

# How much self-presentation behavior do applicants from the United Arab Emirates exhibit?

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## Abstract

Applicants from different cultures vary in their self-presentation behavior during job interviews. This study investigates self-presentation behavior in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the second largest economy in the Arab world. Specifically, it examines self-presentation behavior of applicants from the UAE and compares it to the behavior of American, European, and Chinese applicants from previous studies. The randomized response technique was used to gather self-presentation prevalence data of 111 UAE applicants regarding self-presentation behavior in their last job interview. Prevalence rates were lower than those from the United States and from China but higher than those from Iceland and from Switzerland. Results indicate that though UAE culture values modesty, UAE applicants still engage in distinct self-presentation behavior.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Middle East Human Resources sector is affected by significant changes due to the increasingly stiff job competition, the usage of state of the art business technologies, and the arrival of a new generation of qualified workers. Within the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a particularly interesting case. The UAE is the second largest economy in the Arab world and is currently transitioning from an oil-based to a nonoil-based economy. The nonoil-based sector of the economy is dominated by multinational companies (e.g., insurance, banking, healthcare, hospitality, and international trade), and many jobs are therefore advertised internationally. Furthermore, the UAE labor market is highly diverse and most employees are currently expatriates; more than 80% of the jobs are filled by non-Emiratis, and these expatriates come from many countries (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017). Simultaneously, there is momentum to move in a contrasting direction such that UAE federal and local governments are pursuing 'Emiratization' (i.e., localization) as a serious agenda in public and private sector organizations (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017). The impact of this Emiratization initiative is now becoming gradually visible as increasing numbers of younger and highly qualified Emiratis are taking up positions in

private organizations. The UAE organizations are going through a cultural change, wherein competence is becoming more important than loyalty to the owner of the firm and more people belong to the on-demand workforce.

In the UAE, as is the case in many other countries, interviewing candidates is a critical activity for selecting the right person for the right job, but interviews might be biased by applicants' self-presentation behavior (also known as 'faking', e.g., Levashina & Campion, 2007). Self-presentation behavior in the interview could, for example, mean that participants exaggerate work experiences or nominate referees who they know will portray them in a particularly positive way. Previous research (e.g., Fell & König, 2016; König, Wong, & Cen, 2012) has already indicated that self-presentation behavior in personnel selection situations varies between cultures, warning practitioners about prematurely generalizing self-presentation behavior from one country to the next. Given the dearth of data on Emirati applicants, this study aims to add to the literature on cross-cultural differences in job applicants' interview behaviors by investigating self-presentation behavior of Emirati applicants. There are at least two reasons why data from the UAE can enhance understanding on self-presentation behavior of job seekers during interviews. The cultural value system in the UAE

respects and appreciates modesty (Abdulla, Djebarni, & Mellahi, 2011); even highly successful employees exhibit a high degree of modesty in their dealing with others. Correspondingly, it is likely that UAE interview candidates may behave in a modest manner in interviews. However, this cultural predisposition to modesty may be counteracted by other contemporary factors, such as competing in an increasingly challenging labor market in the UAE. In contrast with the situation some years ago, younger and qualified graduates have started to face challenges in finding jobs of their choice, which could be tacitly pushing job seekers toward self-presentation behavior (cf. Roulin, Krings, & Binggeli, 2016). The current study therefore focuses on the extent to which UAE candidates exhibit self-presentation behavior while they are interviewed, and compares the results to data from China, Iceland, Switzerland, and the United States (Donovan, Dwight, & Hurtz, 2003; König, Hafsteinsson, Jansen, & Stadelmann, 2011; König et al., 2012). Following guidance of previous studies, we ensured confidentiality using randomized response technique (RRT)—a technique incorporating a randomization device that prevents researchers from identifying whether a participant's response about a particular kind of behavior was due to the randomization device (in our case: dice) or due to her/his actual behavior.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Participants

Participants were 181 Emirati students from seven universities in the UAE, who were approached in classrooms and volunteered to fill out the questionnaire. Some participants had to be excluded because (a) they reported that they did not predominantly live in the UAE ( $n = 9$ ), (b) their self-reported English skills were lower than intermediate ( $n = 1$ ), (c) they did not or just partially followed the instructions ( $n = 9$ ), (d) they produced inconsistent data (i.e., having mentioned in the demographics part of the questionnaire that they had a job but not stating this when they were asked the same question in the RRT part of the questionnaire,  $n = 23$ ), and (e) their last interview was more than one year ago ( $n = 28$ ).

The final sample consisted of 111 participants of which 100 participants had a Bachelor's degree and 9 had a Master's degree. At the time of the study, 36.9% of the participants had experienced one or two job interviews, and more than a half (63.1%) had experienced three to five job interviews. Participants were on average 30.31 years old ( $SD = 3.89$ ), with 57 female and 54 male participants. Participants applied for jobs in diverse fields: 18 participants indicated that it was a managerial position, 16 finance, accounting, or banking job, 11 participants teaching job, 11 participants engineering job, and 5 indicated that they had applied for a human resource management job (and there were also some other less common jobs). A vast majority of the participants (79.3%) stated that they strongly or very strongly wanted an offer to the job that had last interviewed for.

### 2.2 | Procedure and RRT questionnaire

Participants used pencil and paper to record their responses. Before the RRT questionnaire, participants answered five items concerning their experience with their last job interview. Sample items included questions such as 'When did your last job interview take place?' and 'How strongly did you wish to get the job?'

Participants then received the instructions for the RRT questionnaire. As in König et al. (2011), participants were informed that they should roll a die (provided by the researchers) before reading each question. Furthermore, they were instructed to answer the item with 'true' if the die showed 1 or 2 and to answer truthfully if the die showed 3, 4, 5, or 6. Consequently, the default probability that an item was answered with 'true' was 33%. We provided participants with further information regarding the RRT technique, explaining that this technique ensures that nobody can identify if the answer of a participant actually reflects this specific participant's behavior, thus ensuring confidentiality of the questionnaire. For calculating the results, the percentage of forced 'true' answers (i.e., 33%) has to be mathematically removed before calculating the final results (see König et al., 2011, for more details). After reading the instructions, participants answered the same 14 items already used in König et al. (2011) in an English version of this questionnaire (see Table 1). In addition, the questionnaire included a control item ('I am currently employed') to assess if participants followed the RRT instructions. For every item, we repeated the instruction of rolling a die before reading the question. After the RRT questionnaire, participants answered several demographic questions.

## 3 | RESULTS

In Table 1, results from the UAE sample are presented and displayed in comparison to samples from previous studies. In a similar way to the study of König et al. (2011), the results on self-presentation behavior from the UAE sample were compared to previous results on self-presentation from China, Switzerland, Iceland, and the United States. Calculations used chi-square tests for each item between two samples at a time and Fisher's exact test in the cases in which the requirements for the chi-square test were not met.

In general, the UAE sample shows lesser self-presentation compared to its Far Eastern counterpart from China (except on items 2, 4, and 5). A comparison of the UAE and the U.S. samples reveals a slight tendency for UAE participants to report lesser self-presentation behavior (for six items, the UAE percentages were significantly lower, whereas the difference was not significant for the other items). A comparison of the participants from the UAE with those from Switzerland indicates that participants from the UAE engage in more self-presentation behavior in the majority of cases. This is especially true for item 12, where participants from the UAE tend to nominate individuals as referees who portray them in an exaggeratedly positive way—this item reflects the most widely used

**TABLE 1** Items and results of the RRT questionnaire for the UAE sample ( $N = 111$ ) and for samples from China ( $N = 307$ ), Switzerland ( $N = 416$ ), Iceland ( $N = 245$ ), and the United States of America ( $N = 221$ )

No	Item	UAE (%)	China (%)	Sw. (%)	Ice. (%)	U.S. (%)
1	I overemphasized or exaggerated my positive attributes during the application process (e.g., hardworking, detail orientation, efficiency)	18	37**	5**	17	56**
2	I outright fabricated or made up information about myself when applying for the job so as to maximize the chances of me getting hired for the job	22	11**	0**	0**	17
3	When applying for the job, I exaggerated my work experience to make myself look more impressive than I really am	15	39**	0**	8	45**
4	When applying for the job, I claimed to have experience that I didn't actually have	12	10	0**	0**	23
5	When applying for the job, I claimed to have knowledge that I did not have	18	15	0**	14	16
6	When applying for the job, I exaggerated my past work or performance evaluations to make myself look like a better employee	27	42*	2**	0**	30
7	When applying for the job, I exaggerated my skills to my benefit.	24	45**	16	23	51**
8	When applying for the job, I exaggerated qualities or characteristics of myself such as dependability and reliability	22	37*	1**	25	47**
9	When applying for the job, I gave false opinions	11	34**	1**	2**	43**
10	When applying for the job, I tried to portray myself as more agreeable (trusting, empathetic, cooperative) than I really am	31	87**	16**	18*	41
11	When applying for the job, I tended to de-emphasize or 'play down' what some might consider my negative attributes	22	71**	50**	40**	62**
12	When nominating references, I selected individuals who I knew would portray me more positively than I deserve	60	83**	10**	15**	-
13	When applying for the job, I pretended to be more interested in the job than I really was	35	79**	30	25	-
14	When applying for the job, I handed in faked certificates or documents	0	0	0	-	-

Note. UAE = United Arab Emirates, Sw. = Switzerland, Ice. = Iceland, U.S. = United States of America.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

self-presentation behavior of participants from the UAE. However, Swiss people tend to minimize negative attributes more often than UAE participants, which is also true when comparing results of the UAE with results of the sample from Iceland. Nevertheless, the Icelandic and the UAE samples seem to share more similarities than the Swiss and UAE samples because the percentages did not differ significantly for five items between Iceland and the UAE. While recognizing these commonalities, it was noted that the UAE sample seems to use more self-presentation behavior than the sample from Iceland.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed at shedding light on the behavior of applicants in the UAE, an important Middle Eastern country that is often neglected by personnel selection researchers. In particular, the RRT was used to examine how much applicants from the UAE engage in self-presentation behavior. A comparison to previous samples

(Donovan et al., 2003; König et al., 2011, 2012) revealed that UAE applicants, on average, engaged in fewer self-presentation behavior than Chinese applicants and only slightly fewer self-presentation than U.S. applicants. UAE applicants clearly engaged in more self-presentation behavior than Swiss applicants and a bit more than Icelandic applicants. Self-presentation behavior of UAE applicants thus seems to gravitate toward the middle of the spectrum.

The finding of a fairly average amount of self-presentation behavior in the UAE could be explained by the changing job scenario in the UAE. The unemployment rate is still relatively low but the number of available desirable jobs is decreasing, making the situation challenging for job seekers and thus possibly increasing the frequency of self-presentation behavior and suppressing traditional modesty values. Furthermore, the society in the UAE is known to highly respect Western society in general, and the United States in particular (Al-Kandari & Gaither, 2011). The marked influence of the United States might stimulate job-seeking graduates to engage in similar self-presentation as U.S. graduates.

It should also be kept in mind that the UAE is a relatively small country and people still live in closely knit clans and communities where they know each other quite well. The finding that UAE job applicants tend to retain themselves from inflating their worth too much could be attributed to the small size of UAE: If the interviewers happen to be from the UAE, dishonest behavior may be easily detected.

Overall, the UAE applicants seem to use more assertive self-presentation behavior (i.e., behavior that highlights their positive characteristics; Levashina & Campion, 2007) than the European comparison countries, whereas the UAE applicants reported a lower degree of defensive self-presentation behavior (e.g., de-emphasizing negative attributes; Levashina & Campion, 2007). Fabricating information and focusing on their own positive characteristics seems to be a strategy that applicants from the UAE are especially likely to use. Future research could examine person- and country-level variables that affect the use of assertive and defensive self-presentation behavior (such as whether applicants believe that they live in a competitive 'jungle' in which cooperative people who behave in a morally correct manner are unsuccessful, see Roulin & Krings, 2016).

More generally, this study shows the importance of cross-country differences for human resource management. Thus, it contributes to the growing literature on the influence of culture on business aspects and in particular in the UAE (see, e.g., Aljerjawi, 2016). Furthermore, this study also shows that practitioners would be ill advised to assume that applicants from different countries engage in the same amount and the same kind of self-presentation behavior (cf. Fell & König, 2016).

As all studies, this study has some limitations. Although the use of the RRT is certainly an advantage as it ensures a high degree of anonymity, the RRT has the disadvantage that no scale can be constructed and no internal consistency measure can be applied to the data to check the reliability. Furthermore, the study is limited by its sample—data from other countries, particularly from other Middle Eastern countries, are needed to check how far generalizations can be made on the basis of these results. Additionally, future research should try to collect data from more experienced applicants than the students in the previous studies, maybe with the help of e-lancing websites such as Amazon Mechanical Turk in the United States (cf. Roulin & Krings, 2016) and Mostaq.com for Arab-speaking freelancers. In particular, researchers might try to explain cross-cultural differences in self-presentation behavior by taking into account country differences in cultural dimensions (cf. Fell, König, & Kammerhoff, 2016), ideological attitudes and their underlying worldviews (cf. Roulin & Krings, 2016), and economic situations (cf. You & Khagram, 2005).

To conclude, this study suggests that UAE job seekers engage in less self-presentation behavior than Chinese applicants, but in similar levels to American applicants. The data also showed that in several aspects, Emirati applicants engage in higher self-presentation behavior than certain Western European applicants. The local cultural values of modesty and humility appear to be overtaken by

pressures of a shrinking job market and increasing challenges of getting a job in public sector organizations. These results are in contrast to the assumption that UAE applicants would exhibit modest or no self-presentation behavior. This study therefore suggests that recruiters from the U.S. and Western European countries need to develop adequate understanding of the UAE local culture and economic situation.

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