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Abstract

In less than 30 years, Dubai has rapidly transformed from a traditional fishing village into a booming modern 'westernized' city, where expatriates form over 80% of the population of three million people. In this research, Emirati managers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the rapid societal and workplace transformations in the UAE. The frameworks used were the cross-cultural theories of Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars. The findings show that while there is an enduring traditional, collectivist and religious underpinning to Emirati managers' attitudes and practices, there has been a significant shift towards westernized management attitudes and practices. Theoretical and practical implications of the research are discussed.

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Abstract

In less than 30 years, Dubai has rapidly transformed from a traditional fishing village into a booming modern 'westernized' city, where expatriates form over 80% of the population of three million people. In this research, Emirati managers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the rapid societal and workplace transformations in the UAE. The frameworks used were the cross-cultural theories of Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars. The findings show that while there is an enduring traditional, collectivist and religious underpinning to Emirati managers' attitudes and practices, there has been a significant shift towards westernized management attitudes and practices. Theoretical and practical implications of the research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates is a paradox, especially the highly commercialized city of Dubai. In less than 30 years, Dubai has been rapidly transformed from a traditional Moslem fishing and pearling village, into a hyper-modern internationalized (and largely "westernized") city, with expatriates from over 120 countries forming over 80% of the current population of 1.2 million people. Indeed, Dubai is increasingly being branded as "The Las Vegas of the Middle East" or "The Disneyland of the Middle East". On the surface level of this largely traditional society, there is now, paradoxically, an abundance of 'glitz and glamour' and modernization. As a result of the recent and rapid societal changes in the UAE, there appears to be a major shift, and perhaps even a fracturing, in the cultural identity and lifestyle of indigenous Emiratis, from the traditional to the ultra-modern.

As part of a larger study into changes in societal and workplace values in the rapidly developing UAE, the main objective of this paper was to examine the rapidly changing management practices and attitudes of educated Emirati managers in Dubai. This paper discusses research in which 52 educated Emirati male and female managers completed questionnaires to explore their rapidly changing management values, practices and work ethic.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.

The main theoretical frameworks used were the cross-cultural management theories of Hofstede (1984) and Trompenaars (1997). These theories and their relevance to the present research will now be briefly discussed.

Hofstede pioneered cross-cultural workplace research. Based on data collected from 116,000 IBM employees from over 50 countries, he found that there were significant cultural differences between nations. Using statistical techniques such as factor analysis, his research distilled the major differences into five main dimensions in which a country can be ranked along a continuum, from low to high. Hofstede (1997, p5) described the dimensions as:

(1) *Power Distance* is 'the degree of inequality which the population of a country considers as normal'.

(2) *Uncertainty Avoidance* is 'the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations'.

(3) *Individualism* is 'the degree to which people in a country prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of groups'. A recent study found that due to increased wealth and education, the younger generation of Emiratis are more individualistic than their parents' or grandparents' generations (Whiteoak, Crawford and Mapstone, 2006).

(4) *Masculinity/Femininity* is 'the degree to which values like assertiveness, performance, success and competition, which in nearly all societies are associated with the role of men, prevail over values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, care for the weak and solidarity, which in nearly all societies are more associated with the role of women'.

(5) *Time Orientation,* is a dimension in which nations can be considered as being either short-term or long-term in orientation.

Despite some criticisms of his research, Hofstede's model has proven to be robust and has been the basis for many subsequent cross-cultural studies. The United Arab Emirates is characterized by Hofstede as high in power-distance, high in uncertainty-avoidance, low in individualism (i.e., high in collectivism), and mid-range in terms of masculinity/femininity.

More recently, research into cross-cultural workplace values has been undertaken by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), who derived seven main dimensions from research involving over 53,000 participants. The dimensions, as recently described by Bing (2003) are:

(1) *Universalism vs. Particularism [Rules vs. Relationship*s]. This dimension revolves around whether rules or relationships regulate workplace behaviors. Universalists tend to follow societal and work rules, while particularists tend to be more concerned about whether or not the needs of people, particularly those people closest to him or her, are being met. Trompenaars found that people in more traditional and collectivist societies tend to be more particularistic than people from modern individualistic societies.

(2) *Individualism vs. Communitarianism[Collectivism]*. This dimension is very similar to Hofstede's.

(3) *Neutral vs. Affective [unemotional vs. emotional]*. This dimension relates to the amount of display of emotion at work that is considered acceptable in various cultures.

(4). *Specific vs. Diffuse*. In 'specific' cultures, work and relationships are compartmentalized separately; that is, work and personal relationships are not supposed to mix. In 'diffuse' cultures, there is less of a distinction between work and personal relationships, which may overlap, and friendships may indeed be instrumental, in that they enable the participants to accomplish goals. In many Arab and Moslem societies, including the UAE, exists the concept of 'wasta', an Arabic word that means the use of social connections to obtain benefits in work or business that otherwise would not be provided. For example, wasta plays an important role in securing of employment in many Arab nations. However, in modernizing Arab nations, the more educated people are, the less they will allow wasta to interfere with good business (Mohamed and Hamdi, 2008).

(5) *Achievement vs. Ascription.* This dimension describes the difference between those who value achievement and personal attributes as the primary reason of success, versus those who value the background of the colleague, his or her education, and even the reputation of the family or extended family itself. For example, in many Islamic cultures such as the UAE, individuals are accorded respect based on the importance of their family in society.

(6) *Attitudes toward Time*. In some societies, for example in France, the importance of the past, as represented in literature, architecture, music, and other streams of culture, are significant; in others, for example the U.S., the future is perceived to be more important than a past away from which many Americans immigrated.

(7) Attitudes toward the Environment. This dimension is based on Rotter's (1950) concept of Locus of Control. People with a high "internal locus of control" are those who feel they control their destiny, fate or success, while individuals with a high "external locus of control" tend to feel that their destiny is in the hands of fate, chance, God, or other forces external to themselves. Research shows that the UAE is relatively high in terms of internal Locus of Control, as Islam teaches that individuals should work hard to deserve their successes in life (Yousef, 2000).

As noted earlier, the UAE, and particularly Dubai, have undergone a dramatic and rapid transformation from a small traditional pearling and fishing society into a hyper-modern, and more 'westernized' society in a very brief period of about 30 years. Commensurate with this societal modernization has been workplace modernization, driven by the many hundreds of large multinational corporations that have established themselves in Dubai in recent years, as well as competitive pressures for domestic companies and even UAE and Dubai government departments to quickly achieve modern international standards.

Hypotheses: While this was an exploratory study, it was hypothesized that as a result of the dramatic societal changes describes, Emirati managers would perceive the culture of UAE workplaces today (as compared to 25 years ago) as being less collectivist, less diffuse, lower power-distance-oriented, and less relationship-oriented.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were distributed to 60 Emirati managers/professionals undertaking an MBA course in cross-cultural management in a well-known western-based university in Dubai. Eight questionnaires were discarded as they were incomplete, resulting in complete data from 52 respondents (29 males and 23 females; age-range 22-41; mean age 28.2). The questionnaires obtained both quantitative and qualitative data (see Table 1 for selected quantitative questions, measured on a six-point likert-type scale, and open-ended qualitative questions. The responses to the quantitative questions were analyzed using pair-wise t-tests. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using a thematic content analysis (TCA; Roberts and Popping, 1993). The responses were transcribed and coded using a grounded theory approach (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where, over many readings of the responses, and many iterations of constant comparison of themes, meaningful coding categories or themes emerged from the data.

Table 1. Selected quantitative items and open-ended questions

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Individualistic

In general, how collectivist/individualistic are Emiratis in the workplace today?
In general, how collectivist/individualistic were Emiratis in the workplace 25 years ago?
(1 = very collectivist 6 = very individualistic)

Specific

Today, Emiratis keep business and friendship as separate matters in life
Twenty-five years ago, Emiratis kept business and friendship as separate matters in life
(1 = strongly disagree 6 = strongly agree)

Power Distance

Today, Emiratis respect their managers' decisions without question.
Twenty-five years ago, Emiratis respected their managers' decisions without question
(1 = strongly disagree 6 = strongly agree)

Masculinity

Today, success at work (promotions etc) is important to Emiratis
Twenty-five years ago success at work (promotions etc) was important to Emiratis
(1 = strongly disagree 6 = strongly agree)

Relationship Oriented

Today, relationships (e.g., who you know) are important for success at work
Twenty-five years ago (e.g., who you know) were important for success at work
(1 = strongly disagree 6 = strongly agree)

Open-ended questions:

How do your cultural beliefs influence your attitudes at work? Please give examples.

Working life has changed in the past 25 years in the UAE due to globalization and modernization of workplaces. What are three advantages and three disadvantages of these changes for UAE culture?

How have these changes influenced your sense of identity as an Emirati?

In what ways, if any, has the modernization of UAE workplaces gone against UAE cultural values? Please provide examples

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FINDINGS

Table 2 shows that, as hypothesized, the Emirati managers perceive that UAE workplace culture is generally now less diffuse and more specific (i.e., work and relationships do not mix as much as 25 years ago), lower in power distance, and more 'masculine' or competitive now than 25 years ago. Further, there was a statistical trend showing that 'relationships and who you know' tend to be less important for success at work now than 25 years ago (i.e., success is more achievement-based than ascription-based, and 'wasta' is not as important in a modernizing workplace as in the past. Interestingly, contrary to the hypotheses and previous research, Emirati managers perceived that workplaces in the UAE are not significantly more individualistic today than they were 25 years ago, and indeed that they are still quite collectivist.

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Table 2. Paired Samples t-tests comparing perceptions of work attitudes now and 25 years ago

	Mean	S.D.	t	p
Individualistic Now	2.26	0.93		
Individualistic 25 Years Ago	2.13	1.59	0.55	.58 *n.s.*
Specific Now	3.25	1.42		
Specific 25 Years Ago	2.07	1.46	5.19	.001***
Power Distance Now	3.25	1.21		
Power Distance 25 Years Ago	4.34	1.59	4.40	.001***
Masculine Now	5.26	1.42		
Masculine 25 Years Ago	3.90	1.38	5.70	.001***
Relationships Now	4.76	1.33		
Relationships 25 Years Ago	5.13	1.34	1.78	.08 *trend*

Qualitative findings

Based on the grounded-theory thematic content analysis of the open-ended responses, several major themes emerged that supported the general hypotheses that modernization and westernization of UAE workplaces are perceived by Emirati managers as resulting in less relationship-oriented workplaces. However, the qualitative responses also show that many of the traditional practices and attitudes still endure (such as gender differentiation, respect based on age and gender, helping relatives in the workplace, etc). The major themes included Diffuse/Specific (Trompenaars), Power distance (Trompenaars), Ascription (Trompenaars); and Masculine/Competitive (Hofstede). A strong theme that emerged was the issue of Emirati women working in the same offices as men, which was almost unheard of 25 years ago. A selection of responses to the open-ended questions is shown in Appendix A.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that while there is a significant and enduring traditional high-context and religious underpinning to Emirati managers' social identities, along with a collectivist and diffuse approach to management practices, there is also a significant shift towards more westernized, low-

context identity and management practices. Emiratis in the study welcome or tolerate many of the cultural and societal changes, but are concerned about dilution of Emirati culture and identity, especially as a minority population. While for some Emirati managers there is dissonance due to the multiple and conflicting social values that have resulted from rapid modernization, many have been able to reconcile the complexities of these conflicting social identities and rapid cultural shifts in management style. At a theoretical level, the results provide general support for the theories of Hofstede and Trompenaars, but also indicate that cultural attitudes can change rapidly in a developing society undergoing dramatic modernization and globalization. At a practical level, it is clear that managers would benefit from cross-cultural management training and change management training to deal with such rapid cultural changes more effectively.

Limitations and future research. The current study was exploratory in nature, and part of a long-term project. To examine workplace attitude changes in the UAE at a deeper level will require more fully-developed questionnaire scales and more participants from a broad range of UAE society. These limitations will be addressed in the larger study.

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Appendix A

Selected responses to open-ended questions (categories in parentheses)

Question: How do your cultural beliefs influence your attitudes at work? Please give examples.

"I respect older people and higher positions – this sometimes might hinder my progress – if negotiating with a female or someone older. [ascription]
The manager should have a special place in the group. [power distance]
Respect the ladies [ascription]
Work collectively // Teamwork [collectivism]
Always do things I will be proud of [Islamic work ethic]
Loyalty at work [Islamic work ethic]
Care about others [collectivism]
Not shaking hands with men//Keep my limits when speaking with men [masculine]
A personal attitude at work (relationships) [diffuse]

Q: *How do your cultural beliefs influence your attitudes at work? Please give examples (continued)*

Cannot attend meeting after 6pm (Female respondent) [masculine]
I had to get used to working with men, which felt strange at first [masculine]
Helping colleagues without waiting for them to ask [collectivism]
If someone is related (part of the family) then dealing with them at work is different from others [diffuse]

Q: *Working life has changed in the past 25 years in the UAE due to globalization and modernization of workplaces. What are three advantages and three disadvantages of these changes for UAE culture?*

Advantages

Women in the workplace [masculine/feminine]
People promoted according to performance [achievement]
Motivated people to produce better work [achievement]
No friendship advantage at work [achievement]

Disadvantages

Losing relationships [individualism]
Not as many big or extended families [individualism]
Family moving to other cities [individualism]
Women accepting western habits (e.g. handshaking) [Masculine/feminine]
More materialism//Become money oriented [masculinity]
More rushed life//Always busy lifestyle [masculine/competitive]
Long hours at work [masculine]
Less social life [masculine]

Q: In what ways, if any, has modernization of UAE workplaces gone against UAE cultural values?

Allowed females to work in more places [masculine]
Too much mixing between genders [masculine]
Letting women enter before males [masculine]
Loss of respect for others, especially elders [ascription]
Less time for family and children [masculine]