

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Sustainable CSR: Implications within an Arab Context

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## ABSTRACT

**PURPOSE:** Currently, there has been growing interest in how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is expressed and understood within different parts of the world as related indices continue to be of interest to foreign investors. However, most existing research in the Arab region uses static data to investigate the matter, leaving researchers with a dearth of information on the topic. The aim is to identify how CSR and its sustainability is understood and expressed from within an Arab context.

**DESIGN:** Qualitative data from 12 key CSR experts and policy-makers in Kuwait was collected and analysed. A non-structured one-to-one interview approach was adopted for this study.

**ORIGINALITY:** This first of its kind, exploratory research in the region aimed to examine CSR initiatives and motivations and how they are expressed in relation to cultural aspects in the region.

**FINDINGS:** The preliminary findings, in alignment with previous research done on the topic, confirm that although CSR practices are not a foreign concept to locals, they are indeed implicated with social habits and religious beliefs.

**RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS:** The findings contribute to the general knowledge of CSR literature and aid in better understanding the motivations, barriers and definitions of the term as they currently exist. They will also offer insights into the perception of sustainability strategies for various stakeholders in emerging and developed markets.

**KEYWORDS:** CSR; SDGs; Ethics; Corporate Governance; Sustainability; Stakeholders

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is categorised as a complex and broad concept, and more than forty definitions are observed in the previous literature (Song and Dong, 2022). It is defined as a strategy in which enterprises aim to align their behaviour and values with its range of stakeholders (Al Amosh, 2022). CSR refers to the practices undertaken by a business to contribute or benefit society by looking above personal requirements. A definition provided by the European Commission in 2001 is considered to incorporate the gist of all the explanations by scholars: a procedure under which the business integrates environmental and social issues in their business, together with looking after the interest of stakeholders on a voluntary basis. Focus is given on the centrality of the stakeholders; that is, actions should not harm the interest of stakeholders (Naveed *et al.*, 2022). In the present decade, corporate responsibility has emerged as an unconscious practice and does not come under any regulation or law. Although they are considered as custom and are expected to be followed and obeyed by organisations (Rahim and Katz, 2020), better recognition and an increase in benefits are derived if a corporation is responsible socially to all their stakeholders. One of the most important stakeholders who are influenced by a company's CSR is the consumer (Kim and Park, 2020). Therefore, CSR activities are adopted by the majority of corporations in the field of social, environment and economic performance (Rahim and Katz, 2020). Further, contemporarily, CSR is not viewed as a cost but rather an investment that will, in turn, bring extensive profits (Anwar and Malik, 2020).

In the current scenario, it is evident that CSR impacts consumer's attitude and behaviour at various scales and various external factors; however, it is also well established that CSR efforts should be aligned with stakeholder interests (Collinge, 2020). Research also states that different cultures and value systems may impact the overall values of CSR initiatives as they are often aligned with what the community, amongst other stakeholders, deems important (Boubaker, 2021). Therefore, it may be beneficial to investigate the topic on a country that is criticised for having a high corruption rate—Kuwait.

This first of its kind exploratory research in the region aims to examine CSR initiatives and motivations and how they are expressed in relation to cultural aspects in the region. It also identifies how CSR is understood and expressed in one key country in the Arab region, Kuwait, where it is expected, in alignment with previous findings, that CSR practices are indeed implicated with social habits and religious beliefs. The study is crucial as there is a dearth of information on the topic from within the Arab region; the findings will therefore contribute to the general knowledge of CSR literature and aid in better understanding the motivations, barriers and definitions of the term as they currently exist. They will also offer insights into the perception of sustainability strategies for various stakeholders in emerging and developed markets.

## National Benefits of CSR

Gallardo-Vázquez *et al.* (2019) define CSR as based on various strategies to improve national competitiveness. Practices of CSR that are based on and increase open communications with the

stakeholders, in addition to transparency, can aid the society improve business trust as well as increasing social capital, leading to a facilitated self-regulation of the organisation. Other strategies involve the enhancement of a country's reputation, increasing the perceived value of what they offer, boosting exports and attracting investment. To be specific, Kudlak (2019) argues that countries that employ CSR as a differentiation technique are capable of strengthening and promoting a responsible reputation, thus engendering and promoting a comparative and competitive advantage. Niche strategy is another CSR technique that involves a country employing a strategy that focuses on the increment of their market share in particular segments of the market (Schwak, 2021). For instance, in the race towards reducing carbon emissions, those who align their goals and increase the demand/supply for such products provide a prime example of using niche strategies successfully.

### Impact of Culture

In the 1960s, Geert Hofstede created a structure designed to enable cross-cultural communications; this has come to be known as Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Shwartz *et al.*, 1997). Essentially, by employing a factor analysis framework, it explores how the culture of a society can impact the values and behaviours of the people within it. Many academics in a variety of disciplines have utilised Hofstede's theory for research purposes, however, it is most extensively employed in cross-cultural psychology, international management, and cross-cultural communications (Shwartz *et al.*, 1997). His empirical findings prove that national differences are evident in the way people think about values.

Because value systems of cultures differ across the world, the essence of 'culture' as well as the pillars of what is often referred to as 'values' is constantly changing, primarily due to more advances in technology and reachability (Visser, 2008). Scientists also believe that values are continuously found to play a dominant part as indicators of human behaviour and the motivations behind them (the why's) (Bar and Otterbring, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to try and bridge the gap between theory and practice, particularly to investigate how decisions based on cognitive values implicate activities such as CSR. Researchers have found many relevant links, such as that management practices and their effectiveness vary widely by country (Arsawan *et al.*, 2022). Such research into the depths of uncharted contexts, like the Arabs, may help explain the practical outcomes of their collective human behaviour in the region—their governance and policies, which is expected to stipulate their values, norms and expectations.

When investigating the Middle Eastern countries through Hofstede's lens, there existed some dilemma on whether or not the clustered countries should be considered collectively in a group or on an individual basis when considering their cultural dimensions. It was proposed by Lamb (1987) that it is hard to oversimplify and point to any major sign on the most cultural values in the Middle Eastern countries, even when many similarities seemed to exist. His claims were supported by many researchers based on the fact that each Middle Eastern country is different from the others and has multiple cultural variations (Lamb, 1987).

It was further suggested and researched by Sidani and Gardner (2000) and Ali and Wahabi (1995) that Middle Eastern customs are significantly less followed in countries such as Lebanon and Morocco, even though they share dominant cultural dimensions. However, despite the claims for independence, a number of researchers working on Middle Eastern culture disagreed with this claim and considered the countries as a cluster (Ali and Wahabi, 1995; Sidani and Gardner, 2000). Moreover, based on the research by Wilson (1996) Middle Easterners have the same beliefs and attitudes despite their cross-national and social classes. Furthermore, Dedoussis (2004) claims that these generalities are made when reference is made to the culture of Middle Eastern countries on a broad scale, the bigger geographical region from Africa to the Arabian Gulf and Sudan to the Middle East. Thus, he advises that they should be treated as a unit (Dedoussis, 2004).

## Research Framework

The choice of qualitative methods for research was primarily to understand in more detail how relevant local experts and policy-makers understood and practiced CSR. Patton (1985) defines qualitative research as an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, which is dominant strategy in qualitative research. In total, 12 experts in CSR in different fields were chosen, 8 men and 4 women, all of which were personal contacts. All of the participants are from within the local community in Kuwait, and are either experts in the field of CSR, policy-makers or practitioners. Their details are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Interviewee Information**

Code	Gender	Sector	Industry	Age	Title
SO1	M	Public	Planning	50+	Minister
SO2	M	Public	Information	40-50	Minister
SO3	M	Private	Finance	40-50	Director
SO4	F	Private	Finance	30-40	Director
SO5	M	NGO	Finance	40-50	President
SO6	F	NGO	Humanitarian	30-40	Director
SO7	F	Private	Telecom	30-40	Director
SO8	F	Private	Real Estate	30-40	Director
SO9	M	Private	Education	50+	President
SO10	F	Private	Finance	30-40	Director
SO11	F	NGO	Humanitarian	50+	Director
SO12	F	Public	Humanitarian	50+	Minister

Source: Constructed by author

The development of the initial research instrument uses the logic of a restricted phenomenological approach in order to serve its purpose of gaining feedback from a first-person point of view. Eichelberger (1989) asserts that, in a phenomenological study, there is a need to conduct an analysis of the experience so that the basic elements of the experience that are common to members of a specific group can be identified.

The interview guide was designed based on three categories as noted below:

- 1) Awareness and understanding of CSR;
- 2) Expression of CSR in local culture;
- 3) Barriers and motivations of CSR.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted the phenomenological approach that seeks to elucidate the meaning of the lived experience of a phenomenon of a group of people. Patton (2002) notes that a phenomenological study is one that focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. A dimension of a phenomenological approach is the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. A phenomenological study requires an investigator to derive research questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals and ask them to describe their everyday lived experiences (Creswell, 1998). According to Creswell (1998), this is done through interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Since the aim of this research is to recognise the lived experiences and understandings of CSR of a collective bunch, it provides grounds for using this methodology. Thus, through in-depth interviews, it was convenient to derive their lived experiences from selected participants.

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) summarise the fundamental methods relied on by qualitative researchers for gathering information as participation in the setting, direct observation, in-depth interviewing, and document review. Therefore, to answer the research questions, an in-depth, semi-structured interview-based study of 12 experts in CSR was conducted in an open-ended manner. The primary sources were the interviews that were used to gather descriptive data, in the subjects' own words, so that the researcher could develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world. A set of general questions was used to guide the interviews (Table 2). The face-to-face interview is presented as enabling a "special insight" into subjectivity, voice and lived experience (Rapley, 2004).

**Table 2: Consolidated Findings within Research Constructs**

<b>Local's Understanding of CSR:</b>	Locals are aware of conventional CSR activities and understand that they can impact their businesses.
	Local culture does not enable the society or motivate them to take part in conventional CSR initiatives, perhaps due to the lack of awareness on one's individual contribution.
	There are two ways the locals express CSR—announced (public acts) and unannounced (religious duties).
	Most of those who live in Kuwait have participated in a CSR activity of some sort, particularly on vacation/outside the country (ex. Recycling).
	Professionals interviewed describe conventional CSR as an extra-curricular activity that is usually not part of a bigger company or country strategy.
<b>Barriers &amp; Motivations to CSR:</b>	Most experts agree that locals are “moved” and “impacted” by country and company initiatives that “confirm” and “show” their social norms.
	Locals also “ <i>relate to initiatives which are in line with the government agenda</i> ” as one expressed, and those that celebrate patriotism such as the honouring of the late Sheikh Sabah as the “Amir of Humanity”.
	Communicating family values is also a key issue when considering a company's “ <i>extra-curricular events of value and impact which may fall under the CSR umbrella</i> ” one stated, as most private businesses are family-owned.
	Anything trending social topics and/or occasions were seen as a catalyst for CSR initiatives in the local arena; these included sporting achievements, aggression against women, and most recently online learning.
	Many expressed CSR to be motivated by popular opinion and the likeableness of the society to a brand.
	Experts concur that the local culture may be “stuck in their old ways” and therefore CSR needs to be incentivised with the help of governmental policies and laws.
	Experts agree that conventional CSR initiatives are difficult to get approved, particularly in the private sector where some expressed that their (older) higher management described CSR initiatives as “a new idea/for the new generations”.
	Older managers/company owners do not see the added value of conventional CSR activities, even in the public sector.
<b>Expression of/ Perspective on Local Culture</b>	Religion prevailed as a main and dominant theme when expressing CSR locally; it was usually built into most strategies that qualify as CSR.
	CSR is perceived as part of our cultural expectations and is usually viewed as an extension of one's personal values.
	Patriotism and loyalty to the government/nation were also a major element in the way that CSR is expressed and implemented locally.
	Most conventional CSR initiatives, particularly environmental initiatives, are considered colonial and “unimportant” to both private companies and public institutes, they were found to be primarily bolted-on as CSR strategies sporadically.
	Locally, what is understood conventionally to be CSR initiatives, such as recycling, beach clean-ups, etc., are usually used as a way for institutes (both public and private) to build reputation, show commitment to social norms/expectations/values.
	A few referred to CSR as something expected of an institute at certain times of the year; these are the initiatives that were primarily considered ‘Built-in’ to most institutes strategies. Most of the conventional CSR initiatives were perceived as ‘Bolt-on’.

Source: Constructed by author

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

An integration of the philosophy of phenomenology, where consciousness arises from the experience, and the strategy of Grounded Theory (GT) (Selden, 2005), which takes on a more interpretive view to positivism, was used to analyse the data collected in this research. According to Gurd (2008), GT is best suited to questions of process. The distinguishing feature of GT is the systematic and iterative process of collecting and analysing data and gradually transforming it into concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Moreover, GT's key advantage is its ability to bridge the gap between empirical research that is not linked to theory, and theory that is not grounded in empirical research.

The findings of this research suggest that religion was the most significant cultural aspect influencing the expression of CSR in Kuwait. A key concern was therefore how CSR could be linked to and expressed in line with the Islamic religion. This contrasts with western practices of CSR that are often linked to increasing business performance, corporate reputation, customer loyalty or reducing risk (Alizadeh, 2022). The pilot study supports theorists who suggest that the Arab world is likely to have different individual, institutional and socio drivers of CSR activities, and that the Islamic religion is likely to play an integral part in the relationship between business and society (Koleva, 2021).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results are evidence that, when CSR is present in an Arab context, it needs to be looked at in a more intricate manner. Although conventional research from Muslim countries reveal that Islamic values contribute to the ethics of CSR, the findings from this research reveal that there is a hidden undercurrent of Islamic values that needs to be further identified and analysed. Furthermore, it was found that conventional CSR initiatives are engaged in in Kuwait, mainly due to obligations imposed by the West: the more international presence a company has, the more it was likely to initiate traditional CSR activities. This is in line with the findings of Ismael (2020), who found that CSR in developing countries is expressed primarily to impress international stakeholders. Also, recent findings from Koleva (2021) confirm that most local initiatives that fit under the CSR umbrella are not entirely built into corporate strategy.

Also, the study identified obstacles to implementing CSR locally in a successful way, such as the lack of synchronisation between NGOs, government, and other stakeholders. This confirms Al-Abdin *et al.*'s (2018) work that identifies gaps in relationships between stakeholders identified in the CSR literature. Lastly, since the pilot study revealed that religious beliefs are expressed as the primary strategies underpinning CSR initiatives in Kuwait, a few key observations remain puzzling. First, when investigating how professionals understood CSR, the results varied from one person to another. This is interesting, because participants generally agreed that religion is at the heart of their CSR strategies, thus leading to the conclusion that the same stimuli (religious duty) led to varied outcomes from individuals, both within and across demographic profiles. This is similar to findings

observed by Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), Walker (2010) and West *et al.* (2016). Second, we initially set out to discover the cultural impact of CSR in the local culture; on investigation, however, it rarely showed in a way that could be linked back to the key theories (such as Hoftsede) that are reviewed. It became clear that one main subset of culture seemed to be religion, that played a dominant role. Since scholars describe religion as a cultural system that naturalises conceptions of a general order of existence, religion is considered a part of culture and experiencing spirituality that is inward, personal, and subjective. In other words, cultural values are seen as a foundation to religiosity (Edara, 2017). In summary, specific aspects of the Islamic religion emerge as very important in understanding the impacts of CSR in the Arab context. Different aspects of a religion may be embraced differently by different people, so it would be fruitful in future research to investigate how these differences may translate into different understandings and expressions of CSR.

## Research Implications

International management and cross-cultural leadership entails many moving parts. Choices that are made must consider the protocols and values of that particular country (Lebron *et al.* 2003). Therefore, it is important to note that there is plenty of evidence that culture may impact the way people work, what they value, and how it is presented. The varying pillars of value and social norms may be impeding the understanding of the locals if conventional values are adopted generically. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate, from a local lens, what implications national culture may play on CSR understanding, initiative, and participation. The study aims to identify how CSR is expressed locally from the perspective of key stakeholders; this can help to outline the practice and perception of CSR in the Arab context. This research confirms that CSR should not be examined in isolation from the cultural context and obligations perceived by the individual. Furthermore, this research will be one that paves the road to further exploring the relationships of CSR and culture from a unique standpoint, digging deeper into the relationship of a certain aspect of culture—religion—and its implications on CSR activities.

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