Arabia, there are some organisations that have excellent e-services but bad interaction behaviour with customers at the same time. An interviewee stated the example of:

“a public sector organisation and one of the best of current e-services providers. They use the Internet, databases, service centres, kiosks, Interactive Voice Response (IVR), and the traditional way of doing business. In addition they are working on the awareness improvement through the different means of media, but in terms of their regulations, the quality of service and the interaction with customers, there are always issues as in some other organisations”.

Another participant emphasised this by stating: “if we have such an issue this would be because of the quality of organisation’s interaction with customers”.

To conclude, organisations should do more to improve their services; the Saudi Arabian Department of Zakat and Income Tax, for instance, still as one of the interviewees said: “ask for information from other organisations while they should be the base of e-government as tax departments in other countries”. “People have several issues like the traffic and need clear, convenient and fast process procedures and good interaction”. Finally, a participant concluded his answer by saying “I wish to see our public sector concentrating on serving customers like some private sector companies do, even if the outcomes are different (i.e. money in case of private and service for public sector)”.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed method approach to answer: To what extent do cultural values impact on e-service use in Saudi Arabia, and if so how? Cultural theories, dimensions, and models previously identified in the literature in addition to the following two phases were obtained in an attempt to answer this question.

Sampling procedure (qualitative phase)

During sampling the researchers sought to reduce the risk of obtaining invalid data by targeting specific participants who would provide valuable contribution to the topic especially in the exploratory stage (Coyne, 1997). Focus groups, especially as one of the various qualitative methods are frequently conducted with purposively selected samples (Morgan, 1997). This study used a convenience sampling procedure for two important reasons. Groups can be selected quickly, and the potential participants can be readily identified. This technique, as Teddlie and Yu (2007) contend, “involves drawing samples that are both easily accessible and willing to participate in a study” (Teddlie and Yu, 2007; p.78). It is indeed a validated sampling technique where the researcher recruits the potential participants through the convenient available resources for him/her. There were two criteria to identify the potential participants of our study: the age (younger group 30 years old and below, and older group 31 years old and above), and the willingness to participate.

Consequently, four focus groups were conducted in Saudi Arabia. Each focus group lasts between 60 – 90 minutes and has 4 – 6 participants of experts and users. The Experts’ groups are comprised of the staff of Yesser who expose to various implementation experiences as part of their daily duties and that was one of the rationales behind choosing Yesser only. While General users (customers) are the users of IT online business and e-government services in the general public. Since
the Experts samples belong to an organisation, it has been approached directly. While the general users who are the second target group were recruited from an English language Academy because of the variety of people attending it and the availability of the venue for the focus groups to meet. The initial questions were broad in order to attract as much information as possible, while the last one was specifically designed to refer to our topic. Although both groups have six questions, there was a slight difference in the questions for each one.

**Sampling procedure (quantitative phase)**

Using snowballing technique, employees of public and private sector in Saudi Arabia were targeted for this study. Snowball is a sampling technique that is “based on social network logic whereby people are linked by a set of social relationships and contacts” (Petersen and Valdez, 2005). According to the Saudi Ministry of Civil Service (2011), public sector employees in Saudi Arabia number over one million (1,098,127) in 2010, while in the private sector only 724,655 Saudi employees registered in the same year (the Saudi Ministry of Labour). The link to the online questionnaire was sent to 195 emails from the researcher’s personal list asking them to participate and invite their colleagues and friends to participate as well. The same invitation letter was also posted on the researcher’s personal profile on facebook, and a modified message (because of the characteristic length restrictions) on Twitter. The invitation message was written in Arabic and included a brief about the research, the research team and their contact details, the research ethics committee approval and their contact details for any complaint or comments on the research conduct.

One of the disadvantages of snowball sampling is the difficulty of “obtaining parameters of representation” (Petersen and Valdez, 2005). Sample selection and size influence “the kind of statistical procedure” (p.7) and consequently they reduce the potentiality of generalisation (Bazely, 2004). Consequently, a first follow up email was sent one week after the questionnaire was opened, and then a second and last email was sent one week before closing it thanking those who completed the questionnaire and reminding who not completed or started.

Although quantitative methods are less likely to be used alone, they “appear to be better delineated and more focused than qualitative” (Morse, 2003; p.192). As a result of the individual interviews and focus groups we conducted earlier, and since most of the cultural studies conducted in Saudi Arabia used the existing global cultural indices, culture here was measured with special attention to the new identified Saudi cultural values. These new built constructs needed to be examined in wider population in order to confirm and build the final framework of cultural values. This method has been selected to confirm the critical cultural values that impact on e-service use in Saudi Arabia and be able to generalise it. This illustrated the first part of our research model (Figure 1), which is culture. The second part measures the use of e-service in Saudi Arabia using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) designed by (Davis, 1989). Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use were measured using six indicators for each one of them. The remaining two factors of TAM were measured using one statement each. There were some modifications in the statements to fit the study context.

![Figure 1. The research model](image-url)
Pilot study

The questionnaire was piloted in two phases; first phase has nine participants, while the second phase has twenty participants. They both contributed to the design of the questionnaire. Accordingly, our questionnaire was comprised of nine sections that include close-ended questions with ordered choices except the last two optional questions that were asking participants about their job title and comments on the questionnaire. Twelve indicators representing our scope construct were obtained from (Gainer and Padanyi, 2005).

RESULTS

The results of the qualitative phase were presented in the construct’s foundation section. Below is a summary of the quantitative phase results.

A total of 341 responses were received, 254 out of them were completed and valid for the analysis making the percentage of about 74.50%. 87 were excluded after checking the data against the missing values and outliers. Majorit (61.8%) of the participants ranged between 25 and 34 years old. In comparison one participant only was in the over 60s age group. Similarly, majority (70.5%) of our study participants were working for the public sector. Answers to the question about the education level were predefined in six different groups. About half of the participants (44%) have a master degree. Diploma and Doctoral degrees were similar, 18 participants for the former and 17 for the latter.

Our hypothesis was the presence of Service Oriented Culture is a positive (+) predictor of Intention to Use e-services in Saudi Arabia. Using Partial Least Squares (PLS) path analysis technique (Temme, Kreis and Hildebrandt, 2006), the results rejected this hypothesis by indicating a very weak negative path coefficient of -0.008. Reasons behind rejecting the hypothesis are more explained next in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

“In some cases people may use a system in order to comply with mandates from their superior, rather than due to their own feelings and beliefs about using it” (Davis et al., 1989; p.986). If an organisation lacks such mandates the presence of such culture will disappear. This is the case in the majority of the Saudi organisations that the qualitative results of this study confirmed.

Delone and McLean (2003) recommended to add “service quality” as a significant dimension of Information Systems success particularly in the e-commerce environment where customer service is vital (Delone and McLean, 2003). In the study context Saudi organisations were identified to have a lack of service-oriented culture. This study has attempted to prove the significance of service quality by placing it as a major determinant of e-service use in Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly, this study rejected the hypothesis: Service-oriented culture is a positive predictor of intention to use e-services in Saudi Arabia. It identified the presence of service-oriented culture in the Saudi organisations as a negative predictor of intention to use e-service. Sufficient efforts were made to ensure the usability of our instrument, however answers to this construct questions contradicted our hypothesis. Thus, an explanation that could be made for this result at this stage is a response bias that Arab participants popular with (Baron-Epel et al., 2010, Paulhus, 1991 and Smith, 2004) when answering such kind of self-reported questions. Or they did not understand the questions of this construct properly, and there is no other reason/s can be offered since sufficient efforts were made to make the questions clear and understandable. Of these efforts, questions of this construct were obtained from another validated study. Another is, since questions were translated from English to Arabic we have adopted the method of back translation through a certified translator to assure the translation accuracy. Moreover, our survey questionnaire was piloted twice using several methods like Q-sort, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Researchers investigating Arab population should pay attention to this issue to ease the analysis process and avoid unreliable results.

CONCLUSION

There are many organisations throughout the world that have failed to successfully implement and use e-service, especially in developing countries. Culture has been widely addressed as a reason behind this (Anderson and Swaminathan, 2011; Chappell and Feindt, 2000; Kundi and Shah, 2007). However, values that construct culture have not attracted the same attention. This paper tested the need for Service Oriented Culture as one of the Saudi cultural values that have not been studied sufficiently in the literature. Organisations should overcome the cultural barriers and acknowledge the presence of those values in order to better achieve successful engagement by their employees in e-service use.
REFERENCES


