

UAE PPF REPORTS 2020

The effect of perceptions of government service and reputation on nation happiness





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Abstract

The UAE ranks first in several indicators of e-government worldwide and in the Arab region (FCSA, 2018). It aims to become one of the top five happy countries in the world by 2021 and to that extent has created the post of Minister of State of Happiness and Wellbeing in 2016. It also aims to become one of the most competitive countries in the world. But how are these various factors related? At the core of an agile government is the purpose of delivering public value of which happiness is one key objective. Because so little is known on this topic, this paper attempts to explore the relationship between country reputation, e-government reputation, customer loyalty and happiness at the service level and the overall wellbeing level. The paper has significant policy outcomes.

Keywords: agile public value delivery, country reputation, corporate reputation, happiness, well-being, e-government, e-services, loyalty

1.0: Happiness and an Agile Government

Happiness is a concept that is not easy to define. Although a distinction is made between hedonic (a subjective concept) and eudaimonia (or wellbeing, a psychological concept), they may not be that different (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009). Studies on happiness always point to interpersonal relationships (Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick, & Wissing, 2011), and as we progress to more and more online interactions, will this decrease the level of happiness?

Public value is defined as non-excludable goods that once produced can be consumed by additional customers at no additional costs - which suggests that it needs government or public sector production (see Samuelson, 1954). Happiness can be considered a public good and hence the responsibility of a government to facilitate the same. Often happiness has been linked to economic levels (for example see Bruni and Porta, 2007 and see the Easterlin paradox), though researchers are looking at other measures. Is there a way governments can manage the happiness agenda in an agile way? Governments are represented through many organizations and are key touchpoints either visibly or invisible in a citizen's life.

Public value (in this case public goods) need to meet three points of reference (Kaul, & Mendoza, 2003) (See Exhibit 1):

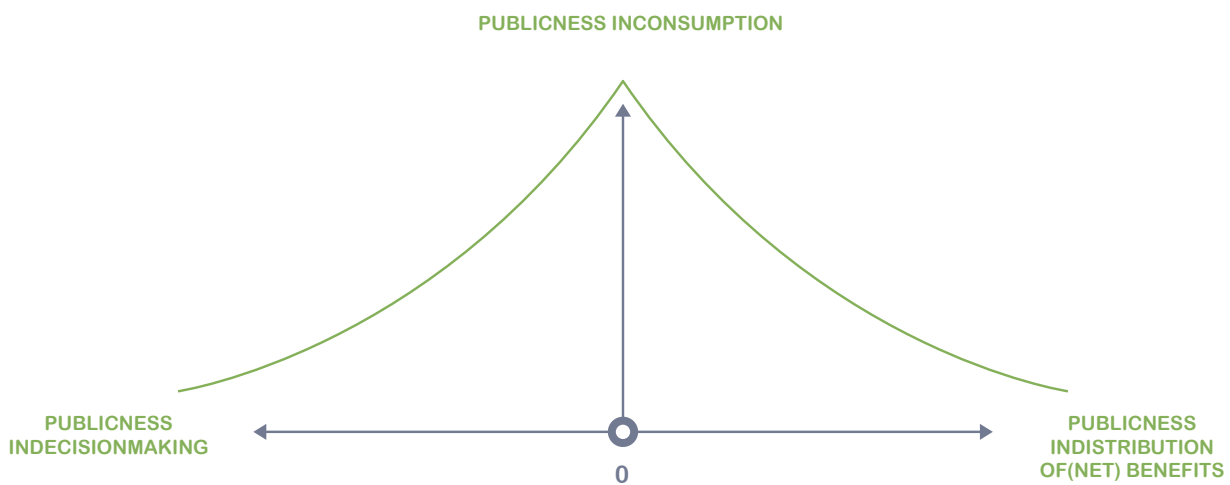
1. publicness or participatory nature of decision-making: This deals with which goods are in the public domain, how much of them to produce, how to shape them, and how to distribute their benefits among all concerned. In this case we are exploring happiness and the role of e-government departments to deliver happiness via service quality.
2. The publicness or equity of the distribution of benefits: This is the extent to which various groups (consumers of public goods) derive benefits. Here we assume that the benefit is the same across various constituents. This is not tested here.
3. The publicness of consumption or the non-exclusiveness of the consumption of public goods across individuals and groups. Here we assume that all constituents have free and convenient access to the service. This is not tested here. We only look at the mobile of web based services.

As observed in the Exhibit 1, an agile government needs to constantly perform a balancing act in terms of developing public value. There are challenges in many of these cases looking at global examples. For example, the private sector and third sector are now actively involved in public good decision making, production and distribution of public goods that were once under the purview of governments. Education is a simple example

but private sector provision is now extending to issues like state security, or health. Though access maybe assumed to be free, because of infrastructure issues, literacy, or even age, we find many services may not be easy to access. This creates another challenge for governments in delivering public value.

This study looks at the role of e-government services and the country in the happiness of the individual. It is perhaps one of the first studies of its kind and has significant policy implications for the government and its various entities. Though the study is conducted in the UAE it is globally relevant.

Exhibit 1: Agile Public Value Delivery



Source: Kaul & Mendoza, (2003)

2.0 UAE and e-Services

The global e-governance market is valued at USD 45.76 billion, grabbing a CAGR of 12.6% during the forecast period (2017-2023) according to a Marketwatch report (2019). In the Middle East, government accounts for 10% of the total amount spent on IT services - making it perhaps the largest consumer if you take system integration as a key requirement. The refocus on e-government is a major trend driving this fast pace of change. Among the Gulf countries, the UAE remains one of the most attractive markets in this sector for e-government initiatives at both the federal and local government level.

By 2019, the UAE was ranked 21st according to the 2018 E-Government Development Index (UAE Government, 2020a). In the year 2000, the Emirate of Dubai began the

e-government revolution with its e-Government initiative. In 2013 the UAE launched the mGovernment project. At that time, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, met with 1000 government officials and asked them to move the government services platform to smart phones within 24 months (TRA, 2018). In 2020, the emirate of Dubai passed the Smart Dubai law and the Smart Dubai Department would be responsible for transformation for “Dubai’s smart transformation, to empower, deliver, and promote an efficient, seamless, safe and impactful urban experience for residents and visitors, facilitating information exchange between public and private sectors, and improving the efficiency of government sectors through automation and by encouraging the public to use smart services” (Khaleej Times, 2020).

The citizen or e-services portals can address Government-to-government (G2G), government-to-citizen (G2C), or government-to-business (G2B) online services. This paper focuses on government-to-citizen (G2C) services. There have been many benefits attributed to e-government services (Chester et al., 2003; UK Cabinet Office, 2000):

1. to the government: decreases duplication of effort, reduces bureaucracy, saves costs (money, time, effort), leads to greater coordination and transparency and encourages data sharing between entities
2. to the citizen/resident/business: increases speed of service delivery, greater participation, convenience, greater choice of channel, more personalization, reduces regulatory and bureaucratic burdens, ideally simplification of process, and avoids duplication

There are challenges and opportunities with e-government in UAE that involve issues like:

1. Interoperability: This involves the compatible functioning of both hardware and software of various systems across departments, levels and emirates. Further there are issues of making sure information is usable and means the same across various entities for purposes of analysis and decision making. The fact that various government entities compete for excellence awards also creates different levels of services that may lead to duplication. Currently the UAE government has introduced initiatives like the UAE Pass which is a national digital identity and signature solution and works with local initiatives like the Smart Dubai App that tries to bring all citizen services under one umbrella to simplify processes and payments.

2. Localization for services: UAE is home to people representing over 200+ countries and a major tourist location. While Arabic is the official language and localization is key, the ability to be global and personalize services offers further opportunities.
3. Data and Technology: Using AI to reduce the work of applications and procedural, repetitive tasks and duplications - AI is still developing and UAE is a small population for testing of 9 million customers of which Emiratis are only 2 million. The data laws are still developing and data collected in UAE must remain in UAE.

3.0: Nation Happiness

In global markets, to compete for talent, for attracting businesses and to project a strong positive image, country reputation matters. If governments are the largest providers of services (da Silva & Batista, 2007), how do e-government services impact the consumer of e-government services and the country reputation? One of the measures of country reputation is emotional appeal (Passow et al., 2005). Emotional appeal can be simply explained as extent to which the country is liked, loved and respected.

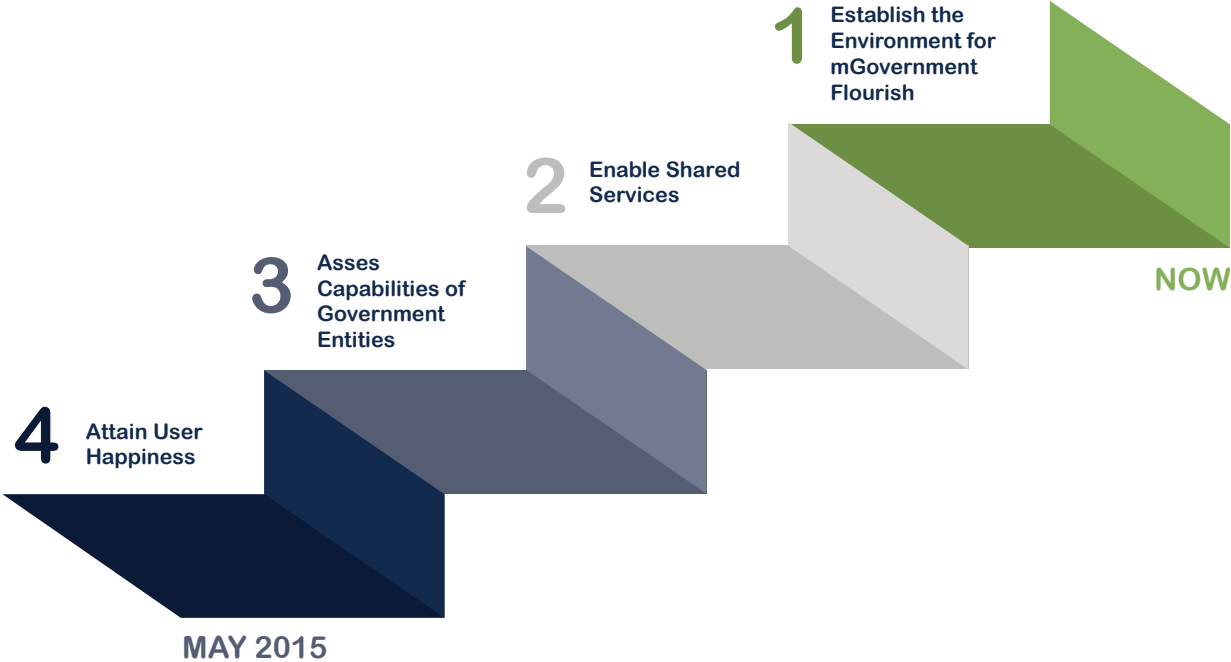
Happiness is an emotion that is linked to subjective well-being and is measured by asking the question about how people feel (Powdthavee, 2007). There are two types of happiness - hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. The first is experiential often focusing on materials and short-term, while the other focuses on self-actualization and is experiential (Theodorakis et al., 2015; Carter and Gilovich (2012).

In marketing studies, satisfaction with services, and reputation is often linked with positive emotions, while dissatisfaction is linked with negative emotions (Graca and Arnaldo, 2016). Quality of services is linked to loyalty (Sá, Rocha & Cota, 2016; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2002) and happiness (Wong, 2004; Keyser and Lariviere, 2013). This can transcend to overall happiness (rather than merely context driven) or life satisfaction (see for example Ahuvia & Friedman, 1998; Day (1987).

One of the challenges the governments are facing is that though GNP increases, happiness does not necessarily do the same (Khan & Hussain, 2013). For the UAE government, when it launched the mGovernment Roadmap in 2015, one of the four indicators for progress of the mGovernment Roadmap were: Achieve citizen happiness (see Exhibit 2) and the creation of the post - UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing in 2016. This goal was reemphasized in the Dubai Plan 2021 (the people: city of happy, creative

and empowered people). The National Program for Wellbeing and Happiness’s focus is “Inspiring people, government and the broader community in the UAE to cultivate wellbeing as a way of life and enrich the greater happiness of the nation.” Under the pillar of Cohesive Society and Preserved Identity of National Agenda, the UAE Government aims to make the country amongst the top five happiest countries in the world by 2021 (UAE Government, 2020b). According to the 2018 UN World Happiness report, UAE ranked 20th among 156 countries, first in the Arab world, 11th for UAE nationals only, and 19th for its expatriate residents representing 117 countries.

Exhibit 2: UAE m-Government Roadmap

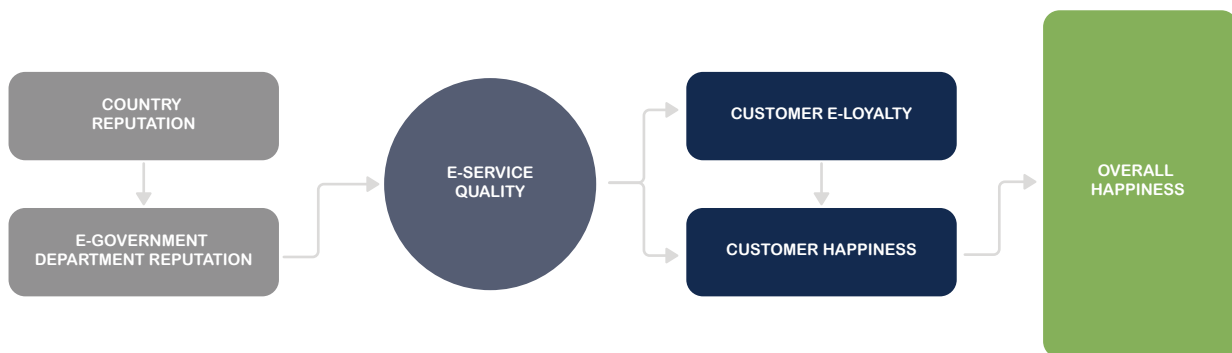


Source: <https://government.ae/-/media/Smart-UAE-page/ROAD-MAP-mobile-government-English.ashx?la=en>

4.0: Conceptual Model

The model this paper tests is the relationship between country reputation, e-government department reputation, customer loyalty and happiness: this is illustrated in Exhibit 3:

Exhibit 3: Conceptual Model: What makes constituents happy?



Source: Authors

5.0: Methodology & Analysis

The study was conducted with the ethics approval granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee in UOW (Ethics Number: 2017/020 - Approval Date: 14 March 2017). While it uses a mixed methods research, this paper presents only parts of the survey conducted. The survey consisted of the following items measured with a 7-point Likert scale.

1. The Country Reputation was composed of 14 items (adapted from by Anholt (2006) Fombrun et al. (2000), Passow et al. (2005) Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2008),
2. Corporate reputation was three dimensional using 14 items adapted from Reputation Quotient Fombrun & Gardberg (2000) and Walsh and Beatty (2007).
3. e-Service Quality: 28 item scale adopted from various previous studies: Parasuraman et al. (2005), Connolly et al. (2010), Papadomichelaki and Mentzas (2012), Alawneh et al. (2013), Rehman et al. (2016), Sharma et al. (2015), Janita and Miranda (2018).

4. e-service loyalty: Six item scale adopted from are Chen (2012), Hsu et al. (2012) and Elkhani et al. (2014).
5. Customer Happiness: five item scale adopted from Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999), Keyser and Lariviere (2014) and Gong and Yi (2018).
6. Overall Happiness: Four items adapted from Lyubomirsky (2001).

The questionnaire was translated into Arabic and the questionnaire was distributed using a paper format and online in the UAE using a snowballing method. A total of 510 questionnaires were received and 437 were useable for analysis. Of the sample, 84 per cent of the respondents are UAE citizens, 14.6 per cent of the respondents are resident and 1.4 per cent are tourists. 81.3 per cent of participants had been living in UAE for more than ten years, whereas 18.8 per cent are had been living in UAE for less than ten years. This means a significant majority had experienced the shift to e-government services. The top three departments for most used services were:

1. Ministry of Interior: for payment of traffic fines (44.6%), vehicle registration renewal (27.9%); driving license renewal (27.9%);
2. Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship: for new ID card (27.9%); new passport (13.7%)
3. Federal Authority for Electricity and Water: for payment of bills (19.9%);

Two basic types of factor analyses with SEM, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), were used. The tests conducted for CFA, reliability and validity (Cronbach's alpha) find that the tool is robust; these are reported in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4: Convergent Validity, internal consistency reliability (Composite Reliability), Cronbach's Alpha, and discriminant validity (second order)

Variables	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
Corporate Reputation	0.85	0.65	0.60	0.85	0.91	0.81					
Customer Happiness	0.93	0.72	0.27	0.95	0.94	0.47	0.85				
E-service loyalty	0.91	0.73	0.37	0.97	0.91	0.56	0.41	0.85			
Happiness Baseline	0.91	0.77	0.19	0.98	0.90	0.41	0.44	0.28	0.88		
Country Reputation	0.76	0.53	0.47	0.98	0.93	0.69	0.52	0.33	0.29	0.73	
E-service Quality	0.86	0.60	0.60	0.98	0.96	0.77	0.52	0.61	0.39	0.60	0.77

Notes: The numbers in the diagonal are the square root of AVE.

α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; MSV = maximum shared variance; MaxR(H) = maximum reliability.

The hypothesis testing was done by measuring the estimated path coefficient value with critical ratio (C.R) or t-value and p-value where ideally is t-value should be greater than or equal to 1.96, and p value is $\leq .05$ (Byrne, 2001). The properties of the causal paths between independent variable and dependent variable are shown in Exhibit 5. The results indicate that five path coefficients were considered statistically significant as they were greater than 1.96 at 0.05 level. Two path coefficients were under 1.96 indicating that they were statistically non-significant at the 0.05 level.

Exhibit 5: SEM output for regression weights - The direct effect

Relationship	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
Country Reputation → Corporate Reputation	0.690	0.097	9.132	0.001	Significant
Country Reputation → E-service Quality	0.131	0.105	1.842	0.065	Not Significant
Corporate Reputation → E-service Quality	0.705	0.105	7.773	0.001	Significant
E-service Quality → E-service loyalty	0.620	0.074	9.530	0.001	Significant
E-service Quality → Customer Happiness	0.484	0.094	6.945	0.001	Significant
E-service loyalty → Customer Happiness	0.109	0.071	1.818	0.069	Not Significant
Customer Happiness → Happiness Baseline	0.445	0.061	9.124	0.001	Significant

Note: 1) Significant relation (in bold); not supported denotes that the hypothesis is not accepted in the hypothesized sign.

2) Critical Ratio (t-values) for a two-tailed test are 1.96 (significance level = 5 percent).

3) β : Standardized estimate (Path coefficient), S.E. Standard error, C.R.: Critical ratio (t-value)

6.0: Findings & Discussions

This study finds that for e-government services, that

- (1) the country reputation does impact corporate reputation but not e-services quality
- (2) the corporate reputation impacts perception of the quality of e-services
- (3) Quality of e-services impacts loyalty to the service and customer happiness
- (4) e-services loyalty does not impact customer happiness
- (5) customer happiness contributes to overall happiness

6.1 Policy Discussions

The study has several policy discussions for the agile delivery of public value.

1. Country reputation impacts the perceptions of individual government entities in terms of e-government services: Hence by emphasizing the overall country image, the cumulative benefits for all is stronger. This has implications for government entities at both the federal and local emirate level. The UAE has just now created a UAE nation brand logo (see Exhibit 6) and the narrative across the country needs to reflect the national aspirations.

Exhibit 6: UAE Nation Brand



Source: <https://www.nationbrand.ae/en>

2. The individual e-government organizations impact perceptions of service quality and service loyalty not the country reputation suggesting the path to customer excellence still is at the individual departmental level: To this extent the focus on service excellence in UAE needs to continue. As was seen there are some services customers use e-services more often and perhaps in terms of prioritization, this is the place to start.

3. e-service quality and not e-loyalty impact happiness: This seems obvious as often customers for government services are captive customers (they have no choice in the services they consume though there may be multiple methods of accessing the service). So whether the service is outsourced or not, accessed online or in face to face delivery methods, a customer still may have to pay for that service (ID cards, fines, utilities, etc.). What affects happiness is satisfaction scores with quality of the service. This finding has implications on how you measure happiness at the service level and how quality is measured (process, time spent, value for money etc.).

4. Customer Happiness or Wellbeing at the service level leads to overall happiness: This has policy implications for the country. Unless all government services (considering that the country is rapidly becoming digital), can deliver expected quality, overall happiness cannot increase. Marketing literature clearly talks of the gap between expected services and delivered services in creating dissatisfaction. There are implications for organizations that promise too much and deliver less. We suggest more research be conducted on the long-term effects of using online services and the impact it has on personal interactions and wellbeing.

7.0 Way Forwards

This is one of the first studies of its kind and for governments that are transforming to digital governments there are caution points. First of all, customers are often captive to government services (though delivery methods may be many). This is strongly indicated in our findings that e-services loyalty does not lead to happiness. Hence a strong proxy measure of happiness is perceptions of quality of services. Further research can be conducted on delivery modes of services (digital versus personal) so see what are barriers and enablers in perceptions of service.

Secondly, there is a spillover from country reputation to corporate reputation, but not to the products a company offers. Hence nation brand building must be done simultaneously by building product quality. This field of research, the influence of product perceptions on the country perceptions is this nascent, though it has strong bearings on the topic of soft power.

Last but not least, happiness and wellbeing can be perceived as public goods and the role the public sector has is still not clearly articulated. It is a complex topic as employees may also be both consumers and providers of happiness. This area will benefit from further research.

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Acknowledgements

This report was edited by **Lama Zakzak, Engy Shibl, Melodena Stephens and Scott Fargher.**

The author(s) wishes to express personal appreciation to the following individuals for their input to the different stages of producing this report and for providing essential input and assistance into the report and its related materials:

Lama Zakzak | Engy Shibl | Marouen Ghezal | Shuaib Kunnoth | Ghaith Yagan

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Toward this goal, the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government also collaborates with regional and global institutions in delivering its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world. The School is committed to the creation of knowledge, the dissemination of best practice and the training of policy makers in the Arab world. To achieve this mission, the School is developing strong capabilities to support research and teaching programs, including:

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