



Citation for published version:

Wilkins, S & Emik, S 2019, 'Institutional influences on firm strategy in authoritarian emerging economies: Multi-platform mass media companies in the UAE', *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-05-2018-0230>

DOI:

[10.1108/IJOEM-05-2018-0230](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-05-2018-0230)

Publication date:

2019

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Institutional influences on firm strategy in authoritarian emerging economies: Multi-platform mass media companies in the UAE

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Abstract

Purpose – This is one of the first studies to investigate the influences of institutions in an authoritarian regime on the strategies of firms that operate in a potentially sensitive industry. The study examines how institutional pressures affect the strategies of multi-platform mass media companies (print, broadcast and Internet) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study used a purposive sampling strategy to conduct interviews with 28 senior managers who have responsibility for strategic level decision making in a UAE media company. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A mainly deductive process of thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key ideas, patterns and relationships in the data.

Findings – The survey participants reported that increased multi-platform delivery in the media industry brings rewards, challenges and new risks. Although the normative and cultural-cognitive pressures are both strong in the UAE, it is the regulative pressures that seem to have the largest constraining influence on firm decision making and business strategies. The strong institutional pressures existing in the UAE encourage tight coupling, where firm structures and processes are linked and designed in response to the institutional constraints. Evidence was found only of some minor decoupling.

Originality/value – In response to our findings, we hypothesise that in nations under authoritarian rule, political pressures will likely override all other institutional pressures, and that it will be most sensible for firms to adopt tight coupling strategies. However, the success of many UAE firms both at home and internationally suggests that strong institutional constraints do not necessarily act as a barrier to superior firm performance.

Keywords Strategy, Decision making, Media industry, Multi-platform, UAE, Institutions, Institutional theory, Coupling, Decoupling

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Institutional approaches are prevalent in the study of strategy and management decision-making. However, the majority of research on strategic management has been undertaken in developed countries. Although studies conducted in emerging economies have appeared in recent years, the findings are still inconclusive with regard to how and the extent to which institutional differences impact upon the strategy and performance of firms (Anchor and Aldehayyat, 2016). Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction; they may be regarded as the ‘rules of the game’ in a society, which are enforced by relevant individuals, groups and organisations (North, 1991). These

institutions consist of formal rules, such as laws and explicit standards or regulations, and informal constraints, such as customs and traditions shaped by long-lasting systems of shared values and understandings (Scott, 1995). Emerging economies have less-developed but often rapidly changing regulatory institutions. In many cases, they also have strong political and/or cultural institutions. These unique combinations of institutional influences may impact greatly upon local business practices. Thus, firms need to behave differently in emerging markets compared to developed markets (Ramamurti, 2012). Also, the institutional influences in emerging markets may affect domestic and multinational firms differently (Wu, 2013).

Although emerging economies are far from homogenous, many of them have authoritarian governments that are characterised by strong central power and limited political freedom. Examples of states that are widely considered to be under authoritarian or managed democratic rule, or to be partial/failed democracies, include China, Russia, the Arab Gulf States, Cuba, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela, Vietnam, Zimbabwe and the 'Stans' (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Authoritarian economies need strong regulative institutions so that the government can retain control and manage most of the key aspects of social and business life. In many emerging economies, the mass media industry is subject to particularly strong institutions. The term 'mass media' refers to mass communication methods that reach large audiences, e.g. newspapers, radio, television and the Internet. The governments in these countries recognise that control of mass media is critical to maintaining political control and social order. Nowadays, however, the Internet and social media can sometimes be used to circumvent state-operated media channels. It is widely believed that social media was used to organise collective activism in the Arab Spring of 2011, which saw uprisings and social violence in countries such as Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia (Khondker, 2011).

In the last decade, access to the Internet has increased dramatically worldwide. For example, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), more than 85% of residents are online (Sinclair, 2013), and more than 80% of the population has a smartphone, on which social media is used and television viewed (Fanack.com, 2018). Increased access to the Internet has stimulated the growth of digital, social media and mobile commerce. Firms have needed to change the way they interact and engage with consumers, but it has been a challenge to increase both firm and customer value (Sanni *et al.*, 2018). In the media industry, one of the most noteworthy and prevalent trends in recent years has been the adoption of multi-platform approaches to the production and distribution of content (Doyle, 2015a). Multi-platform delivery may involve distribution of content using print, websites, smartphones, interactive games and video on demand services, among others. Institutional influences in the operating environment may have different influences and impacts on different modes of delivery, which represents a key challenge for the strategic decision makers in mass media companies.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the influences of institutions on the strategies of mass media companies (print, broadcast and Internet) in an authoritarian emerging economy. The study data were obtained in the UAE. In any business environment, firms usually face, at least to some extent, a range of conflicting demands and interests among stakeholders. Certain regulatory pressures may be designed to satisfy a government's political, economic or social goals, but these institutional influences may have a negative or constraining impact on firm performance. For example, human resource localisation policies may force or coerce firms to recruit nationals even though these individuals may be more expensive than expatriate labour and lack the necessary knowledge, experience or skills. Thus, a key objective of the study is to better understand how managers in the UAE mass media industry make decisions and formulate firm strategy that copes with environmental constraints and which at the same time

achieves business objectives. The research is concerned with examining both the institutional influences that put pressure on firms to act in certain ways and the actual strategies adopted by firms to cope with these pressures. The strategies adopted by firms are analysed at the organisational level.

The following two sections provide a review of the regulation and operation of media companies in authoritarian emerging economies, with a particular focus on the Arab World, and a brief overview on the rise of multi-platform media companies. After this, institutional explanations of firm behaviour are examined and explained, again with a focus on the Arab World. Then, we present details of our method before presenting our results. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our key findings and a discussion on the implications for firms that seek to achieve both external legitimacy and business goals simultaneously.

Mass media in authoritarian economies

There is consensus among political scientists that mass media can play a role in sustaining or destabilising authoritarian regimes (Stockmann and Gallager, 2011). In authoritarian regimes, criticism of the government in the mass media may lead to erosion of the government's legitimacy, social unrest, and destabilisation of the nation's sociocultural framework. However, in countries such as China and Russia, as well as those in the Arab Gulf region, the mass media has facilitated institutional, social and economic change without weakening the political power of the incumbent leaders. In order for mass media to have a stabilising effect in societies, strong institutions are needed that positively reinforce the rulers' desires. Nevertheless, different authoritarian states have demonstrated different levels of desire and ability to control freedom of speech and public access to information (Norris and Inglehart, 2009). With a degree of heterogeneity between authoritarian states, institutions play an important role in guiding the managers of mass media companies in the actions to take in order to achieve external legitimacy.

Based on three decades of research, Rugh (2007) concludes that the most powerful influence on the structure and functioning of the mass media in Arab countries is the actual political reality that prevails in a particular country at a given time. As most of the countries in the Arab Gulf region are authoritarian regimes, the government is one of, if not the strongest, legitimating actor. However, in this region, it is not uncommon to find that customers, suppliers and other business partners are powerful actors locally, and these actors often have close relationships with the ruling family or government (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999).

The UAE was established in 1971 as a federation of seven emirates, each with its own ruler. Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the richest and most influential emirates. In 1971, the UAE did not have a commercial newspaper that was professionally produced using a printing press. Although most of the UAE's domestic newspapers, radio stations and television stations are less than thirty years old, the nation has established itself as a media hub for the Middle East, facilitated in part by the establishment of media zones, such as *twofour54* in Abu Dhabi and *Dubai Media City* in Dubai. International broadcasting companies such as Bloomberg, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), CNN (Cable News Network), Fox, Reuters, Sky and Sony have established offices and/or production facilities in these zones, attracted by the excellent infrastructure and business-friendly policies. Although the UAE has a population of only 9.2 million, the country has 15 daily newspapers (7 in Arabic, and 8 in English); 72 free-to-air television stations; and 120 publishers producing over 400 publications (National Media Council, 2013). The UAE media industry is highly competitive but firms in the UAE tend to have a strong market orientation, and managers tend to be future oriented, which has a positive effect on business performance (Abu-Rahma and Jaleel, 2017; Al-Ansaari *et al.*, 2015).

Multi-platform media companies

The vast majority of media companies in the UAE produce and distribute content using a multi-platform approach. For example, print newspapers and television broadcasters generally offer online and mobile delivery in addition to traditional print and television formats. This means that consumers can access media content in the way that they prefer, which may strengthen loyalty to particular providers. Previous research has found that adopting a multi-platform strategy has helped firms to promote innovation and overcome procedural inertia (Doyle, 2015a). Although the UAE has high Internet usage, 56% of literate citizens in the UAE claim to read a newspaper every day (Fanack.com, 2018), and, as elsewhere in the world, consumers are generally reluctant to pay for online news content (Doyle, 2013). As a result, many media firms in the UAE offer a lot of content with no paywall.

Most media companies nowadays aim to maximise the interactive elements in their online, mobile and digital platforms, so that users can rate and comment on content and participate in quizzes and discussion forums (Sivek, 2010). Consumers that read and interact with websites, for example by participating in blogs, may provide firms with valuable data on user preferences and behaviours, as well as increasing advertising revenues (Doyle, 2015b). In fact, firms need to recognise that consumers actually have multiple beneficial roles, as audience, distributors and content creators (Sanni *et al.*, 2018).

The move to multi-platform formats has changed the ways in which media companies operate. Increasingly, writers and content creators rely on intuition and professional standards rather than having to refer to complex sets of organisational rules (Sivek, 2010). Firms have promoted remote working to reduce costs and to better cope with twenty four hours a day, seven days a week working. Some firms prefer to recruit younger employees that grew up with online and digital communication and, as a result, who embrace it more wholeheartedly (Sivek, 2010).

Institutional explanations of firm behaviour

External legitimacy

In any organisational field, such as a specific industry, the desire to achieve legitimacy typically causes firms to become increasingly isomorphic over time, whereby they adopt similar structures, processes and rhetoric (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Legitimacy may be regarded as “the generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate” (Suchman, 1995, p. 544). According to Scott (1995), firms adapt to the local institutional environment as a result of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pressures. Each of these three ‘pillars’ of institutions operates through its own mechanisms and processes, delivering legitimacy to firms on the basis of being legally sanctioned, morally authorised or culturally supported.

Achieving external legitimacy elevates a firm’s status in the community, facilitates resource acquisition, and deflects questions about a firm’s rights and competence to provide specific products or services (Baum and Oliver, 1991). It is important for all firms to achieve external legitimacy, because without gaining the acceptance and approval of key stakeholders in the firm’s operating environment the firm may be unable to obtain the resources or customers that it needs to prosper. For multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating in foreign markets, achieving external legitimacy may also help to overcome the liability of foreignness.

Sun *et al.* (2010) argue that legitimacy may be cultivated through personal ties with powerful political and social actors or through broader engagement with social and political issues in the host country. A number of studies have found that it is often particularly advantageous in

emerging markets for firms to build personal relationships with powerful local players in order to minimise the risks of operating in environments with unfavourable or less-developed institutions and to obtain critical non-market resources (e.g. Boddewyn, 1998; Frynas *et al.*, 2006; Henisz and Delios, 2002). However, Kumar and Das (2007) argue that firms should do more than simply nurturing personal contacts, and that they should be responsive to the needs and interests of all key societal groups.

It may be more advantageous for firms to focus on developing and maintaining political connections with government actors in politically stable countries, where regime change is less likely in the short and medium terms (Leuz and Oberholzer-Gee, 2006). Soltani and Wilkinson (2011) argue that it is particularly important for firms operating in the Middle East to build legitimacy with the wider community, as firms are often vulnerable to a range of risks. Such risks include negative publicity and hostility from specific organisations and movements; full product boycotts; and attacks on the firm's property, staff or resources. For example, in 2006, many Danish products – from dairy products to children's toys – were withdrawn from sale in Muslim countries, in protest of the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a Danish publication (Fox News, 2006). In this example, Danish firms lost their external legitimacy in Muslim markets as a result of their country of origin.

Firms that want to operate in the Middle East, or in other emerging markets that have strong cultural institutions, must adopt practices that are considered desirable and appropriate within the norms and values of the local society (Forstenlechner and Mellahi, 2011). In particular, MNEs must understand and appreciate the nature and structure of a host country's institutional characteristics in order to satisfy the demands and expectations of the government, customers, local interest groups and the local society in general. However, in emerging markets, there is often a lack of reliable information about the local institutions (Anchor and Aldehayyat, 2016). Furthermore, strategies that have been effective in developed economies may be unsuitable in emerging economies (Khanna and Palepu, 1997). In uncertain emerging markets, to deal with the lack of experience and information, MNEs may minimise the risk of doing something wrong by imitating the approaches adopted by the leading domestic firms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Decoupling and loose coupling

Institutional theory explains that organisational isomorphism results from the desire of firms to conform to the rationalised myths in society about what constitutes 'proper' organisation. In other words, firms adapt to a socially constructed environment, where regulative pressures come mainly from the state/government and normative and mimetic pressures typically come from peer organisations or groups (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008). A problem that firms commonly face is that the rationalised myths may not support or 'fit' with the most efficient solutions to the firm's problems, e.g. modes of operation/methods of production. When conflicts exist between institutional and task environments, or when there are conflicting institutional pressures, firms may *decouple* their actual practices and activities from their formal structures (Kraatz and Block, 2008). For example, a firm may formally adopt a legitimating policy or programme but then actually fail to implement some or all of the requisite practices expected with such adoption (Misangyi, 2016).

Decoupling enables a firm to gain legitimacy, as it appears to have adapted to the rationalised myths in society, but in reality, the firm's practices and activities may be different than its formal structures suggest. Thus, decoupling may simultaneously deliver for firms both legitimacy and economic efficiency, particularly when the firm can avoid inspection or scrutiny. However, decoupling can be a highly risky strategy for firms because societal

recognition that a firm is not doing what it claims to be doing would expose the firm as a fraud. Such exposure would lead to a loss of legitimacy and punishments may be imposed by the state and/or key stakeholders; for example, the firm may be required to pay fines, or the firm's customers may boycott the firm. Relatively little research has been conducted in authoritarian emerging markets that considers the extent to which decoupling is possible or desirable in different organisational fields.

Tightly coupled systems are highly integrated and responsive to each other, whereas non-coupled systems are separate and unresponsive (Orton and Weick, 1990). In many situations, firms will not adopt only coupling or decoupling strategies. In practice, many firms adopt *both* coupling or decoupling strategies, an approach known as *loose coupling*. Thus, the term 'loose coupling' may refer to the existence of tight coupling between certain groups and practices, and non-coupling between others. The existence of loose coupling strategies in firms suggests that individual agency may exist despite institutional pressures. There is now consensus among researchers that loose coupling may be used by firms as a means to cope with complex institutional environments and that it may not necessarily involve deception or deliberate manipulation (Greenwood *et al.*, 2011). Parnell *et al.* (2000) argue that a firm's strategy must 'fit' with both the firm's environmental factors and the psychological characteristics and constraints of the managers responsible for strategic decision making. Thus, this research is concerned with understanding the perceptions and experiences of managers in the UAE's mass media industry with regard to the logics that influence their strategic decision making.

Method

The data used in this study were collected in multi-platform mass media companies that operate in the UAE. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, to ensure that data were provided only by individuals who have responsibility for strategic level decision making in their organisation. A total of 28 senior managers were interviewed, who held job titles such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO); Managing Director; Head of Channel (television company); Editor (newspaper); Head of Digital Operations (newspaper); Director of Marketing & Communications; Human Resources Manager; Business Development Manager; Director of Corporate Communication; and Chief Photographer/Deputy Pictures Editor (newspaper). Table I provides a summary profile of the interviewees, indicating sex, nationality, job level and industry sector. Most of the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of work, but a few interviews took place at alternative mutually agreed locations. The interview durations ranged from 40 minutes to 130 minutes, but the vast majority of interviews lasted between 60 and 80 minutes.

Institutional theory was chosen as the lens through which to examine the institutional constraints that influence organisational decision makers in the UAE, and Scott's three pillars of institutions was selected as the specific theoretical framework to guide the development of our interview questions (Scott, 1995, 2008). We created an interview guide that comprised 38 mainly open questions, which reflected Scott's three pillars, and which collected data about: the institutional constraints and influences facing strategic decision makers in the UAE mass media industry; how firms cope and react to these institutional constraints and influences; and how individuals make strategic decisions at a personal level.

Examples of questions include:

- How do laws, rules and official regulations influence the way your firm organises its activities?
- Are there any laws, rules or regulations that your firm is able to ignore or 'work around'?

- How do values and beliefs in UAE society influence the way your firm organises its activities?
- Are there any things that your firm does differently to the industry norms?
- In what ways does your firm develop and maintain connections with the government and political elite?
- For you personally, what things most influence your strategic level decision making?

Table I.
Summary profile of interviewees

		Number of interviewees	Percentage of sample
Sex	Male	23	82.1%
	Female	5	17.9%
Nationality	UAE	8	28.6%
	Arab	13	46.4%
	Western (e.g. European, North American)	5	17.9%
	Asian (Filipino)	2	7.1%
Job level	Owner/ CEO/ director	7	25.0%
	Senior manager/ head of function/ editor	10	35.7%
	Middle manager/ head of section	6	21.4%
	Technical/ specialist manager	5	17.9%
Industry sector	Newspaper publisher	10	35.7%
	Television/ film production/ broadcaster	8	28.6%
	Magazine/ periodical publisher	4	14.3%
	Radio broadcaster	3	10.7%
	Internet-based company	3	10.7%

The interview guide was not followed slavishly, so that the interviewees could have some control over the direction of the ‘conversation’, and focus on the topics about which they felt most experienced or comfortable talking about. It should be noted that some interviewees appeared quite nervous and guarded talking about the topics in this study, but the researchers did their best to put the interviewees at ease, also reminding participants that their responses would be presented anonymously. It is estimated that most of the interviewees answered approximately 25-30 of the questions in our interview guide. Some of the questions were not asked by the interviewer because they were not needed or appropriate after previous responses, while other questions were unanswered because the interviewee said that the question was not applicable to their organisation or specific work, or that they preferred not to answer the particular question.

Additional interviewee-specific questions were asked by the interviewers when it was relevant and appropriate to do so. These were typically follow-up questions asked in response to the interviewees’ original answers. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. As the study used Scott’s three pillars of institutions as its theoretical framework,

the data analysis followed a mainly deductive approach (Scott, 1995, 2008). Deductive reasoning is a theory testing process that seeks to establish whether a theory applies to specific instances. Although less common than inductive approaches in qualitative research, deductive procedures can represent an important step towards assuring conviction of findings (Hyde, 2000).

The data were analysed using a process of thematic analysis, which is a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012). By focusing on meaning across the data set, thematic analysis enabled us to identify and make sense of the interviewees' shared experiences. To avoid missing relevant content in the data, an inductive approach was followed in addition to the deductive process, which involved identifying concepts or potential categories that were not related to our theoretically predetermined themes.

In total, twelve predetermined themes were created, guided by literature on Scott's three institutional pillars and more specifically the measurement of institutional factors (e.g. Garrido *et. al.*, 2014), as well as our thoughts on how the individual pillars may each apply in the UAE. For example, themes for the regulative pillar included: existence of laws and regulations; employees follow 'rules of the game'; enforcers of 'rules of the game'; and sanctions for non-compliance. All themes are listed in Table II. In summary, our data structure has three levels, as suggested by Corley and Gioia (2004): at the 'top' are the theoretical aggregate dimensions, represented by the three institutional pillars; then, the themes that were developed a priori, which relate to the three pillars; and finally, the concepts, that represent meanings or experiences expressed by the interviewees.

Initially, the two authors each read the interview transcripts separately to familiarise themselves with the data and to generate provisional ideas and interpretations. Each author coded the data, matching words and phrases to identify concepts, or categories, which 'fit' with the predetermined themes. The authors then met several times to compare and discuss their provisional coding; to agree the final coding; and to pair each resulting concept with a theme. A list of codes was created for the data that could logically not be allocated to one of the predetermined themes. However, these codes were not sufficient in quantity or homogeneity to warrant the creation of any new concepts or themes. In the final phase of our data analysis, all concepts, themes and aggregate dimensions were reviewed to ensure that the results appeared accurate and made logical sense. No notable issues or problems were experienced during this phase. It was perceived by the authors that there was sufficient data to support each theme, and therefore also each of the three institutional pillars.

Results

In this section, we provide our key findings, categorising our results as firm responses to regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pressures. We also consider the extent to which a firm's decisions and strategies may be considered as examples of decoupling. Our findings are illustrated with a selection of interviewee quotes. We have not used the interviewees' exact job titles, in order to preserve anonymity. An overview of the data structure, which shows sample concepts and identifies the predetermined themes that relate to each of the three institutional pillars is provided in Table II.

Regulative pressures

As might be expected for a potentially sensitive industry in an authoritarian country, the strategic decision makers in our study perceived that there are strong regulative pressures that greatly constrain their decisions and strategic choices. The UAE has a number of laws,

regulations and charters that regulate specific segments or activities within its mass media industry. For example, an Act passed in 1980, which is still in effect today, bans any direct criticism of the country's rulers.

We take great care not to publish anything that could be perceived as criticism of the country or its rulers. The government and rulers ultimately determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. All employees know the rules and they must have respect for the local culture. Individuals know that if they get something wrong they could be dismissed, and even arrested or deported from the country. (Human resources manager, newspaper)

Table II.

Data structure showing sample concepts, themes and aggregate dimensions

Concepts	Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company must be aware of legislation and regulations • Company must comply with legislation and regulations 	Existence of laws and regulations	Regulative Pillar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and development provided so employees know 'the rules' • Employees know and follow 'the rules' 	Employees follow 'rules of the game'	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and rulers determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable • Company's relationship and communication with National Media Council 	Enforcers of 'rules of the game'	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual employee behaviour influenced by possible sanctions • Firm behaviour influenced by possible sanctions 	Sanctions for non-compliance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Owner of company is an elite • Company builds and maintains relationships with elites • Company benefits from wasta 	Relationships with elites/wasta	Normative Pillar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company follows local and international industry codes of practice • Individual employees influenced by the general mind-set of the industry in the UAE 	Industry professionalisation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production output/content satisfies consumers in the UAE's multicultural society • As an employer, the company respects and acknowledges the customs and religious occasions of different religions 	UAE multicultural population	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production output/content satisfies consumers • Production output/content satisfies advertisers • Production output/content must not upset or offend anyone 	Stakeholder expectations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production output/content avoids religious topics 	Religion	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day-to-day business operations are affected by religion, e.g. during Ramadan 		Cultural- Cognitive Pillar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company enforces a dress code that upholds local cultural values • Consumption of alcohol is banned on company premises 	Cultural values	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company's employment conditions and benefits satisfy the needs of women • Homeworking is popular with women/ satisfies the needs of women • Families and husbands prefer women not to work in a mixed sex office • Company avoids employing women because working conditions are believed unsuitable for them 	Families and Gender	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual employees must understand the UAE's national culture • Individual employees are influenced by cultural values and societal expectations 	Managers' perceptions of the institutional environment	

In 2008, the UAE joined most states in the Arab League to pass a charter regulating satellite broadcasters, which threatens closure of any station that jeopardises social peace, national unity, public order or general property. The National Media Council (NMC) is responsible for media regulation in the UAE. Thus, the NMC probably represents the strongest of the regulative institutions in the UAE's mass media organisational field. The NMC's functions include: promoting support for the Union; promoting Emiratisation (labour localisation); promoting national identity and social cohesion by inculcating pride in Emirati culture; promoting national resilience against alien cultures and detrimental traditions; promoting public awareness of important issues, such as environmental protection and consumer rights; and highlighting the UAE's accomplishments both nationally and internationally (Khan, 2014).

It is vital to comply with the rules and regulations if you have a business in this country. We appreciate that the rules and regulations often offer us some degree of protection and certainty, but they do limit the scope of our work, by making it impossible for us to cover certain topics that may be regarded as sensitive. These topics would be perfectly acceptable in other countries. (Business development manager, newspaper)

We take great care to ensure that we comply with all laws and regulations. We regularly seek clarifications and permissions from the National Media Council and we have lawyers and consultants to advise us. We know that if we slip up we could easily be fined or prosecuted, with issues escalated by the local regulators to higher authorities. (Marketing manager, film production company)

In 2018, the NMC issued a new set of mandatory regulations for electronic media, which covers all online activities, such as e-commerce, publishing and selling of print, video and audio material, as well as advertising. The regulations also apply to social media influencers that promote brands or conduct e-commerce in the UAE. All firms involved with electronic media in the UAE now need to be licenced by the NMC.

The new code of practice for online activities has not caused us to change the way we do things as our current policies and procedures are fine. We already respect the religious, cultural and social values of the UAE. However, we recognise that operating digital platforms brings with it new risks as things are now done much quicker and staff are often able to post things online without first going through the traditional editorial control procedures. To deal with this, we have conducted training and development activities to remind staff of their obligations and responsibilities. (Head of Digital Operations, newspaper)

Actually, we welcome the new [electronic media] regulations. It is important that regulations keep up with the rapid technological developments in electronic and social media. The regulations are common sense really, and they will help protect users, employees and firms from negative and harmful material. Rather than constraining the way we do things, these regulations show that the UAE is one of the most developed and successful media hubs in the world. (General Manager, publishing company)

In making recruitment decisions, managers may feel legally or ethically obliged to recruit UAE nationals over expatriates, in compliance with the country's Emiratisation agenda. Even when recruiting speakers or trainers for an event, organisers may need to consider the nationalities of potential visitors, either because of the regional competitive spirit that exists among the Arab Gulf nations (e.g. feelings that someone from Saudi Arabia or Bahrain can't know more about a certain topic than experts in the UAE) or because of the diplomatic relations between countries (e.g. Qatari and Israeli nationals are currently banned from entering the UAE).

When we organise our conferences, we often opt for the UAE-based speaker instead of bringing someone from outside, because there can be delays in getting approvals, and sometimes applications for visas are rejected. Because we are unable to confirm the names of speakers for an event far in advance, we often have to start promoting the event before we can publish or confirm the full agenda. Even when we want to publish an advertisement in a local gazette, we may need to get the advertisement pre-approved by a certain government entity. (Digital Marketing & Events Manager).

The interviews in our study generated little data that could be interpreted as clear and definite examples of strategic decoupling. Rather, our interviewees seemed eager to emphasise that they do not make decisions that would be in conflict institutional expectations. However, some interviewees did offer examples of how their firm coped with institutional constraints that may damage or hinder the firm's operational or financial performance. In such cases, the interviewees typically justified their firm's strategies or actions as being essential due the nature or demands of the media industry. For example:

The growth of online and digital has turned us into a twenty-four seven business, so we cannot observe public holidays. Employees are often annoyed that they don't get the same holidays as their friends or relations, but most employees accept that this is one of the demands of working in our industry. (Chief executive officer, media production company)

Topics that we would not mention or cover in our [TV] programmes, we may sometimes write about, or allow public discussions, on Facebook or Twitter. (Editor, TV channel)

Although we are careful to observe all laws and regulations, nowadays our readers expect real news stories and critical writing. Particularly in our online version, we sometimes cover topics that not every person may approve of, and our topics might involve some sort of criticism, for example, when discussing environmental damage or bad driving on the UAE's roads. In such cases, our criticism of the country is rather subtle. Of course, we would never directly criticise the Sheikhs, the government or the country, because this is illegal. (Editor, newspaper)

Normative pressures

Norms and values that exist in society may represent normative constraints on management decision making. Scott (2008) explains that values are conceptions of the preferred or desirable that influence structures and behaviours. The structures and behaviours can be compared and assessed through the creation of societal standards. Norms help managers to define goals and objectives, and norms indicate how things should be done and what actions may be regarded by society and stakeholders as appropriate and acceptable. Normative pressures may be recognised in routines, procedures, conventions, roles, codes and beliefs. March and Olsen (1989) suggest that actors tend to focus on social obligations. As the principal actors in organisational strategic decision making, it is the responsibility of managers to identify and interpret normative 'rules', and to then create strategies that enable the firm to gain and maintain legitimacy in society, as well as achieving organisational goals.

In all of the Arab Gulf countries, societal power, prestige and influence is concentrated in the hands of a few elites. These elites comprise the sheikhs or rulers, senior government officials, and senior figures in the major tribal families, who also tend to own the largest domestic companies. Many firms in the UAE perceive the government as the only source for gaining legitimacy (Forstenlechner and Mellahi, 2011). In some cases, firms owned by elites may be able to decouple from normative pressures, and because of their status in society, they will not be challenged or lose legitimacy.

As a large government-owned entity, we can, to an extent, make the rules, because we can sometimes influence how rules are interpreted or enforced. We are close to the ruler's court, so sometimes we can get access to information or events that other newspapers may not get. This has helped make our website one of the most popular sources of news and local information in the UAE. Also, we can check more easily what is and is not permissible, and get quicker approvals to run a particular story or use particular pictures. (Editor, newspaper)

The elites are the most powerful and influential individuals in UAE society, so it was not surprising to find that several firms sought to develop relationships with these individuals. In the Arab World, the practice of using networks and connections in business or social life is known as *wasta*. A firm is recognised to have *wasta* if it is able to request assistance or favours from an individual or entity that is in a position of power to grant the assistance or favours. *Wasta* helps bind families, communities and firms for peace and well-being, and as such *wasta* may benefit each of the parties involved, as well as society as a whole. However, Hutchings and Weir (2006) argue that in recent years, the term 'wasta' has become associated with the process of seeking benefits from the government. Nowadays, *wasta* is sometimes linked with nepotism, cronyism, personal gains and corruption (Barnett *et al.*, 2013). Although some of our interviewees appeared to perceive *wasta* as a negative thing, most interviewees agreed that

wasta could contribute to a firm's success. In particular, foreign firms may use networks to overcome their resource deficits in different stages of internationalisation (Bembom and Schwens, 2018).

Networking is the key to success in our industry. You get to meet more people; it opens doors; you get more business; and it builds your public relations as well. (Director, radio station)

The owner of our company is a sheikh, so we have all the necessary connections. We are directly and fully supported by the Sheikh himself. So, we get the news first and we get invited to the selective events. The sheikh is very forward looking, so he has encouraged us to rapidly develop our digital and mobile platforms, as well as making effective use of social media. (Chief Photographer/Deputy Pictures Editor, newspaper)

It always helps to know people in the government because they will open doors for you. As a foreign company, it is important that we enlarge our network so that we do not miss out on any opportunities. When we can get a sheikh or VIP in one of our programmes, it is great for our image and people perceive us as a successful company. (Managing director, film production company)

Normative pressures often result from the professionalisation within an organisational field. For example, in 2006, the UAE Journalists Association agreed a code of ethics for its members, which included things like 'having respect for Islam and UAE culture, values and traditions'. Some of our interviewees were clearly influenced in their decision making by professionalisation and the perceived norms in the UAE's mass media industry. Isomorphism among firms' structures and processes appears strong, as interviewees were unable to give examples of their firm's strategies or practices that were different to competitors or industry norms. Other interviewees mentioned the need to satisfy both the demands and expectations of readers/viewers/listeners and advertisers, and to take into account the interests and values of all stakeholder groups.

We abide by both local and international codes of practice in our industry. (Business development manager, social media company)

The UAE is a very multicultural country, so we do our best to consider all nationalities, whether they are our listeners or our employees. For example, we respect and acknowledge the customs and religious occasions of different religions. (Marketing manager, radio station)

We are a government-owned newspaper, but we are still expected to make a profit. This requires us to sell as many newspapers and as much advertising space as possible. So, we must consider what stories and features our readers and advertisers actually want us to publish. Our writing must be informative and interesting, but we cannot afford to upset or offend anyone. (Marketing manager, newspaper)

Cultural-cognitive pressures

Cultural-cognitive pressures result from the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality. While normative institutional pressures are associated with norms and values,

the cultural-cognitive institutional pressures are related to cultures. ‘Culture’ may be defined as “the transmission from one generation to the next, via teaching and imitation, of knowledge, values, and other factors that influence behavior” (Boyd and Richerson, 1985, p. 2). Individuals create their own versions of social reality within the wider pre-existing cultural system.

The UAE’s national culture is influenced most strongly by tribal family traditions and Islam, the religion that is dominant throughout the Arab World. The UAE’s institutional environments are characterised by strong hierarchical structures. These structures are the result of a tribal based society, which emphasises family values and connectedness, as well as respect for elders and authority. Islamic values shape business and management practices throughout the Arab World (Forster and Fenwick, 2015). In the UAE, all firms must allow Muslims to observe the prayer times each day and they must respect Ramadan, the month in which Muslims fast each year, by reducing the working hours of employees (usually including non-Muslims too). In general, religion is seen as a sensitive topic, which many media companies in the UAE choose not to discuss or engage with.

We do not get involved in religious topics, and we tend stay away from news related to religion completely. (Managing director, TV channel)

We uphold local cultural values by ensuring that actors and actresses wear conservative clothes and we do not allow performers to consume alcohol in the studio, or in fact anywhere on our premises. Much of our business comes to a halt during Ramadan, because it would be disrespectful to produce music during this holy month. (Chief executive officer, media production company)

In traditional UAE culture, families protect females. For example, although women in the UAE are allowed to drive and work, families may forbid females from travelling abroad for work or from sharing an office with a male. The participation of national females in UAE higher education has always been considerably higher than that of national males (Wilkins *et al.*, 2018), and as a result, women now play a large and active role in the labour market. Cultural values have changed during the last two decades, and even families that hold traditional values, who may previously have preferred their women to stay at home rather than work, now support the decisions of those females who wish to work. However, the rise of multi-platform operations in the media industry has also promoted the growth of homeworking. Although most UAE national women prefer to work in the public sector, the media industry is one that is slowly becoming more popular as a career choice. Increasingly, women can be seen in senior management positions. Firms that deny employment to women may lose legitimacy in society, and while most media firms welcome female employees, there are still (unpublicised) exceptions, which may be regarded as examples decoupling.

Our company welcomes female employees. Women are now occupying all kinds of positions. For example, they are working as editors, writers, photographers and managers. Women may face challenges after they get married and have children, but we are careful and generous when it comes to working hours, maternity leave and health insurance benefits. (Human resources manager, newspaper)

The rise of our online and digital operations has made it possible for some employees to work remotely. Homeworking has been particularly popular with women, as it allows them to work while also fulfilling their family commitments. And, to be honest, I think some

husbands are much happier with their wives working from home than working in mixed sex offices. (General Manager, publishing company)

We avoid employing women in our company because the working hours are late, which would not be suitable for women. Also, we wouldn't want our clients to hang around with female employees, especially as some of our clients drink alcohol. (Chief executive office, media production company)

Managers follow particular courses of action because these actions are taken for granted as the way things should get done (Scott, 1995). Individuals and firms deal with uncertainty by imitating others, which results in isomorphic structures and processes. However, an individual's decisions may be influenced by the conception of who they are and the actions that make sense for them in any given situation. Although all of our interviewees appeared keen to achieve individual and organisational legitimacy, by implementing strategies that appeared to them to fit with the UAE's norms, values and culture, it is highly probable that managers with different national and religious backgrounds may perceive the UAE's norms, values and culture differently, and to an extent, be influenced by their own social identities, backgrounds, beliefs and values.

To be honest, I am probably influenced a lot in my decision making by rules, regulations and expectations, as well as the general mind-set of the industry in this country. Of course, I also need to focus on maximising profits. I enjoy challenges and am not afraid to take risks, but I am very aware that if you make one bad mistake, your career in this country could be finished. (Business development manager, newspaper)

In the UAE, cultural-cognitive pressures encourage self-censorship in media firms, as content editors avoid publishing or broadcasting anything that may be considered offensive or inappropriate in the local environment. There was agreement among all managers that employees recruited from outside the UAE needed a period of adjustment to the norms, values, culture and expectations of stakeholders in the UAE, in addition to a structured induction programme and ongoing support.

Workers can't just say 'I want to go and work in the UAE' without first understanding the rules, culture and environment in this country. There are currently many opportunities in the UAE's media industry and there will likely always be new opportunities, but new employees must understand the organisational and industry environments and act accordingly. (Co-owner, magazine)

Discussion

Scott's (1995, 2008) conceptualisation of three pillars of institutions was found to be a valuable theoretical framework to aid the examination of strategies and decision making in UAE mass media companies. Each of these three pillars of institutions operates through its own mechanisms and processes, delivering legitimacy to firms on the basis of being legally sanctioned, morally authorised or culturally supported. It is concluded that although human agency and individual/organisational attitudes to risk may contribute to explaining some micro-level decisions, the macro institutional influences appear to have a much stronger impact on managerial decision making. This is illustrated by the fact that our interviewees were unable to identify any substantive non-isomorphic decisions, behaviours or business strategies in the

UAE media industry. In general, we found few differences in firm strategies and behaviours between locally owned and foreign firms, although some government and locally owned firms admitted to benefiting from *wasta* with the sheikhs or ruler's courts. Firm size seemed to have a stronger impact on the opportunities available to the firm, the quality of the firm's work, and its financial performance, with larger firms appearing to benefit from their scale.

Although cultural-cognitive institutional pressures are critical to the understanding of individual decision making and firm strategies across most of the Arab World, rapid changes are possible, particularly in the regulative institutions and value systems of the normative pillar. In many emerging markets, as the regulative influences strengthen, the normative and cognitive-cultural influences become weaker (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2017). The regulative institutions in the UAE media industry have developed quickly and strongly, and although these regulative institutions have the largest constraining influences on firm decision making and business strategies, our findings suggest that the influences of the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars remain strong.

The NMC is a powerful body that regulates all aspects of the UAE media industry and as such represents the strongest single influence of the regulative frame. Firms that do not comply with laws or regulations face prosecution and fines, and ultimately may be closed down. Although these laws and regulations apply equally to traditional media formats such as print and television, the survey participants tended to agree that managing online and digital operations is more challenging due to the speed of operation, 24/7 working (i.e. operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), increased remote working and streamlined editorial control procedures. Firms increasingly expect individual employees to take personal responsibility for their work output, ensuring that it complies with all relevant laws and regulations, as well as societal expectations.

As is typical in most authoritarian states, it is unacceptable to criticise the rulers, government or country. It is not unusual for individuals working as writers, editors or broadcasters in the UAE to be arrested, imprisoned or deported, depending on the seriousness of their offence. In fact, one of our interviewees has been arrested on two occasions, for taking photographs in a forbidden location (near a military base, although it was somewhat in the distance) and of an unacceptable subject (an ambulance at a sporting event).

Most people working in the UAE media industry know someone else working in the industry who has been arrested, or someone who knows someone who has been arrested, and these examples serve to reinforce the importance of complying and conforming with the nation's laws, regulations, norms, values and culture. Such knowledge and awareness of the nation's institutional requirements and expectations encourages the process of self-censorship, which is standard practice in the UAE media industry. In conclusion, it is clear that macro institutional pressures strongly influence the logics that cause managers to make particular decisions and strategic choices.

The strong institutional pressures existing in the UAE encourage tight coupling, where the structures and processes of organisations are linked and designed in response to the institutional constraints. Evidence was found only of some minor decoupling, such as not allowing employees to take leave in public holidays; engaging in 'subtle' criticism of the country; using a particular medium (e.g. the Internet) to discuss topics that would not be discussed using a different medium (e.g. the television broadcasts of the firm); and not employing women in certain job roles (for which they may be appropriately qualified). Thus, we conclude that in the UAE's media industry, tight coupling characterises the vast majority of strategic decisions and approaches, with a very small minority of firms engaging in small degrees of loose coupling.

Conclusion

This study makes a number of contributions. First, the findings indicate that in authoritarian countries, institutional pressures and constraints may be far stronger than in free market democratic countries. Second, although the literature suggests that decoupling strategies are a viable way for firms to pursue firm specific objectives and requirements while preserving their external legitimacy, in practice, decoupling may not be a realistic option in authoritarian countries. Third, our findings indicate that firms owned by elites will have a competitive advantage in the market, but firms that are able to build *wasta* or relationships with elites may also enjoy competitive advantages.

Previous studies have found positive relationships between strategic planning effectiveness and firm success (Elbanna, 2008). A key implication of this study's findings is that individuals and firms need to develop mechanisms for identifying and processing the requirements and expectations of the institutional environment. In particular, expatriate managers and those employed from outside the host country need to be taught about the nation's institutional environment, both during their induction and on an on-going basis, and given time to adjust to the norms, values, culture and expectations of stakeholders in the host country. Expatriate managers tend to be conscientious (Furnham, 2017), but regardless of their specialised job roles, these managers need to learn the skill of balancing conformance to institutional pressures and achieving business objectives (Lakshman and Lakshman, 2017).

The principal theoretical implication resulting from this study is the realisation that the strategic decisions of firms may be influenced more by systems of government and political influences than any other institutional influences. Thus, in response to our findings, we hypothesise that in nations under authoritarian rule, political pressures will likely override all other institutional pressures, and that it will be most sensible for firms to adopt tight coupling strategies. This suggests that managers are constrained from pursuing heterogeneous or innovative actions, which will lead to isomorphism in the structures and processes of firms.

It is widely believed that institutional constraints may hinder firm performance, which provides the rationale for implementing decoupling strategies. However, it may be observed in the UAE that many companies appear to be efficient and competitive, even in international markets. Furthermore, it is not only the UAE's oil companies that have enjoyed international success, but also firms from diverse industries such as air travel, aluminium production, banking, hospitality, ports and maritime services, real estate and telecommunications. The success of many UAE firms both at home and internationally suggests that strong institutional constraints do not necessarily act as a barrier to superior firm performance. Furthermore, research by Pattnaik *et al.* (2015) concluded that host country institutions do not significantly explain the variation in performance of multinational subsidiary firms.

The study is not without limitations. It focused on the influences of the external environment on management decision making, but, in practice, strategic choices are also driven by firm resources and capabilities, as well as managerial perceptions and preferences (Thomé and Medeiros, 2016). The study involved a relatively small sample in only one industry and one country. Further studies could be conducted to assess the extent to which generalisation is possible across other industries and other authoritarian countries. Although several interviewees seemed at times nervous or reluctant to talk about particular topics, the researchers feel that most interviewees were candid and open about both their personal and firm's approaches to strategic decision making. Of course, it is impossible to know the exact extent to which interviewees shared the full details of their knowledge and experiences. Despite these limitations, the study provides findings that may be valuable and useful to both researchers and practitioners working in authoritarian emerging economies.

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