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INSIGHTS INTO INFORMAL PRACTICES OF SPORT LEADERSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE IMPACT OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE WASTA

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and understand the impact of one of the informal culture forces on leadership corruption in sport settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 individuals. Board members, presidents, and secretaries general were asked via phone interviews to describe the term *wasta*, using evidence from non-profit sectors in the Arab Middle East. The results show that when *wasta* is considered from a positive perspective, it is perceived as a means to solve problems or avoid bureaucracy, whereas it is perceived as corrupt behavior when it is considered from a negative perspective. Practical implications of the findings are discussed, together with limitations and ideas for future research.

Keywords Leadership, culture, corruption, non-profit sectors, impacts.

Introduction

Clarity about concepts such as corruption is important when it concerns the public interest and the policy-making of sport governors at national and international levels. Corruption refers to the use of money, gifts, or relationship to obtain certain kinds of benefits and advantages (Treisman 2000). Although the way that people describe the term of corruption is affected by political, economic, social, legal, cultural, and institutional contexts (Korany 2014), the common denominators of all cultures are that people view corrupt behaviors as negative acts.

No doubt, the debate around corruption depends on the culture, but the content of this phenomenon tends to be similar all over the world. For example, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) scandal over the Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games due to alleged bribes for hosting votes is perceived as one of the notable scandals in sport, given the IOC's leadership role across national and international governing bodies (Transparency International 2016). Similarly, FIFA, football's world governing body, has been embroiled in corruption proceedings since 2015, after the US Department of Justice accused several members and presidents of federations as well as other top executives of corruption. This involved criminal, sports leadership schemes involving hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks (Jennings 2016).

These two indicative examples reflect the state of the non-profit sport sector at national and international levels and unethical practices used by many actors managing this sector, particularly when we observe that the non-profit sport sector is now in competition with the for-profit sport sector (Megheirkouni 2017c, 2019). It is essential to mention that research on unethical practices has attracted great attention by sport business researchers in both developed and developing countries, given that sport has become a global phenomenon, attracting global business investment (Brooks *et al.* 2013, Gorse and Chadwick 2010, Kihl 2017).

Maennig (2002) linked corruption and the economic benefits of hosting the Olympic Games, and argued that the corruption problem could be dampened by reducing the surpluses in the host cities, making the selection process more transparent, and increasing the incentives for corruption-free behavior. In addition, Maennig (2005) distinguished between two types of corruption in sport. These types are: 1) competition corruption that refers to the unethical decisions of referees and other officials or athletes' behaviors and acts, such as doping, that can illegally affect competition results; and 2) management corruption that refers to unethical behaviors of people in decision-making positions, such as board members and chief executives in national and international sports organizations. Numerato (2009) pointed out that the media function as both an enemy and a facilitator of corruption in sports. Heron and Jiang (2010) claimed that there is a relationship between organized crime and sports corruption, given that several investigations have been carried out to determine whether results on the pitch were influenced by illegal gambling operations. Mazanov and Connor (2010) discussed the role of scandal and corruption in sports marketing and sponsorship, and argued that scandal and corruption in sport provide opportunities for marketing and sponsorship. Particularly, many sports marketers and sponsors work on incorporating scandal and corruption as part of strategies to maximize the return on investment in sport. Corgan (2012) pointed out the financial corruption of college athletics created by unethical sports agents and the National Collegiate Athletic Association's revenue-generating scheme, preventing college athletes from financially benefiting from their athletic prowess.

As seen above, there are many studies that have addressed corruption in sports from different perspectives. We extend this examination by addressing a largely ignored perspective that focuses on the relationships among actors (networking dimension) in specific cultures. Basic to this approach is the observation that "ongoing social relationships provide the constraints and opportunity that, in combination with characteristics of individuals, issues, and

organizations, may help explain unethical behavior in organizations" (Brass *et al*. 1998 p. 17). For example, Nassif (2014) claimed that the Lebanese sport system is widely affected by the state's multi-confessional political system, which is transformed in reality into a struggle for overrepresentation in all state settings, including sport leadership positions. This process, unfortunately, leads to the salient use of corrupt and (in the Lebanese context) nepotistic behaviors to achieve personal or sectarian purposes.

Given that corruption is not a new phenomenon (Dreher *et al.* 2007, Tanzi 1998), the level of attention paid to corruption naturally raises the question: why is there so much attention on how this phenomenon occurs in sport leadership? The answer is still not obvious. Several studies have linked 'culture' with corruption in sport settings (Dorsey 2017, Jarvie and Thornton 2013, Raab 2012, Yost 2009). In this vein, it is argued that organizational culture reflects national culture, to the extent that the latter is embedded in individuals (Van Oudenhoven 2001, Naor *et al.* 2010). Many studies on the Arab Middle East in the field of sport leadership address the role of Arabic culture in all aspects of life (Amara 2012, Megheirkouni 2017b). Specifically, sports occupy a hallowed place in the cultural life of the Arab Middle East. National pride is increasingly attached to the fortunes of sports teams (Hammond 2005). Therefore, leadership positions in sports organizations in the Arab Middle East have attracted the attentions of powerful and rich people, who currently occupy most leadership positions in sports federations and National Olympic Committees (NOCs) (Megheirkouni 2014). But this has negative implications for the performance and reputation of Arab sports organizations on the international stage, given that leadership positions have become used for personal interest rather than public interest.

More importantly, the ethical and cultural tendencies of those leaders are brought with them to these organizations. Megheirkouni (2014) points out that people often link their actions and the environment in which they brought up and worked. We argue that this is one of many

reasons that lead to the spread of corruption within Arab sports organizations. Furthermore, Harrison and John (2014) connect organizational culture with leadership behaviors, and argue that organizational culture is the base of human resource management practices which reinforce certain behaviors of leadership. In this regard, Bass (1985) argued that an organizational culture evolves from its leadership, and vice versa. Accordingly, the current study aims to explore and understand the impact of an informal cultural force on leadership corruption in the non-profit sports sector, using evidence from the Arab Middle East.

Literature Review

The Middle East Culture

As an abstract term, it is difficult to define what a culture means, and people often define it in different ways that serve their purposes. But all agree that it refers to the way of life, habits, norms, and traditions that control the behavior of a group of people. For Hofstede (1983), culture is a "collective mental programming it is that part of our conditioning that we share with other members of our nation, region, or group but not with members of other nations, regions or groups" (p. 76). Related to culture is the term multicultural that refers to more than one culture in a group of people and can also refer to a set of subcultures defined by gender, race, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Northouse 2018). However, there are hidden cultural forces in some countries or clusters, such as the Middle East, described as unwritten forces that are common to groups, here Arab people. Empirical studies revealed that *wasta* is one of these forces (Hutchings and Weir 2006, Megheirkouni 2016a, Weir 1999, 2003a, 2003b) which is the focus of the current study.

Positive and Negative Attitudes toward informal Culture Forces

Wasta. This is a salient practice in an Arab context. It refers to social networks of interpersonal connections rooted in kinship ties (Hutchings and Weir 2006). Very little research has focused

empirically on *wasta*, but all descriptive accounts emphasize its ubiquity in organizational practices. For example, Yahiaoui and Zoubir (2006) point out that *wasta* in the Arab context is referred to as *ma'arifa* – 'who you know', *ras* – 'person who is in the top position', *laktaf* – 'shoulders', or *wasel* – 'person who has relationships with people across a social structure'.

Although some authors, for example, Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993), emphasize the beneficial functions of *wasta* in an Arab context, it is still perceived as corrupt behavior in Arab societies. This has been well-illustrated by Megheirkouni's (2016a) study that revealed that managers appointed via *wasta* demonstrated high-level egoism by blocking leadership knowledge to managers at lower levels. This behavior is used to ensure monopoly of management positions, which Western scholars view as a 'dangerous other' or alterity (El-Kharouf and Weir 2005).

Guanxi. It is perceived as a key aspect of interpersonal relationships within Chinese cultures. Specifically, *guanxi* is a relationship between two individuals to give as good as they receive. A Chinese individual with a problem, personal or organizational, naturally turns to their *guanxiwang*, or 'relationship network,' for assistance. An individual is not limited to their own *guanxiwang* but may tap into the networks of those with whom they have *guanxi* (Hutchings and Weir 2006). According to Chen *et al*. (2009), effective attachment, the inclusion of personal life and deference, can determine subordinates' *guanxi* relations with their superiors. Measures of these elements were more predictive of positive outcomes than were simple indices of the presence or absence of *guanxi*. For instance, Hutchings and Weir (2006) were more specific: they reported that *guanxi* has positive connotations of networking and negative connotations of corruption. Cheung *et al*. (2009) noted that the relationship between perceived *guanxi* with one's manager and positive outcomes was mediated by job satisfaction.

Svyazi. It is a Russian word referring to social capital (Efremova 2000). The word *blat* is also widely used to refer to informal relationships in and since the Soviet era (Ledeneva 1998). The term *blat* means 'criminal underground world' in Russia (Efremova 2000). That is why most Russians prefer the term *svyazi/blat* to refer to social networks. Several studies revealed that the term *svyazi/blat* capital has positive impacts such as reducing uncertainties and risks in financial transactions (Batjargal 2003, Sedaitis 1998).

Jeitinho. The concept of *jeitinho* or *jeito*, which means a 'little way out', is known as a hermeneutic key to Brazilian society. It is stands out as a strong characteristic of behaviors in Brazilian culture (Duarte 2006). Although *jeitinho* is sometimes seen as positive behavior (Amado and Brasil 1991), others may view it as negative. For example, Barbosa (2006) showed how *jeitinho* can be positive and negative. Barbosa distinguished *dar um jeitinho* which means 'to have a way out'. Specifically, it refers to solving problems, regardless of the ways and means, legal or illegal; what is important in *dar um jeitinho* is the outcome. *Jeitinho Brasileiro* means "(the) Brazilian way out" and refers to the capability to use creativity and pragmatism in the problem-solving process. All Brazilians perceive it as a quick and indirect strategy that helps achieve ones' goal without any negative implications and repercussions (Amado and Brasil 1991, Smith *et al.* 2012a, Torres and Dessen 2008).

Pulling Strings. The familiar colloquial phrase in English depends figuratively on an exteriority of power: the puppet as an object that is moved or manipulated by someone else. The term *pulling strings* in British culture refers to "obtaining favors particularly through links with influential persons" (Smith *et al.* 2012a, p. 4), whether based on long-standing connections, e.g., family connections or shared schooling, or from chance contact. Smith *et al.* (2012b) argue that the term *pulling strings* has not been explored or investigated. In addition, no one has confirmed that it refers to a process that is indigenous to the United Kingdom.

However, Fox (2014) has used the phrase 'fair play' to indicate in one way or another to a mutual opportunity for individuals and meaning explicitly *pulling strings*.

Table 1 References to informal cultural forces

Wasta	▪ It refers to a person who mediates/intercedes as well as the act of mediation/intercession. ▪ It seeks advantage. ▪ It is a source of opportunity. ▪ It means succeeding or failing depends on the power of the *wasta*.
Guanxi	▪ Family relationship, utilitarian ties, and particularistic ties embedded in Confucian values. ▪ It is regarded as a gray area inevitably associated with favoritism, nepotism, unfair competition and fraud. ▪ It is the process of finding a solution to a business rather than personal problem by using personal connections. ▪ It represents a way to bypass laws and regulations through personal connection with government officials, to obtain special treatment or scarce resources.
Svyazi	▪ It is a monetized practice in which connections and access to assets are treated as commodities to be sold. ▪ It has the contemporary meaning of *blat* that means criminal and criminal underground world. ▪ It reduces uncertainties and risks in financial transactions and facilitates access to resources and loans.
Jeitinho	▪ It is an ingenious informal way of overcoming bureaucratic obstacles. ▪ It is a key mechanism by which social and political relations are produced and reproduced. ▪ It is a mechanism to reduce conflicts and facilitates transportation from one environment to another. ▪ It is perceived as the most authentic process in terms of problem management.
Pulling Stings	▪ It refers to obtaining favors particularly through links with influential persons. ▪ It derives from family connections or shared schooling, and may also derive from shorter-term chance contacts.

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Leadership Corruption and Culture

Leadership corruption can be described as controversial and illegal behavior because it ignores well-defined conceptions, rules, and laws of justice (Rendtorff 2009), though dependent on the society we live in. Corruption has a wide range of forms including, but not limited to, graft, sabotage, fraud, hypocrisy, and anti-citizenship behavior, but unethical behavior is the common thread between these forms (Pearce *et al.* 2008).

Treisman (2000) analyzed various 'perceived corruption' indexes from business risk studies in the 1980s and 1990s. The results revealed that cultures that were described as less 'corrupt' were known by their developed economies and Protestant traditions. Given that his analysis covered only the period covering the 1980s and 1990s, it is worth noting that demographic change in several areas in Europe has been seen between 1990 and 2016 due to wars, violence, political crises, and terrorism. This may suggest that even countries that were less corrupt may become more corrupt.

Some researchers linked corruption and the kind of leadership (Huberts *et al.* 2007, Yahchouchi 2009). For example, Pearce *et al*. (2008) propose that the propensity for corruption of leaders and the degree to which leadership is shared are key factors in understanding the potential for executive corruption. Their results revealed that shared leadership can deter corruptive tendencies by providing checks and balances capable of reducing the potential for corrupt behavior. Others went further and argued that distinctive societal cultures have implications for all aspects of life in society, including leadership behaviors (Ashkanasy *et al.* 2002, Clark *et al*. 2003, House *et al.* 2004). On the other hand, scandals and financial corruption have affected the prestige of sport leadership and non-profit sport organizations at the national and international levels and have increased the demand for ethical leadership behavior. Although ethical leadership is still in the formative phase of development (Northhouse 2018), empirical research is needed on how people distinguish between ethical and unethical practices in the non-profit sport sector across cultures. It is said that the three elements of moral development: people (who are they?), role (what roles do they have?), and context (where do they work?) are key factors influencing ethical behavior of leaders (Kohlberg 1984).

It is also known that national and transnational cultures can influence leaders' perception of ethical behavior (Forte 2004). Empirical studies revealed that love of money (Li-Ping *et al.* 2008, Tang and Chiu 2003), religiosity (Tang and Tang 2010), social class (Dubois *et al.* 2015,

Piff *et al*. 2012), sexual harassment (O'Leary-Kelly and Bowes-Sperry 2001), are all unethical behaviors perceived as corruptive acts and have negative implications in the workplace over time. No doubt, national cultures play an essential role in shaping and growing unethical behaviors, with some disparity in prevalence of these behaviors (Cullen, Parboteeah, and Hoegl 2004, Parboteeah *et al*. 2005). This proposes that corruption is part of the national culture.

However, although several studies have investigated the relationship between national culture and leadership corruption (Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck 2014, Getz and Volkema 2001, Seleim and Bontis 2009), no research has investigated the relationship between informal cultural forces, such as *wasta*, *guanxi*, *svyazi/blat*, *jeitinho*, or *pulling strings* and leadership corruption in the non-profit sport sector (see, e.g., Dunfee and Warren 2001, Smith *et al*. 2012a, 2012b), given the impacts of culture on ethical behaviors of leaders.

Comparison of Corrupt Leadership in Different Cultural Forces

When things go wrong in any sport organization, this does not always mean that a leader neglects people and tasks in that organization, but rather misunderstanding, a lack of experience or knowledge of leaders, or the external environment factors surrounding sport organizations can be the main reasons. However, if things go wrong due to ethical failures, this may need a strong reaction from officials. But such a reaction to this kind of failure can be differently perceived from person to person. Similarly, sport organizations across cultures may react to a particular behavior differently. This is because that behavior can be perceived as positive for certain cultures and negative for others.

Leader–follower relationships in sport organizations can be described as positive patronage in some cultures due to such factors as influence, control, charisma, experience, guidance, and support (Megheirkouni 2018c). It is argued that such factors are affected by organizational culture, which is a mirror of the national culture (Van Oudenhoven 2001, Naor *et al.* 2010). It is worth noting that within any sport organization there is no uniform

understanding and adoption of a specific culture. Research has shown that large organizations have multiple subcultures due to differences in physical proximity, working environment, and management styles, and that members of these subcultures may share the same values and normative behaviors that guide their actions and attitudes (Khatib 1996).

Empirical research in many different disciplines, such as leadership, HRM, political, and sport governance addresses the impact of unwritten rules on the behaviors of leaders, leader–member relationships, and organizational culture (Griffin and Moorhead 2011, Mabey and Lees 2007, Simpson and Cacioppe 2001). Hoye and Cuskelly (2007) point out that unwritten rules cover acceptable conduct for paid and unpaid staff who convey various values, traditions, cultures, and rules of behavior for their organizations, boards, and teams. It is argued that cultural–institutional context serves to regulate the relations between interest groups and helps mediate conflicts (Mabey and Lees 2007). It may also be argued that it can be seen as a means for corruption.

More specifically, although a wide range of studies have explored and investigated the terms of *wasta* in the Middle East, there is no agreement between researchers on whether it is perceived as a positive or negative phenomenon. For example, some authors perceive this phenomenon as one form of corruption that needs to be thoroughly countered (Klitgaard 1991, Kilani and Sakijha 2002), while others point out its beneficial functions (Al-Ramahi 2008, Megheirkouni 2016a, 2018). Similarly, although much empirical research supports the beneficial function of *guanxi* (Cheung *et al.* 2009, Hutchings and Weir 2006), others emphasized the *guanxi*–corruption relationship (Fan 2002, Li 2011).

Others have gone further and argued that this relationship is dynamic. For example, Luo (2008) pointed out the interrelationships between *guanxi* and corrupt relationships as well as organizational responses to these. In addition, *svyazi/blat* is described as a positive behavior in many studies (Smith *et al.* 2008), but this idea is not well accepted by other researchers because

they believe that *svyazi/blat* leads to corruption (McCarthy and Puffer 2008, McCarthy *et al.* 2012, Smith *et al.* 2012b). Also, *jeitinho* can be viewed as either positive or negative. Furthermore, although no research has been conducted on the practice of *pulling strings* in English-speaking countries, one study by Smith *et al*. (2012a) argues that English-speaking peoples see *pulling strings* as positive behavior. They found that *pulling strings* is widely used in recruitment.

In relation to informal cultural forces for understanding corrupt leadership, leadership literature shows there is no agreement about the relationship between informal cultural forces and corrupt leadership. Therefore, there is an essential need to clarify the reference to the informal cultural force chosen for the present study. Although these forces differ in their emphases (see Table 1), geographical locations, and the structure and/or nature of the relationship between people, each of these forces has in common its reliance on unwritten rules in a society.

Method

Research Design

The epistemological position of the present study is interpretivism derived from phenomenology that refers to the way in which people make sense of the surrounding environment and is also concerned with their lived experience (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). A qualitative research design was adopted for better understanding of hidden culture, given that the subject of informal cultural forces in non-profit sport organizations in the Arab Middle East is not well explained and understood in the sports business and management or sport policy literature. Furthermore, Megheirkouni, (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) points out people in the Arab Middle East are not accustomed to the qualitative form of research: people are 1) concerned about security or ‘dangerous others’; and 2) reluctant to provide information through interviews to protect their career. This increases the importance of the current study.

Interview protocol

Data were collected in different periods because of the full timetables of all participants and their commitments to other meetings, national and international competitions, leagues, and internal and external training camps. Qualitative data were collected to explore and understand the impact of informal cultural forces on leadership corruption in sports organizations. The present study used a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were conducted in the Arabic language. The interviews lasted between 32 and 44 minutes. The questions were divided into introductory questions used to build rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the main questions surrounding leadership corruption and informal influence forces in sport settings.

All participants were asked to describe the relationship between the informal cultural forces and corruption in sport leadership. Sample questions are: Are you familiar with wasta? What does it mean to you? Have you heard about this phenomenon in your organization? Why? What role do you believe wasta as an "informal influence force" plays in your organization? Do you believe there is any way to prevent it? Give more details. Do you agree/disagree with this phenomenon? Why?

Data collection

Data was collected between May and June 2017 from National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and national governing bodies (NGBs) (as illustrated in the following sample section). Data collection was by phone interviews conducted with 18 people who showed interest in the current study. Our external relationships with sports organizations in the Middle East were used to book appointments with the potential participants. Some appointments were immediately booked, while others were canceled and delayed many times, as participants had a full timetable because of national and international competitions and leagues. All participants were

informed that their involvement in the present study was voluntary and the information would remain confidential.

Sample

Based on four months of consultations with many sport experts, coaches, analysts, referees, and well-known academicians in the Arab Middle East, purposive sampling was adopted in the current study, given the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulties of finding ideal individuals who would agree to take part in the study and 'tell the truth' about the phenomenon under investigation (Gratton and Jones 2010). The study targeted individuals who serve in the non-profit sport sector in the Arab Middle East and who have witnessed previous events and faced many institutional-cultural challenges during their work over the last 20 years. Of the 18 individuals, 13 participants were board members from seven sports governing bodies (Football, Basketball, Boxing, Volleyball, Athletics, Swimming, and Gymnastics), as well as five participants from four NOCs (two presidents and three secretaries general). The reasons for selecting those people and organizations can be summarized thus: first, they are the best able to answer the research questions, given their experience in sport management or leadership for more than 10 years; second, those particular organizations represent a small simple of many sport organizations that have had previous troubles with corruption in the region; and third, those 18 individuals showed interest to take part in this research because they wanted to tell their stories about what is known as 'a hidden culture'.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested three major stages for qualitative data analysis: 1) data reduction, 2) data display, and 3) drawing and verifying conclusions. In the first stage, meaning units were identified, followed by considering which of these units fit together into categories. The next step was to assign codes to categories. All codes were written in the margin next to the meaning units.

Table 2 Participants' perceptions toward the informal culture

Example code	Subthemes	Themes
"Tomorrow is like today"	Traditional routine	Avoiding bureaucracy
"Unwavering determination to overcome frustration"	Performance and outcome focused	
"Doing different and new things"	Flexibility to change	
"Change is a key for success"		
"Supporting proposals to update useless laws"	Overcoming barriers	
"One mistake can cost a lot"	Killer errors	
"Exchange benefits for public interest"	Useful means	Strengthening relations
"Asking for help from other government departments"	Facilitating tasks via networking	
"Establishing international relations with international sport federations"	External communications	
"Strengthening personal relations at all levels"	Reinforcing social ties	
"Spending time on planning"	Saving time	Solving problems
"Rationalization of non-developmental expenditure"	Saving money	
"Attracting additional sponsorship opportunities"	Creating opportunities	
"Creating unwritten laws serving particular purposes"	Resisting written laws	
"Creating a healthy environment for work without troubles"	Zero problems	
"Politically controlling representing the password in elections"	Unwritten rules	Nepotism
"Granting career development to ineligible persons"	Blocking talents	
"Relying only on experience instead of academic qualifications"	Personal experiences	
"Linking effective leadership to experienced people"		
"Lifetime leadership"	Leadership monopoly	
"Inheriting sports leadership positions"		
"This makes me feel disgusted"	Pressure	Depression and Anxiety
"Health problems"		
"Deceitful environment"	Lack of trust	
"Avoiding personal initiatives for fear of mistakes"	Lack of confidence	
"Changing in alliances for personal purposes"	Hidden intentions	Bad reputation
"Politicizing elections"	Politicizing sport	
"The decline of continental and international rankings"	Undeveloped sport infrastructure	
"The use of bribes"	Unethical practices	

In the second stage, data display, 'conceptually ordered display' was used by adopting a conceptually clustered matrix. After that, data were entered through going back to coded segments keyed to the study's questions. Here, we used Grinnell and Unrau's (2011) classical cutting and pasting technique. The next step was to draw conclusions via comparing the rows and the columns of the matrix. This helped make contrasts/comparisons between participants and also helped identify more conclusions from the variable matrix. These steps were used for each and across all interviews, which helped generalizing the themes and subthemes from the data (Table 2). The theme names were adopted by relying on what these themes represented as well as determining what aspect of the data these themes captured (Braun and Clarke 2006). To evaluate the credibility of the above categories, a set of doctoral students at the same university (having academic or work experience in the Middle East) were asked to analyze three interviews, using the same procedures following Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Grinnell and Untau (2010). The content analysis provided similar categories to those adopted above, providing evidence of credibility.

The Cohen Kappa test was used to explore the inter-reliability of the analysis. Table 2 shows the number of codes for each theme. Importantly, every category showed high inter-coder reliability (see, e.g., Lombard *et al.* 2010). From the initial total of 937 codes, 706 codes were agreed. From the total of agreed codes, 462 (65.43%) of the codes show *wasta* as a positive factor, while 244 (34.56%) of the codes show *wasta* as a negative factor. Table 3 presents more details on the coding frequency of each category.

Results

The findings of the present study were organized into positive attitudes and negative attitudes toward corruption, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 3 Positive and negative outcomes of *wasta*

Category	Attitudes	No. of codes & percentage	Codes	Cohen Kappa
	Avoiding bureaucracy	204 (44.15%)		.72

Positive	Strengthen relations Solving problems	60 (12.98%) 198 (42.85%)	462	
Negative	Nepotism Depression and Anxiety Bad reputation	81 (33.19%) 56 (22.95%) 107 (43.85%)	244	.86

Table 4 Attitudes toward corruption

Positive Attitudes	**Negative Attitudes**
Avoiding bureaucracy	Nepotism
Strengthening relations	Depression and Anxiety
Solving problems	Bad reputation

Positive Attitudes

Avoiding bureaucracy. *Wasta* has been described as a natural behavior used daily to get things done in Arab societies through avoiding barriers that face people because they do not fulfil the requirements represented by criteria, standards, and rules. It is worth noting that although *wasta* is very common sense in Arab societies, there are some people who are very sensitive to this phenomenon. This can be evident when someone is given something but does not deserve it, as the following quote describes:

> *Wasta* is a very well-known name in our culture and organization [...] it is not acceptable to say that someone is employed by *wasta*, or is supported more than others if that person does not have the required qualifications to be employed [...] people will look at that person contemptuously.

One participant gave a clear picture on the bureaucracy of public sports organizations and non-profit sports organizations managed or supported by governments. The final decision for any external training camps must be agreed and signed by the president of the General Sports Federation. These procedures have also negative implications for sports development and achievements, given the bureaucracy, as the following quote illustrates:

> Immigration authorities in the airport often ask for more details on some athletes […] if we have athletes in military service they cannot leave the country at any time, but if they are travelling with the national team, the General Sports Federation can sponsor them…

A good example from another participant supported what the previous participant said on the need of *wasta* to save time and avoid all forms of bureaucracy that affect sports organizations. He stated the following:

> Similarity of names between one of our athletes with a person wanted by the police affected the athlete […] that athlete was taken for questioning in the airport [...] the president of our governing body was abroad unexpectedly […] I used my personal relations with the executive members of the General Sports Federation to help solve the problem.

Strengthen relations. Although *wasta* is viewed unpleasantly in some public sector companies supported and managed by Arab governments, it is perceived as a useful tool for people who are able to use it. Specifically, to say that *wasta* has occurred, there are two sides: the person who asks for something and the second who facilitates or achieves that thing. However, some people may not be able to use *wasta*, given their lack of relationships. One participant said, "I do not like *wasta*, but sometimes I must use it to get something that is mine, the only way to get it is by using your network". There is a confirmation that *wasta* is rooted in every part of the daily life of Arabs at all levels inside and outside sports organizations, where there is no way to prevent *wasta*, no matter how many methods and ways sports organizations implement fighting this phenomenon, as the following quote illustrates:

> *Wasta* is not a temporary status, which floats on the surface due to some unusual circumstances such as life difficulties [...] it has its roots in the religion [Islam] that calls

> us to help others, strengthen our family and neighbourhood ties […] it is impossible to prevent it.

Another participant went further and described how *wasta* is not only used in Arabic countries, but also in some Asian countries. The term *wasta* is not used in Asia, but some Asian countries use similar terms, which have the same function as *wasta*. For example, one participant talked about Asian Federation of Boxing elections. He stated the following:

> Before any election of Asian governing bodies, candidates begin their external communication with the national federations of all Asian countries to take their voice […] I will be upfront with you, this helped some candidates in the last two decades building strong relationships with other members in Asia […] Some of them have currently active roles in international governing bodies, the International Olympic Committee, the Asian Olympic Committee, and others.

Solving problems. *Wasta* was perceived as an essential element that can enable people to get things done. In some situations, it helps board members of sports organizations to save time and save money. It is noted that when *wasta* is used to solve a particular problem, trust is an essential, as the following quote illustrates:

> Athletes often ask to take a break from university exams while we are in an internal training camp […] the permission should be a formal letter given only by the president of our organization [...] sometimes we give them a permission without these formal letters, but they must come back after their exams to the camp, we use trust with them.

Another participant stated the following:

> The only thing that helps me get what we want is through *wasta* [...] it does not matter whether the thing I want is legal or illegal, right or not, difficult or easy.

One participant described the role of *wasta* in solving problems and used the following example,

> We had a proper problem a few years ago with one of our athletes in the 15th Asian Games, in Doha [...] one of my friends in the organizing committee helped us solve this problem because he is Arabic.

Negative Attitudes

Nepotism. More interestingly, it was noted that the culture of Arabic sports organizations is against this phenomenon because they perceive it as one form of leadership corruption if it is used by leaders. But *wasta* is still seen as an unwritten rule in Arabic sports organizations, as the following example illustrates:

> Academic athletes and powerful people who want to be nominated for membership of the National Olympic Committee are not equally treated [...] if you have a link with the Royal Court of the state or one of the powerful princes, all other candidates will withdraw their nomination [...] they will justify their withdrawal that they are not efficient people.

The presidents of national governing bodies in all sports are not all elected by the members of these governing bodies. It was found that the relationship with the government officials can give more opportunities to some candidates than others. More importantly, it is noted that the problem is that these roles often rotated through specific people. One participant stated:

> I am currently a board member [...] I have no opportunity to be the president of this organization [...] I have academic degrees in sport, and I have [trained] national champions many times, because I do not have *wasta* […] the same people have been rotating through the top management of this organization since I have been an athlete.

Additionally, it is found that some sport leadership positions are monopolized by powerful people who have an external relationship with the government. This affected others who may

also contribute to sports organizations through their strong achievement record, experience, and academic qualifications. One participant stated the following:

> Many people have master degrees and doctoral degrees in sport, some of them and others have a long history in sports achievements at the national and international levels [...] unfortunately, they are still ignored by those who are at the top level.

Depression and anxiety. The data revealed that selecting inexperienced individuals for leadership roles in sports organizations not only has negative consequences for the performance of these organizations, but also the psychological state of the neglected individuals who have experience, high-academic qualifications, and sports achievements. Specifically, the state of depression was evident when some people are selected to represent the national teams to the Olympic Games. One participant stated the following:

> I have had bad feelings due to unequal opportunities [...]. For example, I have been a board member of this organization in the periods 1990 to 1994, 1998 to 2002, and 2014 to 2018 […] since the 1990s, I have never been on external leadership training courses or international conferences like some members [...] this is monopolized by powerful people.

Another participant supported what the previous participant stated, stating that:

> Unequal opportunities between members, coaches, and athletes is very common in our management […] this makes me feel disgusted.

Similarly, the anger and frustration were apparent even after the neglected people tried to hide their broken hearts due to unequal opportunities, as the following quote illustrates:

> All opportunities are mostly given to specific people […] I always say: never mind, never mind, we are all working for the first team and this country [...] Frankly, I tried to hide

> my feelings at home with my family, but I could not. I was always depressed from these acts [...] I got used to it.

One participant gave more details on the effect of *wasta* on his psychological and physical status. He stated:

> […] they told me I should take full responsibility for the disappointing results after the Rio Olympic Games […] we did not have enough support to make better results […] I always have health problems such as fast and irregular heartbeat, dizziness, feelings of guilt from anything, bad mood, and loss of appetite prior to any championship.

Bad reputation. Although *wasta* is widely used in Arab societies and most sports organizations, it is perceived by non-Arab people as an illegal practice. It is found that the term *wasta* in sports organizations has negative impacts on the credibility of sports organizations in the Middle East, as the following quote illustrates:

> A friend of mine was removed from [a board] membership due to political and illegal issues […] he is still receiving his monthly salary with some rewards from FIFA even after he was removed from the board membership […]

Another participant was clear about the negative consequences of *wasta* when he said: "Most of the international governing bodies do not trust us." This gives a good idea of the gap between national and international sports organizations. The major reason for this gap is the political interference in sport. More specifically, sport events in the last seven decades have shown that sport has been always politicized at the international level. This also appears to be evident at the national level, as the following quotes illustrate:

> […] some politicians protect their football teams and do not allow dropping them to the first level by the use of bribes […]

> The International Olympic Committee and many other international sports federations appointed trusted persons to investigate the state of our sports after a number of corruption cases [...] especially, regarding the election of the board members of our sports federations and the increasing scope of corruption in the national leagues.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to explore and understand the impact of informal cultural forces on leadership corruption in sports organizations in the Middle East. Individuals in leadership roles from many NOCs and NGBs were interviewed about their perceptions of culture and leadership corruption. The findings highlight two major attitudes: positive attitudes (avoiding bureaucracy, strengthening relations, solving problems) and negative attitudes (nepotism, depression and anxiety, bad reputation).

The results of the present study support a previous theoretical work (Hutchings and Weir 2006) that proposes that people in the Middle East "generally speak of *wasta* in negative terms and think largely of its corrupt side, negating the traditionally positive role it has played in mediation" (p. 147). This would help illustrate why *wasta* affects those who legitimately seek to work within the confines of laws in the Arab world (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993).

In addition, the results of the present study support previous research by Megheirkouni (2016a) who stated that "managers appointed via *wasta* demonstrated high-level egoism by blocking leadership knowledge to other managers at lower levels to ensure their monopoly of management positions" (p. 1246). Several studies have revealed that nepotism, as another face of *wasta*, is correlated with job stress and dissatisfaction (Arasli and Tumer 2008), negative word of mouth (Arasli *et al.* 2006), heavily skews the distribution of wealth and status, leading to the formation of opposing coalitions and exacerbating social unrest (Kuznar and Frederick 2007), and is typically destructive of a competitive performance (Sidani and Thornberry 2013).

This would have consequences in the long term, such as the bad reputation of many sport organizations and depression and anxiety in their people. Others argue that *wasta* also has positive impacts. For example, Megheirkouni (2016a) indicated that *wasta* has positive impacts on facilitating management functions and leadership roles in organizations. El-Said and Harrigan (2009) claim that *wasta* helps increase social solidarity in communities. Additionally, traditional research on *wasta* suggests that this phenomenon is rooted in interpersonal relationships within Arab societies (Brewer and Gardner 1996, Hutchings and Weir 2006). This is supported by the present study that confirmed that *wasta* can strengthen relations between people inside and outside of sports organizations. *Wasta* is used for economic aims and reducing bureaucracy (Loewe *et al.* 2008).

Corruption, acting as one of the sensitive issues for any sport organization, is being fought through a set of crucial decisions, policies, and laws around the world. According to the results, it was found that culture has a strong relationship with leadership corruption in a sports setting in the Middle East. Recruitment and selection in any organization, including sports organizations in the Arab world, are highly subjective, depending on personal contacts, nepotism, regionalism, and family name. More importantly, it is not unusual to employ personal relations within government departments to get things done. Particularly, sports managers in the Arab world often show a higher commitment to family and friends, rather than organizational goals and performance (e.g., Hutchings and Weir 2006, Megheirkouni 2014). This suggests that this informal cultural force has its roots in the way that people live, grow, or learn. Although publics perceive this phenomenon as a negative behavior, the personal benefit is still dominant for certain individuals in sports organizations in the Middle East, though exceeding policy and laws intentionally or unintentionally to accomplish their personal benefits.

The results of the present study suggest that informal cultural forces around the world can be discussed from two perspectives: positive impacts and negative impacts. In other words, this is widely affected by how people perceive the informal cultural forces. In this sense, also, the results of the present study are consistent with those of previous studies on the positive and negative impacts of informal cultural forces (e.g., Hutchings and Weir 2006, Smith *et al.* 2012a, 2012b). However, the level of leadership corruption may differ in the form of the informal cultural forces influenced by the strict implementation of laws and rules, and the level of accountability. That implies that the term 'leadership corruption' tends to be somewhat heavy on the ears of the people who show opposition to this phenomenon, regardless of their culture. However, most of those people ignore their moral values, otherwise driving them to reject this phenomenon, when it comes to their own personal benefit.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The literature review and empirical findings of the present study provide several interesting insights. It can be stated that the current study is the first study that has investigated the impact of informal cultural forces on leadership corruption in the non-profit sport sector, using evidence from the Arab Middle East. The first theoretical contribution lies in drawing on cultural literature to help explain how leadership corruption occurs in sports organizations and the role of informal cultural forces.

Although cultural theorists (e.g., Hofstede 2001) and institutional theorists (e.g., Scott 1995) addressed the impact of culture and institutions on organizations, there were clearly disagreements on the form of influence. According to the results of the current study, we argue that cultural and institutional factors are inextricably linked in the Arab world, and the system of sports organizations is an amalgamation of culture and institutions.

Additionally, the present study expands the scope of empirical research by exploring and understanding the impact of informal cultural force on leadership corruption. Successful

approaches for fighting leadership corruption are widely affected by societal culture (Husted 1999). The study empirically proves that there is a relationship between *wasta* (informal cultural force) and leadership corruption in sports organizations in the Arab Middle East. The results would help governments that seek seriously to reform leadership and management in all sport sectors, to pay more attention to the impact of culture on leadership corruption. Further, management reforms usually include provisions and incentives for leaders and managers to have the required skills, such as regular learning and development courses that enable them to complete the roles and functions entrusted to them effectively.

Consequently, human resource development consultants, experts, and designers need to combine cultural factors and leadership development practices in sports organizations in the Arab Middle East. Importantly, governments also need to run educational courses that focus on the difference between positive and negative facets of *wasta*, and how it contributes to leadership corruption in sports organizations so as to reduce its negative impacts on society in general and sports organizations in particular.

Limitations

Despite the insights gained from this study, it is not without some limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The qualitative approach design limits the generalizability of the findings. An interesting avenue for future research is to explore the findings of this study in a larger population in other sport sectors: for-profit, non-profit, and state sectors in the Arab Middle East. Another limitation is that the current study considered only one informal cultural force (*wasta*), which is widely used in the Arab Middle East. The current study did not consider the impacts of other informal cultural forces such as *guanxi*, *svyazi/blat*, *jeitinho* or *pulling strings* on leadership corruption in sports organizations in other clusters, such as Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Therefore, future studies need to compare these informal cultural forces in terms of their impact on leadership corruption in sports organizations.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that *wasta*, as one of the informal cultural forces, can be seen from positive and negative perspectives. The literature review shows that there is no research exploring the impacts of informal cultural forces on leadership corruption in sports organizations (Megheirkouni 2014, 2017a). Importantly, the results of the current study reveal that *wasta* is considered as a positive force when it is used as a means to solve problems or avoid bureaucracy, and thus get things done, whereas it is perceived as a negative force when it is used as 'corrupt behavior'. The results of the current study suggest that although being a seemingly unlikely choice, one of the effective methods for fighting leadership corruption in sports organization in the Arab Middle East could be the use of *wasta*.

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