The concept of wasta

An Insight into the Concept of Wasta A Marketing Research Project

I. ABSTRACT – VITAMIN WAW:

Wasta is commonly practiced " act" throughout the Arab world which is frequently linked to using connections in some manner or the other in order to achieve one's goals. Wasta often goes by the nickname " vitamin waw" because waw(و) is the Arabic letter equivalent to the English letter " w." This nickname's connotation also indicates the way wasta gives the user power that isn't always so easily accessible to most people. According to previous studies on Wasta in the Arab world we notice that there are mixed interpretations of its true meaning; most times it was seen that Wasta was categorized to be somewhat equivalent to Nepotism. We also find that the concept has evolved through time and that it application is becoming more and more common in modern times and in some cases we find that some people link its use to bribery. The purpose of this research was to mainly investigate the most dominant understanding of the concept of Wasta and how it is used across certain groups of people within Dubai's community.

Before setting the main research approach, an extensive literature review was conducted on what was currently available on Wasta as well as on two similar global concepts that were used as a benchmark for the research design & approach. The primary approach to the research was done using exploratory research methods which included three major focus groups across three main cultural groups – Non-Arab Expatriates, Arab-Expatriates & UAE Nationals.

Interestingly enough, all of the respondents did not categorize Wasta as Nepotism instead they referred it as using connections to " beat the

system". All respondents labeled it as an unethical means of getting what you wanted; however almost all of the respondents felt that sometimes a person can be forced into situations to use it. We also find that a very small percentage of respondents linked the concept to money as it was automatically defined as " bribe" or the Arabic word known as " rashwa". People found it very important to highlight that financial gain was not Wasta however it didn't mean that it was " okay to do it".

The implications of this research certainly does not change the world, however it proves that there is a great need for more extensive research on the matter as it may re-define what is seen as a common practice of the Arab world and a " way of life".

II. INTRODUCTION:

a. Problem Definition:

The word " واسطة " or " WASTA" is a popular Arabic term that is used within the Middle Eastern Region. We live in a relationship-centric culture where we often see how Wasta surpasses over meritocracy. This concept may be viewed by outsiders negatively however this ethical hurdle presents a unique challenge in that there is nothing discreet about it—Wasta is a part of the regional industry and culture, and is a norm that is accepted within the Arab society.

Wasta has seen as a form of privilege based on having the right connections. It is common to see business decisions that include hiring and promotion might be effected strongly be by whom you're related to or whom you know. In addition to workplace advancement, Wasta is also used to circumvent

legal issues, to avoid lines in government agencies or to hasten

administrative processes.

b. Importance of the Problem:

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept and the most dominant

perception of Wasta among the population. We would like to see if there is

any equivalent English word and to what extent can describe Wasta.

We realized that there is lack of available research of the concept and

therefore try to make a contribution to the existing scholarly literature. We

noticed that we there are mixed interpretation within different culture and

Wasta has been misused or defined differently from what it was defined in

past, when the original idea came from tribal culture to help and support

each others.

Research Question

What we would like to investigate with this research study is:

" What is the concept of Wasta?

We want to understand the different perceptions within society about Wasta.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN:

a. Summary:

a. Type of design: Exploratory design

b. Information needs – Perception of Wasta

c. Data collection: Primary & secondary

d. Research Method: Qualitative-unstructured

e. Data analysis: non-statistical

f. Direct approach

g. Instrument used for collecting data: Focus Group

h. Questioning techniques – Descriptive questions

i. Type of Sampling : Non-probability sampling, Convenience sampling

j. Population & Sample size : 13 respondents

a) UAE Nationals
b) Arab Expatriates

c) Non Arab Expatriates

b. Methodology & Fieldwork:
As this study conducted in United Arab Emirates, its multicultural
environment with more than 15 different nationalities provided a suitable
platform to obtain insight and the perception of this population to define
Wasta. The research design and the data collection method have been
explained in details as below:

c. Research Design:
The research design used in this study is exploratory design. The information
needed has been determined as the most dominant understanding and
perceptions of Wasta which exist in society. Data collection method has been
classified in two major parts. Secondary data which is obtained from the

existing literature review and primary data which obtained from direct approach from the respondent. The research method is qualitative since emphasize of this study is conceptual.

d. Research instrument:

The research instrument utilized in this study to collect the data is consisted of a series of focus group. Focus group involves participant in an open discussion by expressing their opinion and experience which generate truthful data and information which helps the researcher to discover the practical side of subject. The outline of focus group developed in such way to discover the understanding and perception of Wasta among the respondent. Respondent were asked to define Wasta on their own words and based on their experience. The participants were sent invitations for the focus group and given assurance of confidentiality.

e. Samples and data collection:

Before conducting the focus group, we believed that the perception of Wasta vary between different groups within a given community. Even within groups, individuals would have gone through different experiences. Since it is not practical to meet with too many people in a short amount of time we thought that the best way forward was to conduct mini focus groups and to meet with a selection of people. The objectives of the focus groups were to help us reveal what the most dominant perception of Wasta was across the different groups

Type of sampling used in this study is Non-probability as generalize ability was not important. Sample type in this research is convenience sample. Participants were chosen based on three different categories in order to have

a homogeneous group and get the cross sections of views from diverse population. The sample for this study included all full-time employees who worked in different companies and consisted of 3 groups selected based on the following categories in UAE:

* UAE Nationals

* Arab Expatriates

* Non Arab Expatriates

f. Sample demography:
As demonstrated in table 3. 1, the ages of participants were between 25 to 45. More than 60% of the participants (61. 54%) were male. Education level of participant was mostly at graduated level (61. 54%) compare to post graduated. The respondents were mainly from the private sector (53. 84%) and the rest equally from semi government and governmental sector. The majority of respondent worked between 1 to 4 years in UAE (46. 15%) and only 23. 08% worked more than 10 years in UAE who had more exposure in facing Wasta in different angle of their official and personal life.

Characteristics No. Percentage

_____

_____

Age

25-34 6 46. 15%

35-45 7 53. 85%

Total 13 100%

Gender

Male 8 61. 54%

Female 5 38. 46%

Total 13 100%

Experience

1-4 3 23. 08%

5-9 3 23. 08%

10yrs and more 7 53. 84%

Total 13 100%

Education

Graduate 8 61. 54%

Postgraduate 5 38. 46%

Total 13 100%

Sectors

Private 7 53. 84%

Semi Government 3 23. 08%

Government 3 23. 08%

Total 13 100%

Number of year worked in UAE

1-4 6 46. 15%

5-9 4 30. 77%

10yrs and more 3 23. 08%

Total 13 100%

Table 3. 1 Demographic breakdown of the sample No. 13
g. Focus Group Questions:
After drawing up the theories on Wasta based on our literature review we have come up with the following questions to be used as a basis for conducting the focus groups.

a. Define Wasta and give an example of a scenario

b. What would you use Wasta for?

c. Define the dimensions where you believe Wasta is used? i. e. Business, family, careers, power etc.

d. Do you believe that Wasta is a form of social capital/social power/social status?

e. Give us a scenario where you have received Wasta?

f. Give us a scenario where you have given Wasta?

g. Do you encourage the use of Wasta or not? Why or why not?

h. Do you believe Wasta can be seen as a form of social solidarity – meaning a form of a good deed?

i. Do you believe that Wasta has changed from what it used to be in the past versus what it is now?

We made sure that the questions used for the sessions were open-ended questions that could snowball into discussions of many dimensions – but limiting it within the topic and trying as much as possible to avoid the subject from diverting.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE:

The result form focus groups rely on words and ideas spoken by the participants and presented generally by calculation of the percentages and in forms of table or charts. Three major method has been used to analysis the findings and results such as:

* Content comparison
To compare the content of literature review with the focus group results.

* Coding scheme
To assign the code to each definitions and create a table in order to record the number of times the definitions has been repeated.

* Conceptualization
To come up with the new concept based on secondary and primary data analysis.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW:

In order to understand the concept of Wasta, we tried to find out if there are other words and to what extent are able to describe Wasta. There are different studies by some researchers from different part of the world about Nepotism, Guanxi and Wasta. Some literature focused on family-owned business tried to identify the advantages and disadvantages that nepotism can create in organizations. In the managements of many outstanding companies, large or small, there have been brothers, fathers, sons, in-laws, uncles and nephews who are holding the key positions which can be beneficial and the same time harm the organizations

Toy et al. (1988) believed that nepotism can expose an organization to family fights and also can create a negative impression on hardworking and talented managers who get passed over those who share a last name with the boss. As a result, ambitious professional managers will be discouraged from joining such firms or companies or they leave the company as they face leadership succession. In contrast some believes nepotism is an excellent way to attract and retain a relatively cheap, loyal, and committed work force. Family members are a cheap and available resource of labor for the young entrepreneurial firm seeking to get going. Consequently, they are desirable employees in absence of recruitment program in new firm. (Hagen A., Maghrabi A.& Raggad B., 1998)

a. Summary on the Literature Review:

In order to understand the concept of Wasta, we did a literature review to see what was available. Below is a summary on the main points found under the literature review on Nepotisim, Guanxi & Wasta.

GUANXI REFERENCES

— Made up of " Guan" and " Chi"

— Personal relationship , special connections

— Used in eastern Asia specially China

— A major factor for conducting business activities

— Building the Guanxi network

— Ethics and Guanxi

— (Luo, 1997, pp- 43-51)

— (Lovett, Simmons & Kali 1999 Vol 30)

— (Hwang, Golemon, Chen, Wang, Hung, 2009, pp 235-250)

NEPOTISIM REFERENCES

— Comes from the Latin word " nepot" means nephew

— Favoritism shown to family and relatives

— Used in western countries

— Advantages of Nepotism

— Disadvantages of Nepotism

— As seen above Nepotism is a multi dimensional constructs.. Components

of Nepotism are shown as below:

Family Nepotism Relatives Friends

— Wong, Kleiner, 199, pp. 10-12

— Ford, McLaughlin, 1985, pp. 57-61

— Ford, McLaughlin, 1986, pp. 78-89

— Ali, Al-Shakhis , 1991, pp. 81-102

— Hagen, Amin, 1994, pp. 12-22.

— Hagen, Maghrabi & Raggad, 1998, pp 540-570

— Arasli, Bavik, Ekiz,, 2006, pp 295-308

WASTA REFERENCES

— A Connection or influence

— Loosely equates to Nepotism

— Used in Middle East

— Linked to social solidarity

* El-Said & Harrigan, 2009,

* Loewe, Blume & Speer, 2008, pp. 259-276.

* Al-Meles, 2007.

Family Nepotism Relatives Friends

Table 5. 1: Literature Review Summary

b. Detailed Literature review on Guanxi:

The word " Guanxi" does not exist in any classic Chinese dictionary, but it is made up of two words: Guan which means " door" or " to close up" and chi which means " tie up". The sum of these two words " Guanxi" is defined as special connection or relation. The word Guanxi is used to describe a situation when connection is used to secure favors in personal relationships. It is a complicated relational network that is used to nurture vigorously, ingeniously and creatively. Guanxi includes hidden mutual understanding and directs Chinese attitude towards social and business relationships.

Also, Lovett explains that Guanxi is a practice that governs the business operations in China as well as Eastern Asia. This traditional system works on personal and informal relationships that exchanges favors.

How a Guanxi network is build:

Lovett explains that " increasing" one's Guanxi network has a cumulative effect, this means that the larger the network and the more you know people, the greater will be the opportunity of building new relationships and enlarging your Guanxi network . However sometimes a third person works as intermediary and introduces a newcomer to a Guanxi network and assures his/her credibility. This relationship and connection can also be built by exchange of gifts. Lovett explains this process as follows – Firstly, when the right person has been identified and the familiarities has been discussed between the two. The next step is to select a professional way to signal indirectly to the other party what the intensions are on involving such connections and what kind of exchange is expect. Also the person needs to

find out if the other party is willing to offer favor and aid in return for a present and what would be his preference in a gift. These questions need to be asked skillfully and yet indirectly to deliver the message, for example the person can meet with the right person who can help him and after starting a conversation can for instance say that " Your watch looks old, maybe you would like to change it with a new digital one, and I know some good one …", and therefore the request for help can be asked within this conversation or after the gift is delivered.

The Ethics Behind Guanxi:

According to Lovett, in Western society Guanxi is perceived as a form of corruption but in eastern Asia there are mixed opinions on the concept. Lovett argues that although in the West it is believed that practicing Guanxi in business is unethical but since there is no global standards of ethics available for people to evaluate it. Also he argues that Guanxi is totally different than bribery since, Guanxi is about building long term relationships and bribery is just an elicit transaction.

On the other hand, Hwang had conducted a survey on the perception of Guanxi in Taiwan. His findings show that people in Taiwan believe that although the connections linked to Guanxi are not unethical, however it can be misused for personal gains .

c. Detailed Literature Review on Nepotism:

Webster" s 3rd Dictionary defines nepotism as " favoritism shown to nephews and other relatives. Nepotism provides privilege for unqualified or under-qualified relatives simply by virtue of their relationship with an employee, officer, or shareholder in the firm. As people have desire to favor

the family member and relatives, if any of them need a job, taking care of him or her wins out over the business imperative and here is where the conflict arises because it seems unfair for employees who expect fairness from the company.

Family-dominated operations sacrifice the success of companies and its profitability for the sake of taking care of families and relatives which discourages talented and qualified managers from joining the company and reduce the commitment and dedication of the present employees. Even a son or daughter, who is talented in certain fields, may not offer the right mix of talents that a company needs at a crucial moment in its history. The person who goes into a family business has a readymade laboratory in which to learn, but experts advise that potential nepotee should not join family business when they just getting out of school, they have to do whatever will allow them to develop their own sense of competence. Few people understand or sympathize with children born with silver spoons. But sons or daughters interested in the family business need to have the chance to be tested before they assume control of the firm. (Wong & Kleiner, 1994)

Nepotism in Latin means " nepot" or " nephew" which defined today as the employment of relatives in the same organization (Ford and McLaughlin, 1986). The negative connotation of this word goes back to the time that renaissance pops were trying to get their nephews a high level position in the offices despite their low qualifications and skills. (Ford and McLaughlin, 1985)

Studies conducted in USA, identified various advantages and disadvantages of Nepotism which can influence the organizations' performance.

Primary advantages:
– Nepotism is good for the small or new family-owned organization

– Nepotism allows potential employees who might be effective contributors rather than employees simply because they are related by blood or marriage

– Nepotism provides a positive family-oriented environment for all employees – relatives and non-relatives

Primary disadvantages:
– Nepotism reduces morale for employee in terms of supervision of high-level executives by relatives and granting promotions which are given unjustifiably to a relative

– Nepotism puts unfair pressure on the " nepot" as relative tends to be unsure of organizational rewards whether earned by performance or being who he or she is.

– Nepotism exposes the organization to family conflicts over managerial succession

The same time studies showed that the cultural structure in Arab world has its origin in tribal and extended-family. The harsh desert environment, tribal and Islamic traditions produced qualities of endurance, ferocity, pride, individuality and generosity among the Bedouins. Individuals are hold responsible towards their family & tribes which requires a strong commitment; therefore it is encouraging nepotism in Arab society if it

concerns relatives. Religion is an important factor, but it does not mean as helping relatives in anyway. Ali and Al-Shakhis (1991) as seen in (Hagen, Maghrabi & Raggad, 1998)

Major factors behind nepotism in Arab countries include:
– Socio-cultural structure and behaviors, tribal and extended-family ties shape the individual and societal value, norm, and behaviors in Arab society.

– Economic structure, the basic economic structure is based on agriculture and limited industry, except the oil rich countries, it has a high unemployment rate, which creates higher level of competition for limited job opportunities invites nepotism to play a major role in providing jobs for family and relatives.

– Educational structure, The educational systems in Third World countries (e. g. Egypt or Jordan) creates imbalance in labor market as students pursue to degrees in traditional types such as local administrators and military personnel instead of technical skills needed in industry which encourage nepotism to play a major role in finding jobs for relatives and friends in public sectors.

– Political structure, The public sectors in Arab independent states are the largest employers, leaving only small room for the private sector which results to assigning the educated tribal chiefs and their sons to key public positions to buy their loyalties. Chiefs of tribes in turn, used their influence to help relatives and friends to find jobs in the public sector or in the military organizations where jobs are more available than in the private sectors

(Hagen and Amin, 1994; Muhammed, 1987; Shackle, 1972) as seen in
(Hagen, Maghrabi & Raggad, 1998)

As a result of above study, Cultural differences slightly affected the
perception toward nepotism in developed and less developed countries and
it varies for those had bad experiences, others who had no experiences, and
some who had good experiences with situations involving nepotism in both
countries. (Hagen, Maghrabi & Raggad, 1998)

Abdalla et al. (1998) state that nepotism is derived from the Latin word
Nepot (nephew) and It is defined as the employment of relatives in the same
organization. The longman dictionary of Contemporary English defines
nepotism as " the practice of favoring one's relatives when one has power or
a high office, especially by giving them good jobs". To be more specific,
nepotism is a certain type of conflict of interest.

In nepotism-oriented businesses, the employee may not be sufficiently
motivated. If nepotism is felt intensively, holding managerial or non
managerial position does not make any difference in having difficulty to
promote the employee if they compete with the one who has a family
member, relative or friends in the higher level position in that organization.
Nepotism can also influence the level of employee's satisfaction as well as
the behavioral intentions such as leaving the company and negative word of
mouth.

Managers believe that satisfied employees perform in higher level of
productivity, work beyond their job description, do not represent higher level
of absenteeism and have less quitting intent in their job. Employees with

quitting intentions tend to say negative things about their organizations and engage in negative word of mouth.

Although family members are the desirable employees, but the owners have to be fair and open among the employees. Higher levels of perceived justice and satisfaction encourage the employees to be more loyal and committed to their organization. (Arasli, Bavik &Ekiz, 2006)

As seen above Nepotism is a multi dimensional constructs. Components of Nepotism are shown as below:

Family

Nepotism Relatives

Friends

d. Detailed Literature Review on Wasta:
Definition of Wasta:
'' Wasta" loosely equates to nepotism. '' Wasta". In the Middle East '' Wasta" is well known, understood and tolerated rather than accepted by all.

Wasta is seen as a form of social capital in the Arab world. It's started as a practice from historic Arabic Tribal times and even in the present day an important feature of social, economic, and political life.

It literally means '' to employ a middle man, a broker, a go-between or an intermediary—usually a person of high social status and accepted rank—to achieve one's ends" (Fathi, 1993, p. 61)

In modern language, Wasta means a connection or influence. It is important to further clarify the difference between the concepts of Wasta and social solidarity (takaful al Ijtima'i). Social Solidarity is an important form of bonding SC, while Wasta is potentially more a form of bridging SC. Although originally both were socially constructed concepts, social solidarity is strengthened by Islam's emphasis on social cohesion, charity, social justice, collective responsibility for the welfare of society, and the duty to help the poor and those in need at all times and regardless of economic and social circumstances.. For example, the Quran, the primary source of Islamic law, '' uses the word ' justice' more than a thousand times. . . based on ' goodwill'" and benefit to Muslim society (Richards & Waterbury, 1996, p. 351).

Confusing Perceptions of Wasta in Jordan:
Perception of Wasta is unclear. Many disapprove of it; they say that the use of Wasta is unfair for those who do not have good connections. Others, however, endorse it because it can help people to enforce their rights. Some Jordanians consider it as a form of corruption, while others believe that " Wasta is not corruption, because it is not linked to money." A third group of people claim that Wasta is a form of corruption when it serves to over-ride the law but not if it is merely used to speed up a procedure. For this reason, many Jordanians legitimize the use of Wasta in at least some situations, while almost everybody condemns bribery. Furthermore, a lot of interview partners stated that the use of Wasta was closely linked to traditional values and social norms and therefore " an integral part of the Jordanian culture."

Reasons for using Wasta:
– They do not see any alternative for achieving their goals.

– People go on using their Wasta as long as everybody else does the same.

– Many people associate the use of Wasta with cherished values, such as solidarity or loyalty, i. e. they believe that the use of Wasta is part of their culture.

– Jordan's administrative and political system lacks transparency and accountability on all levels.

Levels of Wasta: In the article they divide the " Levels" of Wasta

– Macro Level (i. e State Level)
On the State Level Wasta is used as important source of influence and connection for families and tribes inside the state apparatus, using their power and positions within in state bodies to " get things done"

– Micro Level (i. e. Society Level)
At the society level people kept the formal governmental system out of their affairs. They continued to solve their disputes and manage their resources informally and through traditional social customs and norms. Tribes ensured that members of the same family and kin lived and worked together, therefore facilitating cooperation and maintaining the durability of family ties and social networks (Amadouny, 1994).

Past VS Present:
Wasta' has changed over time from its tribal roots to becoming a national and organizational norm. In the past people helped friends or families for reasons of power and prestige, latterly, these same people can now seek financial recompense or rewards.

In the past, respect from the community was the highest reward that a Wasta performer aimed for, mainly from tribal shaykhs and notables. Success in solving a conflict led to praise and enhanced the popularity and social and political status of the whole tribe. (Fathi, 1993).

Today, a Wasta performer no longer seeks social recognition and respect as the main reward for his/her efforts. Today, Wasta performers expect material gains for their efforts, even witht heir own relatives and family members (Malhas, 1993).

This new practice led to what Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993, p. 14) described as '' contract-based Wasta," a process which not only leads to further isolation and exclusion of the poor, but also keeps the doors (and pockets) of officials wide open for bribery and corruption.

Dimensions of Wasta:
– To cope with the pressures of daily life in an environment characterized by general scarcity.

– Wasta can speed up procedures and get exclusive access to services and information.

– Wasta, came to determine almost everything from jobs in the state sector, to access to elite education and quality health services to simple rights and entitlements such as the acquisition of a passport or a driving license.

– Establishment of strong business and social networks, where Wasta also played an important role in facilitating the choice of business partners and even laborers.

– Access to loans, cash assistance & discounted health services.

– Wasta was used even in the Judicial system

– Getting acceptance into universities

Drawbacks of using Wasta in Organizations:
The practice of using ' Wasta' in terms of selection, recruitment and development of people is often don't always ensure that you end up having the best and most appropriate person for the job. With ' Wasta' a person often seeks to obtain a position or post that otherwise they would not achieve by using the normal process or practice that lie within open and fair competition. Therefore often by the use of ' Wasta' organizations are denying themselves of the opportunity to get the best people from the market and handing them to their competitors.

VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF WASTA:
From the literature review on Wasta that has been found, we have summarized a few characteristics on Wasta that the research has been based on.

a. '' Wasta" loosely equates to nepotism – a connection or influence

b. To employ a middle man, a broker, a go-between or an intermediary to achieve one's ends

c. Wasta is seen as a form of social capital in the Arab world

d. Dimensions of the use of Wasta:

i. Jobs

ii. Business

iii. Governmental Affairs or Services

iv. Education

v. Healthcare

vi. Judicial System

vii. Banking & Cash Assistance

viii. Access to services & information

— There is a difference between Wasta and social solidarity.

— Three Types of Ethical Perception of Wasta:

1. Wasta is unacceptable

2. Wasta should be endorsed

3. Wasta is unacceptable – but it's ok to use it sometimes

— Wasta' has changed over time – In the past people helped people to gain power and prestige, now people seek financial compensation or rewards

VII. CRITIQUE OF LITERATURE REVIEW:

After having analyzed the literature and articles o