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**Arabic Social and cultural Influences on Aberrant Consumer Behaviour: an
exploratory study of Libyan marketers**

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Abstract

This paper examines the effect of Arabic social and cultural factors on adopting aberrant consumer behaviour (ACB) in Libya. The data was collected by conducting personal interviews with 26 marketers in Libya. The findings indicate that the Arabic social and cultural environment enforces some limitations on ACB control and prevention practices. These limitations have provided an opportunity for some Libyan consumers to engage in ACB. However, this paper goes on to explore some unique alternative ACB controlling and preventative practices used by Libyan marketers which are considered socially acceptable.

Key words: Arabic culture, Libyan Aberrant Consumer Behaviour,

As business becomes more global, understanding the ethical values consumer cross cultural has become an important tool for international business (Ford, Nonis and Hudson 2005), which is can be used to reduce consumer unethical activity (Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch and Cornwell, 2009). However, on this age of turbulent the world is more interconnected and interdependent than ever before and the marketing practices and expectations can not be content (Kotler and Caslione 2009). For example, although Islam governs all individuals' activities as it is all accountable to God and (Marino, 2007) and it is extremely unacceptable to engage in some of consumer ethic scenarios like shoplifting, this behaviour is emerged in one of the strongest player countries of Islamic regulation, Saudi Arabia (Dabil, 2009). Therefore, updated and deep understanding for growing and emerged markets is needed.

Although there has been a growing body of literature concerning ethics in the marketplace, almost all of this research has focused on the seller side and neglected the consumer side (Fukukawa, 2002). However, there are some studies focused on Aberrant Consumer Behaviour (ACB) aimed to developing the under-standing of the phenomenon and building of a model of ACB. ACB is defined as "behaviour in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers." (Fullerton and Punj,1993: 570).

Previous studies show that consumer judgment, understanding, predispositions of ACB can differ markedly between cultures (Rawwas, 2001; Fisher et al., 2003; Ford, Nonis and Hudson 2005). Moreover, social pressures affect the consumer's intention to engage in ACB, because the consumer develops a stronger intention to engage in the specific behaviour if there is a social pressure towards it (i.e. the level of "social influence"; Klobas and Clydes 2002; Bhattacharjee 2000; Fukukawa 2002).

While most of the cultural studies concerning ACB have been conducted using samples of Western consumers, only a few of them have been conducted using samples from Arabic countries (Rawwas 2001; Al-Khatib, Stanton and Rawwas 2005; Dabil, 2009).

According to Hofstede (2005), the essential core of culture consists of traditional – such as historical derived and selected – ideas and specifically their achieved values. Therefore, the Arab culture is censored as similar in all Arabic countries where the Arab world countries that have shared norms and value (e.g. those derived from Islam), customs (e.g. Arabic tribes), history (e.g. Islamic and Ottoman Empire) and language, tend to be having highly convergent national culture.

However, Libya has been selected to be fieldwork area for some justification. First, the Libyan market can be considered a new and unknown market for international firms which did not have contact with global markets during the long period of sanctions (Jodie and Gorrill 2007). Furthermore, it is an under-researched market. However, whilst the Libyan market has been open to international companies since the spring of 2004 (CIA 2009), in Libya there are no retailing chains, it remaining an economy based on small stores. The same is the case in the hotel sector. Therefore, it is quite different to the West where large corporations dominate. In Libya, owner-managers who make their own rules rather than managers who follow company rules, are responsible for counteracting ACB.

Second, the Libyan market is still suffering from a shortage of some products, which may compel consumers to use counterfeited products. For example, there is an intense shortage of the original editions of software programs in the Libyan market (General People's Committee for Economy 2008). This might be one of the reasons why piracy has increased to 88% in Libya, which cost U. S. \$22 Million in 2007 (Business Software Alliance 2008). While there are some signs of other forms of ACB emerging in Libya (Al Awjili 1988; Bakkar 2005), yet this topic has been neglected by Libyan researchers. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to

partially fill this gap in the literature by investigating the role of social and cultural factors in adopting ACB in Libya. More specifically then, the research questions addressed by this study are:

- Could social pressure limit Libyan marketers' control of ACB?
- Do social and cultural factors influence Libyan consumer's adoption of ACB?
- Does the Libyan culture provide other socially accepted ways to control ACB?

Methodology and Research Design

Hofstede and Bond defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another” (Hofstede and Bond 1988, p. 6). Moreover, culture deals with the way people live and approach problem solving in a social context (Geoffrey, Richard and Pamela 1999, p. 203). Consequently, cultural and social factors have an interactive relationship. Therefore, they were examined together in this study.

In order to enrich the results three different sectors have been investigated in this study: grocery stores, computer stores and hotels. These sectors have been selected to cover various potential forms of ACB as they serve different segments of consumers. Virtually all segments of Libyan consumers do shopping in grocery stores, whereas many of the computer stores' consumers are students and more educated consumers as they are computer literate, while hotel guests in Libya are limited to those segments of consumers who have a higher income or whose jobs require them to stay at a hotel.

The study respondents

A sample of marketers was interviewed face-to-face in a semi-structured format in Arabic. The marketers in this study were identified as the person in each grocery store, computer store or hotel who was the most qualified to provide the required information. The contents of the interviews were recorded with hand-written notes and the materials were analysed using a

thematic analysis. After 26 interviews we found that no new themes were being generated and the data was saturated.

The reason for this could be that the business in Libya are very similar because of the absence of the competition of the retailing chains or international companies branches. For example, the computer stores in Benghazi city are very similar in their size and the product they sell. These stores are mostly centred in one street which is in the centre of the city.

As it is showing in the table (1.1) above whilst the Arab region has witnessed a substantial increase in the women's share of economic activity (UNDP 2005), the occupation of some jobs such as seller/hotel employee is still monopolised by males in Libya. Therefore, the sample includes one female.

According to the General Information Association of Libya (2003) most Libyans guests stay in public or private three –five star hotels. Therefore, six interviews were conducted with marketers in three public hotels (five, four and three stars) and three private hotels (all of them are four stars).

Number	Gender	Line of business	Job title	period of experience
1	male	small grocery shops	seller	6 years
2	male	small grocery shops	shop owner	18 years
3	male	small grocery shops	shop owner	20 years
4	male	medium grocery stores	shop owner	22 years
5	male	medium grocery stores	shop owner	20 years
6	male	medium grocery stores	shop owner	10 years
7	male	medium grocery stores	store manager	8 years
8	male	Supermarkets	supermarkets manager	9 years
9	male	Supermarkets	floor manager	4 years
10	male	Supermarkets	management team member	8 years
11	male	small computer stores	technician and seller	5 years
12	male	small computer stores	seller	3 years
13	male	small computer stores	technician and seller	3 years
14	male	small computer stores	store owner	1 and half year
15	male	small computer stores	technician and seller	7 years
16	male	small computer stores	store owner	4 years
17	male	medium computer stores	sales manager	4 years
18	male	medium computer stores	store owner	6 years
19	male	medium computer stores	technician and seller	10 years
20	male	medium computer stores	accountant	10 years
21	male	public- 3stars hotel	rooms division manager	25 years
22	male	public- 4 stars hotel	hospitality unit manager	17 years
23	male	private - 4 stars hotel	reception manager	10 years
24	female	private - 4 stars hotel	reception manager	6 years
25	male	private - 4 stars hotel	floors chief	2 years
26	male	public- 5 stars hotel	rooms chief	7 years

Table (1.1) demographic and business study participants' information

Data Analysis

The results show that there were many forms of perceived ACB which occurred in the studied stores and hotels (such as fraud, quarrelling and the use of bad language with the staff/sellers, shoplifting, misuse of hotel rooms, pilfering from hotel rooms and software piracy). However, the most common form was consumer theft. The marketers emphasised

these forms of ACB and also that the marketers' reactions toward their offenders differed depending on many factors like the consumer's age, gender and any persons who accompanied the offender. These differences were constrained by social and cultural factors. The role of these factors in ACB are explored below:

The Effect of Social and Cultural Factors on ACB Control and Prevention Practices

According to the marketers, there were some limitations on their reactions toward ACB offenders as well as on the controlling tools. These limitations were due to social pressure and Libyan cultural norms. The following sections discuss these limitations.

- **The impact of high power distance on ACB**

According to Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Libya as Arabic county is characterised as high on power distance (Itim International 2009). Thus, older people (over 45 years old) are respected. Hence, the older consumers/guests were not watched or checked so closely by staff when they were shopping or staying at hotels, and clearly this situation could provide a suitable opportunity to engage in ACB. However, almost all of the interviewees said that most of the cases of consumer theft were conducted by a consumer/guest of an older age (i.e. 45 years or above) as demonstrated by this shoplifting story provided by one of the interviewees:

A lady, 45 to 50 year old, always comes to the store. She made good relations with the staff and always said warm greetings. The staff respected and trusted her, and did not watch her. But by chance one of the staff saw her when she was shoplifting.

Another example of the effect of the high power distance is the respect of the highly educated consumers/guests, especially those who occupy high or prestigious job positions. One of the interviewees said:

It is difficult for us to stop a staff member of a university when they perform unaccepted behaviour.

- **The impact of gender on ACB**

Although, Libya seems to be a liberal country there is still a strong effect of customs and traditions on Libyans' behaviour. Also, even though both study and work places are mixed in Libya, direct contact between males and females is not accepted. Therefore, there are some limitations on the prevention of female ACB. Firstly, it is not socially acceptable for the male seller/hotel employee to be watching or checking female consumers/guests. A store owner provided this story:

I noted a couple whose manner in moving around the shop made me suspicious that they aimed to shoplift. Therefore I asked one of the assistants to watch them. When the man noticed that, he complained angrily and said: "Your employee is behaving very rudely and unacceptably because he is looking at my wife."

The marketers try to avoid such situations because it might affect the store/ hotel reputation. Secondly, many of the interviewees in shops said that they do not arrest a female offender inside the shop, because they fear that this offender will say that "... I did not steal, but the seller tried to hide his attempt to molest me". This can put the seller in a serious difficulty. One of the interviewees gave the following story as an example of what can be happen with the seller if he asks a female consumer to be checked:

A young female had hidden a bottle of shampoo in her hand bag which was noted by one of the staff. Therefore, he asked her to open her bag for checking, but she beat him with her bag. She behaved like this to create the impression of being molested.

- **The impact of the family unit on ACB**

As Arabic country the main unit in Libyan society is the family (Metz 1987; UNDP 2005). In the Arab world in general, the family structure is much more rigid and highly emphasised in

comparison to the West (Hammad *et al.* 1999). Thus, marketers try to avoid any reactions that can badly influence the consumer's/guest's family. For example, if the shoplifter is a female who comes accompanied by her husband or children, no check will be made of her actions. One of the interviewees explained his reaction in this respect by this story:

A woman came with her husband and put an item priced 10LYD (which is equivalent to around US\$8) in her hand bag. The seller noticed that and, therefore, added the sum to the total and told her that the extra 10LYD was for what she had put in her bag, without her husband noticing.

The seller behaved in this way because if the husband had noted that his wife had shoplifted and created a disturbance with her, the other consumers would approach the seller saying "... why did you shame this family". As a consequence, he might lose some consumers.

- **The importance of maintaining a good social network**

In a collectivist society like Libya (Itim International 2009), the social network is an important source for help and power. For example, the social network can help in quickly resolving everyday procedures such as opening a bank account or obtaining a driving licence which otherwise can be very time consuming. A good inter-personal relationship with an employee can lead to completing a procedure that might take a month just in one day. Moreover, the social network can help in providing job opportunities as in Libya and all the Arabic World, the notion that "It's not what you know, it's who you know" is an underlying principle even more than in the West (Agnala 1998). Therefore, the marketers believe that maintaining their social networks is more important than controlling ACB. This can be evidenced by this story from one of the interviewees:

In order to reduce shoplifting I installed cameras in my store. However, I was shocked to watch some of my friends and relatives stealing from my shop. I couldn't arrest them and keep a good relationship with them. I do not want to damage my

relationships, therefore, I stopped using CCTV in the store. I prefer to lose money rather than lose more relationships.

- **The impact of social acceptance on ACB**

Previous studies have found that the social evaluation of ACB differs based on its form (Fukukawa, Ennew, and Diacon 2006). If there is a social acceptance of ACB the marketers will make excuses for the offenders, and they will not apply strong controlling or preventative practices against it. For example, pilfering from hotel rooms is socially accepted in Libya. This can be evidenced by the fact that guests do not hide the stolen items, especially those that carry the hotel's logo. Rather, some guests put the stolen items on display in their houses to show that they have been in particular hotels. Thus the interviewees in hotels provided many excuses for the pilfering offenders, such as the guest wants to keep the stolen item as a souvenir, or he/she took it by mistake or forgot they had it or that he/she simply liked it.

The social acceptance of ACB also affects the application of laws. For example, there is an unwillingness to use deterrent regulations that govern software piracy in Libya, although, Libya has had the necessary copyright laws since 1968 (The General People's Committee for Justice 2007) which are applicable to software piracy. This can be evidenced by the Attorney-General of the North Benghazi court's answer when he was asked about using these laws in Libya. In an interview conducted by one of the authors in October 2007, he said:

During my working life I never came across using this type of laws. However, it will not be used unless some one reports a software piracy crime. From my experience I have not heard about any one who took a legal action on this issue.

The Effect of the Social and Cultural Factors on ACB adoption

The limitations in ACB controlling and preventative practices evidenced above have a significant effect on the adoption of some forms of ACB. The following section discusses this effect.

- **Increased ACB adoption by some consumer segments**

This study suggests that a person's age and gender can provide opportunities for some consumers to engage in some ACB activities. For example, the marketers in grocery stores consider that shoplifters fall into three segments, in terms of their age and gender. Accordingly, shoplifters were mostly women over 40 years, young women and men over 55 respectively. According to the marketers' view, engagement in shoplifting by these segments is influenced by the social and cultural norms which make them all less susceptible to suspicion and scrutiny. Conversely, evidence was given of a harsh beating being given to a young male shoplifter.

- **Increasing adoption of the socially acceptable forms of ACB**

Because pilfering from hotel rooms is a socially acceptable form of ACB in Libya, according to the interviewees in hotels, pilfering is more commonly undertaken by guests in larger groups, such as football teams and music bands, than by individual guests. Also, as software piracy is socially acceptable in Libya, none of the interviewees in computer stores considered software piracy as ACB. In fact, the marketers think consumers perform this behaviour in order to help each other. Because of the marketers' compliance with social norms and expectations, some of them were encouraging consumers to install one item of software on two PCs rather than buy two separate copies.

In general, the interviewees consider that it is difficult to apply any law against software piracy in Libya. Typically, they said such as that:

... in Libya the social relationships are very strong and this behaviour is socially acceptable. The consumers can help each other to copy software.

Indeed, the interviewees themselves were against the application of anti-software piracy laws as they believed that applying this kind of law would negatively affect both consumers and marketers, pushing up prices and reducing demand.

Alternative Socially Acceptable Ways to Control ACB

Although the Libyan environment imposes some limitations on ACB control and prevention practices, it provides alternative socially acceptable approaches instead. These are explained in the following section.

- **Using the social network**

As the Libyan society is a collectivist society (Itim International 2009), the social network plays a very important role in solving the problems between people in Libya. Thus, all the interviewees said that they do not ask for help from the police if they have problems with their consumers/guests. However, some of the marketers in stores emphasised that the police always refuse to provide help in shoplifting cases anyway. Rather, the police will advise the marketer to using their social contacts to reach the offender's wider family and solve the problem through them.

In Libya the individual's loyalty and duty to his/her family are greater than any other social obligations. Also, shame and honour are highly emphasised in Libyan society and personal bad actions not only dishonour the individual, but also the entire family unit (Hammad *et al.* 1999). These norms can also be applicable in friendship relations. Thus, the social network is commonly used by the interviewed marketers to solve any ACB problems. For example, the marketers in the studied hotels used the social network through checking the phone numbers that the guest dialled, and would later redial them if there was a problem. The marketers would firstly ask about the type of relationship that links the person called with the guest, in order to know his/her ability to help. Then they would ask for help from any person who they

believed could influence the guest. In many cases the marketers received a positive response and promise of help.

- **Shaming**

Shame and honour are powerful forces in Arab societies and personal bad actions dishonour not only the individual, but also the entire family unit (Hammad *et al.* 1999). Therefore, some marketers use shaming to discourage unacceptable behaviour. One interviewee said:

We find that the best deterrent is shaming the shoplifter in front of the other consumers. In this case, the shoplifter will not return to this shop again and we frighten off any other likely shoplifter.

If the female shoplifter is alone, the seller stops her after she has exited the store and asks her to return the items. As she wants to avoid a scandal, she could either pay for or return the items. The marketers do this to avoid the problems that would be created if the shoplifter accused them of molesting her.

Conclusion

The results of the current study are in line with previous studies which focused on the effect of social and cultural on ACB evaluation and adoption (e.g., Al-Khatib, Vitell and Rawwas 1997; Rawwas, Patzer and Vitell 1998; Ford, Nonis and Hudson, 2005, Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch and Cornwell, 2009). The Libyan environment enforces some limitations on both marketer's reactions to ACB behaviour and the control and prevention practices they employ to deter ACB. Paradoxically, these limitations have increased the adoption of some forms of ACB by Libyan consumers. In Libya and Arabic countries shame and honour are highly emphasised and personal bad action dishonours all the extended family units. Therefore, almost all of the unethical behavioural solutions are sought through extended families.

In order to control ACB, Libyan marketers applied alternative practices to those of the West which are more socially acceptable. Even though some of these practices are illegal and clearly not acceptable in the West, such as using the phone numbers that the guest dialled to reach his/her social network, they are commonly used by Libyan marketers. These marketers choose to use this type of practice instead of asking for help from the police because the marketers desire to remain in line with social norms and within socially accepted boundaries of behaviour.

Unlike the West where large corporations control business, in Libya there are no retailing chains and the same is the case in the hotel sector. Therefore, owner-managers make their own rules rather than follow company rules. As Libya is a collectivist society, marketers there see themselves as a part of the wider society, and thus they interpret the social responsibility of their business in different ways than Western businesses do. For example, the Libyan marketers tolerate or ignore consumer practices that in the West would be seen as clearly anti-social and unacceptable in order to avoid shaming or causing problems for the offender's family.

Limitations and Future Research

As this study focused on a very sensitive topic, informed consent and confidentiality underpinned the fieldwork. Furthermore, participants were briefed on the nature of the research and had the opportunity to refuse involvement or stop at any time they wanted. However, marketers were open and keen to talk about their experiences and instances of ACB in their stores/hotels.

As with nearly all studies of consumer behaviour, the current study is limited by the sample and techniques used in the research. These limitations curb the extent to which the findings of the research can be generalised but also, more helpfully, provide a useful framework for

the suggestion of future studies. Future research should use larger samples covering other sectors which would explore other aspects of social and cultural effects on ACB. Also, conducting further research to examine both marketers' and consumers' views would provide a wider understanding of the factors under investigation.

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