Transformative Efforts of Cosmesis: The Case of UAE

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Consumption of cosmetics remains a challenging and interesting topic to researchers, advertisers and marketing professionals alike. Causes of beauty enhancement products being desired and heavily used have been examined in detail. Yet the connection between cultural values and that of the notion of cosmesis is not fully explored, in particular within the Gulf Countries and more specifically the United Arab Emirates, where economic growth has fuelled new, modern materialistic patterns of consumption. This study incorporates these literature streams belonging to customers' culture theory utilizing Trompenaars- Hampden Turner seven dimensions framework to identify the transformative efforts at the personal level of individual projects for Emirati people. The paper concludes with preliminary findings and suggests future research avenues in the realm of cosmesis and the notion of beauty as advanced in the proposed hypotheses.

Field of Research: Consumers' Culture Theory

1. Introduction

Studies in multicultural management have enforced a viewpoint that culture as per its national borders is a rather stable and slow changing structure. This belief assumes that values, norms and social conventions which determine people's behaviors tend to remain fixed in the long-run, especially in Islamic cultures which exhibit more rigid predicaments based on the Quran. Globalization, however, has shaken these assumptions and this not just at the corporate level, but also deep down into the individual's own identity projects. Nonetheless, little research has been provided to assess the relationship between what Western cosmetics brands and the way the Arab world is transforming itself. As a result, this paper attempts to find out how this occurs while investigating the related behavioral patterns of beauty consumption that change the scene, in particular for the UAE. We find that despite what stereotypical descriptions would anticipate, the Emirati women population is using Western cosmesis to reinvent their individual identities, rather than simply adopting Western habits at face value. This is a theoretical paper based on secondary data and is organized as follows. Section 2 uses the Trompenaars & Hampden Turner (THT) framework to highlight the movement in cultural categories within the Emirati population while covering the relevant literature.

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In Section 3 the paper addresses the specifics of UAE culture in terms of cosmetic consumption and looks at consumer culture theory as a pillar of this Arab society. Finally Sections 4 and 5 lead to the analysis of how identities reshape from within the strategic intent of Emirati culture. We conclude with a discussion on the business implications for organizations and avenues of future research both for strategic marketers as well as academic scholars.

2. Literature Review with the THT Framework for Emirati Culture

"*The culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life*" (Frye, 1973, p. 346). According to this definition, culture is a palimpsest worth decoding. More specifically, this paper focuses on the "consumer culture theory" (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) as the foundations of the different perspectives in marketing research addressing the complexities and the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, organizational performance and cultural meanings set in a conceptual framework of reference.

Although Hofstede (1980; 1994; Hofstede & Bond, 1988) remains an important theoretical reference, we consider that the THT dimensions (Trompenaars, 1996; 2004) are accurate parameters to assess the degree in which a national culture represents its key consumption expressions because they focus on opposite value propositions. This is even more relevant in the case of dynamic changes affecting national culture and fits nicely the fast-paced growth of the UAE economy, fueled by the oil-rich industry as well as tourism or hospitality sector, and manufacturing and logistics verticals. THT framework of the seven dimensions is bi-polar and opposes values on a continuum. It revolves around the following seven aspects: 1) Universalism-Particularism: in a nutshell, the tendency to follow standardized rules vs. that of preferring to abide to personal relationships to resolve conflicting situations; 2) Individualism-Communitarianism: performance focused on the individual is opposed to that of the group, leading to cohesion and consensus. Good examples can be found in the literature on cross-cultural studies (Early, 1993; Latané et al., 1979). 3) Neutral-Affective: refers to the expression of emotions, whether controlled or overtly displayed; 4) Specific-Diffuse: discusses the degree of personal involvement in a relationship, whereby 5) Achievement-Ascription: looks at the status or power position based on performance compared to that achieved through birth, schooling, age, gender and family background. 6) Sequential-Synchronic: offers the possibility to observe the ability to combine tasks simultaneously or in a step-by-step manner and finally, 7) Internal-External Control: assesses the stimulation based on one's internal drive and sense of control vs. that being exerted by external events or conditions beyond one's reach.

Emirati culture has traditionally been viewed as an Arab value system, since individuals speak Arab as their native tongue and identify themselves in the predicaments of Islam. Nonetheless, the Arab world includes countries as diverse as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Palestine or Kuwait. Of the nations mentioned, the UAE is the one to have undergone the most phenomenal transformation in the last 30 years. It has become home to a growing number of international successful companies and

heterogeneous population. Accordingly, the recent diffusion of these numerous products and services, combined with the cosmopolitan experience, has also been accompanied by a transformation of how consumers construct their personal identities. This is a fundamental reason why cosmesis becomes the most visible focus of these transformative efforts. This in turn affects the constitution of national image. UAE customers can no longer be seen as a traditional family unit shopping in small boutiques and local shops, favoring particularistic only values and following the tribal societal structure of the past. It can be argued that the sudden and large development of shopping malls with broad offerings, multi-cultural restaurants and luxurious Western brands on display have re-shaped the way Emirati people find themselves reconciling the opposite value propositions embedded in the THT seven dimensions. Nonetheless, little if no research has investigated the intimate relationship between such rapid evolution and the personalized use of cosmetics through Western iconography and branding messages.

Two schools of thought have emerged from the discourse on consumers' culture theory. On the one hand, advocates of the pervasiveness of globalization anticipate a loss of national identity, through abandoning regional affiliation in favor of homogenized consumer patterns (Bell, 1976; Inglehart, 1997). In the UAE for instance, Simadi (2004, 2006) encounters no impact of national origin on the evolving values of university students. Rather, it is the economic, social and political development which has contributed most to reconstructing their value systems.

On the other, and perhaps most interestingly for this study, the second school of thought sees a convergence of Western and Eastern approaches due to the increasing interactions in the UAE between national and international forces. In Wee's research (1999) it was already shown that teenagers around the globe do not necessarily follow the same consumption lifestyles than Americans, even if they do interact. Furthermore, in a study by El-Adly (2007) which is not exclusive to Arab culture, we find however, subtle differences between Western and local UAE shoppers that support the view of a sophisticated lifestyle in Emirati population. The latter tend to be the relaxed ones, going out on weekends while also being demanding and putting more emphasis on entertainment, diversity and luxury. The former, who are pragmatic, seek primarily price-quality offerings. This reinforces the thesis of a culture in transition, as an ocean in flux. Similar to THT Onion metaphor of culture with multiple layers, the ocean metaphor (Fang, 2006) embraces not just visible wave patterns but also ebbs and flows at different depths.

3. Methodology and Model of UAE on THT Seven Dimensions of Culture

To assess the consumer culture theory, we map the seven dimensions. Particularism vs Universalism has been completely revisited and modified in the UAE. The reluctance to offend others, combined with a desire to maintain harmony are important in Arab societies in general. In a way they also reflect Collectivist rather than Individualistic tendencies in which group harmony or tribal peace is secured through mechanisms that ensure social norms are respected above individual, personal expressions of freedom.

Understanding prevails versus a mere enforcement of the law. Yet again, as is demonstrated by substantial research (O'Donnel & Laurence, 1986; Diamond, 1994; Bryant, 1995), the UAE has established a legal and normative framework for capitalistic measures to be implemented, in turn fostering economic growth and dramatic differences with neighboring countries. In sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia for instance, the UAE has comparatively very liberal laws with a civil law jurisdiction, combined to Shari'a or Islamic Law applied to aspects of family, inheritance and certain criminal acts. The UAE also allow women to drive, alcohol to be sold and consumed, and perhaps most significantly have implemented the establishment of numerous Civil Courts. As a result, from 1999 to 2004 only, GDP of the seven Arab emirates grew by 52.9% (Barkho, 2007).

In what refers to the overt expression of one's emotions, this study pays particular attention to the role of Western beauty brands as well as the continued re-invention of what beauty means in the context of being an Emirati and thus honoring the Quran's predicaments. It is needless to say that the shift is substantial. From only a few decades ago to nowadays facts and figures show there is a fabulous divide. In a recent study by Euromonitor International reported in Gulf News (2011), UAE women spend 38% more than their French counterparts on cosmetics and they consider these wellbeing products a daily necessity. Young people particularly allocate a larger part of their income budgets to these luxury products. This clearly shows a change in trend from a discourse on beauty based on modesty to one influenced by Western brands, adverts and other forms of commercial imagery which has moved away from a conservative approach to definitely a much more modern view of cultural integrity via the affirmation of personal beauty attributes. The implications at the social level may not be yet fully understood, but then again a sample of how and what is occurring can be obtained from the immense success reported in the social media and the footfall of malls.

Geography together with history remain keystones of a millennium-old routine of hierarchical life in which the UAE monarchies constitute the building blocks of a never ending process. The individuals serve families, families serve society and back to people who need to serve both their families as well as society at large (Patai, 2002; Nawar, 2000). Then again, despite the lack of secularism, many efforts have been undertaken to introduce greater transparency and in that sense, more emphasis on the need to promote a vision of merit rather than one of the spoils system. To just take an example, the creation of Media cities and in Dubai especially the intention to draw media businesses and Internet related entities to their gleaming glass buildings, dovetails nicely with the urge to open society to new challenges and opportunities. In sum, the achievement of specific tendencies on the 7 THT dimensions can be said to have been enhanced, while providing more directness and consistent principles.

Of particular interest for assessing the transformative process, we focus on the lifestyles of women, as part of the Emirati society and who are the primary target of the cosmetics industry. Malls indeed have become the modern cathedrals of consumption. They represent an extension of a consumer-oriented life where people meet and greet and women are free to wander, in groups, with family members or even alone. Research has discussed the profound impact of malls on the way secluded women, have

suddenly found a place to have an adventure, by exchanging loaded eye-contact with individuals of the opposite sex (Walters, 2004). The creeping changes also brought about by the storming information and media have certainly transformed the ways of living a Westernized life in which Internet, although controlled and censored, offers that special virtual space on which women can also freely wander away and out of the traditional Majlis. Majlis are physical rooms first developed from Bedouin traditions. They constituted a safe, hospitable place where housewives could offer a meal and share it with other women. Now, the fact that more than hundred TV channels can be picked up offers the possibility to watch and register through the imagery, not only Western movies and series, i.e. American Idol, Friends or Frazier, but also a vast array of advertisements on perfumes, make-up, personal beauty and hygiene products. As Za'Za' (2005) points out you have television programming considered unwholesome in several cultural contexts entering the bedroom of Emirati people and potentially eroding perceptions about what is considered appropriate and decent behavior. In no small sense, but perhaps ironically, this life split with one foot resting in mediated Westernized environment against the more traditional Arabic, Islamic culture offers the possibility to reconcile synchronicity (Sobh et al., 2008) on a plane where time is similar to a wide ribbon allowing many and different things to occur simultaneously. Time is more flexible. Time is also more intangible as the future orients human prospects which are ordered according to the strict abidance of rules imposed by the succession of well-ordered duties: Ramadan, with its day long fasting and intense praying being just one obvious example.

As mentioned earlier there is no study that highlights the changes between individual identities, and more specifically UAE women beautifying techniques with those of the evolving value system for the entire nation. Yet the cosmetics market in the Emirates is close to AED 10.65 billion (US $2.9 B) per year (Mena Report 2009) and more interestingly the spending goes specifically to international brands. With 26 outlets and 40 more planned in the UAE, Paris Gallery is controlling 60% of high-end cosmetics and fragrance sales where the large majority are European and American brands (Cochrane, 2006). And since a brand is the creation of an image, through a name, the product quality and technical benefits, its design and the total store experience why shouldn´t the consumer incorporate all these elements into the very process of beautifying his/her persona? In fact, the personal constructs based on appearance not only delineate modern Emirati styles, but also serve as a basis for judgments on what Emirati society needed to explore, build upon and aesthetically revise for the continued growth and wellbeing of the region. In sum, it provides the ground for a re-evaluation of a larger set of categories that have institutionalized over time and are in the stage of transforming the deeply seated meanings of Arab culture. Analysis of qualitative data expressing the relation between Emirati and Western cosmetics products shows the increasing convergence towards a communal understanding of public consumption that stresses status and wealth, versus a more religious prohibitive constraint rendered, through this interaction, less authoritative and more permissive.

In many ways, cosmetics can be seen as the very instrument to regain control over the self-identifying look that produces an identity expression unique to each woman. As research indicates, girls choose different garments, scents and makeup depending on

the specific setting in which they evolve (Sobh et al., 2008), which also means they decide on how to relate with their external environment to harmonize with what surrounds them. This organic view of actions vis-à-vis the world that surrounds Emirati women, suggests that they find ways to rationalize their own choices while distinguishing it from other practices they would condemn (Bier, 1986; Greenwalt, 1986; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Instead of merely going about the dichotomies between Western and Emirati value systems, they chose to reconcile and embrace them in an utterly singular manner, not only satisfying new requirements brought about by globalization but also creatively reinventing combinations that are original and unique. In sum, this article adds to the growing call for research on the contemporary Arab consumers as markets where materialism is exhibited as much as in non-Arab settings (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000) and where there exists a higher level of vanity expressed regarding physical appearance and concern for achievement (Cherrier et al., 2009).

4. Transformative Efforts and Cosmesis

The concept of cosmesis is of particular importance in this paper as it has historically been affiliated to Western values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Lerman & Maxwell, 2006; Mick, 1996; Rose & DeJesus, 2007). In addition, modesty versus vanity or demonstrations of bold cosmetic applications has been a key predicament of Islam. Al-Qaradawi (1997) highlights the fact a woman should not be revealing what is underneath her attire nor delineate sexually appealing parts of her body. Other public consumption banned in traditional Arab countries includes perfume, explicit make-up, plastic surgery and hairpieces enhancing outer appearance.

Nonetheless, in a seminal paper by Cherrier et al. (2009) on materialism and vanity in the Arab world, it was shown that there was no reliable difference between Arabs and Non-Arabs in the UAE in regards to materialism. Also, vanity was way more present in Arab respondents and this across all subscales of the construct as measured by Netemeyer et al. (1995): a) An excessive concern for physical appearance; b) a positive view of personal physical appearance; c) an excessive concern for personal achievements; and d) a positive view of one's personal achievements. Furthermore, the research emphasized the fact that religion has a direct effect on materialism, more specifically personal materialism. It was shown that Muslims tend to exhibit more of it than Christians and this is a peculiar finding considering the predicament of Islam to avoid worldly or mundane pleasures and possessions in consideration of the afterlife rewards. Acculturation was also finally tested. People who had been living longer number of years in Dubai were found to come closer to the belief expressed by this statement: "*I want others to look up to me for my accomplishments*".

Religion is a fundamental component of consumer culture and will affect heavily purchasing behavior and consumption patterns as Baily and Sood (1993) highlighted when discussing the importance of fasting and feasting during Ramadan time, beliefs of taboos in clothing styles and activities of women, practices of personal hygiene related to toiletries and cosmetics, and their related products and services (e.g. monthly depilation). These findings are further supported by Kalliny and Gentry (2007) in their study on cross-cultural TV advertising analysis between Arab and American countries.

As a prerequisite for successful marketing campaigns, differences in preferences due to cultural categories are paramount. Thus the authors dwell on the Coranic and Christian teachings, e.g. *God loves not the wasters* (Koran 7:31) and the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke (Bible 15:11-32) to explain what thriftiness means in terms of beauty enhancement for individuals living in both environments. They conclude that despite prohibitions like in Saudi Arabia where women have to cover their faces in public, the cultural value of looking beautiful appears to be truly important in Arab societies. Accordingly, it came as no surprise that little difference existed between the two cultures regarding thriftiness since both religions advocate wisdom in spending, but beauty was more valued in the latter group. This may explain why consumption patterns are way higher in cosmetics in this region with respect to the European geographical area.

Based on these findings, we hypothesize that an examination of cultural values related to the construct of beauty will prove tremendously useful in better understanding its extensions beyond the personal identity projects of Emirati people. Therefore we suggest that research pursues the analysis of consumer culture theory in the UAE by addressing the following propositions:

Proposition 1: *Beyond the personal identity project, Emirati people will seek to pursue also group projects around the construct of beauty and its implications. There will be a direct relationship between personal vanity and group vanity.*

Proposition 2: T*hriftiness expressed in religious teachings will be combined with the discourse on beauty at a larger level, whereby aesthetics will be sought as a reconciled outcome between limited spending and beauty magnificence. This in particular will have to do in areas of business, architecture, environmental protection and political influence.*

5. Findings: Cosmetics, Culture and Crossroads

Already some 4.000 year B.C. the powerful Egyptian queen Nefertiti was known to use make-up in the form of heavy eye-liner called *kohl*. Obviously cosmesis and fragrances were not exclusive to the Middle East or the North African region, they were present early on in China, social classes staining their nails, and Japan too, mainly used by *geishas*, the so-called art doers. Interestingly, from Persia, tribes in the Gulf who converted to Islam, used cosmetics only in occasions meant to disguise the real look in order to mislead or cause abnormal desire. Islam predicates therefore that you should not use such embellishments to cheat others and only in case they are not harming your body. When Abu al-Qssum al-Zahrawi, back in the 12th century, also known in the West as Abulcasis and who was the greatest medieval surgeon living in Al-Andalus had its treatise translated to Latin, cosmetics entered the Western world. He considered ointments, perfumed stocks rolled and pressed in special moulds to be part of medicine, as the medicine for Beauty, what we nowadays could consider the precursors of scents, lipstick and curative or treating creams.

Culturally, cosmetics have always played an ambivalent role – whether because it was thought immoral and sinful to wear make-up in most Christian Middle Ages countries, or whether the fashion to wear it came from arenas of theater and ballet, especially in the

20th century Americas and Europe, or because the cosmetics industry is breaking conventional sexual roles by offering products to men in the 21st century. Controversy is healthy insofar as it offers an opportunity to revisit cultural categories and to track their transitioning passage over time. Shari'a, the Islamic code of conduct which comprehensively covers the set of values Muslims should hold, indicates truth, justice, individual freedom, honesty, social duties, collective responsibility, the roles of men and women and that of buying and selling as the core elements of an appropriate Arab culture. It says little about cosmetics except what we already covered so in a sense, it appreciates the viewpoint that cosmetics are part of a deep belief anchored around the notion of health leading to good looks, which in turn can be enhanced to lead to even happy thoughts, status, admiration from others and trend setting examples of success. This perhaps explains why recently, color cosmetics in the UAE have not been affected by the world-wide striking economic recession as the demand for them has been driven by the expanding retailing outlets, the constant renovation and launch of products, and the large young UAE female population. In 2009 only, sales grew by 10%. Lip products posted the fastest growth thanks to the popularity of what has become a phenomenon called the "lipstick effect". The evolutionary explanation suggests that women feel the need to appeal to the opposite sex through facial and bodily features (Campbell, 2008), so reproductive biology becomes helpful in explaining this phenomenon in Darwinian terms (Saad & Gill, 2000). The innate need in women to increase their perceived mate value in the eyes of men strongly correlates with beauty products sales.

Proposition 3: *Emirati women will be more prone to using cosmetics in settings where the conventional family structure is more loosely present, seeking a modern look transitioning away from traditional value to globalized ones.*

Proposition4: *Emirati women will be less prone to using cosmetics in settings where the conventional family structure is present seeking a less modern look while not needing to appeal to men out of the group.*

With hindsight, it makes sense to acknowledge that despite the disciplinary turmoil undergone in consumer research during the decade of the 80s in the West (Lutz, 1989; Belk, 1986, 1987b; Holbrook, 1987) experiential and cultural dimensions of consumption were neglected, but most importantly became later the source of novel, in-depth insights (Arnould& Thompson, 2005; Olson, 1982; Zaltman, 2000). These missed opportunities in turn are now the focus of research informing different constituencies including the social scientific, managerial and public policy communities which are seeking more-socially grounded understandings of consumers' behavior. CCT is particularly interesting for its emphasis on the symbolic aspects of purchasing experiences related to the product's brands, image, and marketing mix that unfold over the consumption cycle and this paper applies the cultural categories of THT to the Emirati buying behavior of women for cosmetics. In line with Khraim (2011) study on brand loyalty for female consumers in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, this paper suggests that the very first parameter to ensure loyalty is the brand, its name and image. And since brands are mainly European and American, it also sheds light on the process of integration of Western values into the Emirati self-identity of female consumers. From this introspective study, it is therefore observed that consumers pay more attention to the

globalizing phenomena by getting acquainted and intrinsically connected with brands on cosmetics that reproduce Western lifestyles and thus re-create a simulated environment where boundaries are negotiated between the West and the Middle East.

6. Concluding Remarks

Given the continued expansion of the cosmetics industry in the UAE, international companies in the sector can benefit from better acquainting themselves to the changing landscape. It is time for advertisers and marketing professionals to revise their frameworks on how to seize a bigger slice of the region's growing markets. This paper addresses the transformative efforts which can be captured by the seven dimensions. In line with Kalliny & Gentry (2007) findings and contrary to common notion U.S. culture and Arabic culture are not vastly different, we chronicle how Western beauty brands have been precursors and significant actors in the transition of the Emirati values while quickly capitalizing on the changing scented winds and cultural landscapes.

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