

The Surprisingly Low Effect of National Culture on E-Government Adoption: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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The Surprisingly Low Effect of National Culture on E-Government Adoption: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Governments worldwide are looking for ways to encourage the citizen uptake of online public services. Although some countries are doing better than the others, the vast majority of governments face adoption problems with their electronic services. Other than supply-side barriers, some nations show strong public resistance to government offerings. Drawing on cross-cultural research in IS adoption and diffusion, we posit that differences among adoption behaviors of nations may be attributed to cultural differences. Indeed, national culture shapes the core values and beliefs of individuals, which in turn influence attitudes and behaviors. As being an emerging field of IS, cross-cultural issues in e-government have not received much empirical attention to date. By using nationwide representative samples, we compared two European nations with different cultural profiles and e-government take-up levels. Surprisingly, the results indicate that Germany and Sweden do not differ substantially in their perceptions of enablers and barriers to e-government adoption.

Keywords

E-Government, Adoption, Cross-cultural study, National culture, Household, Sweden, Germany

INTRODUCTION

E-government is considered as the key facilitator for modernization in public administrations (Becker, Niehaves, Bergener and Räckers, 2008). Nowadays, an increasing number of governments around the globe use the Internet as a medium of communication and transaction with citizens. The success of online public services, however, depends largely on how well the citizens make use of them (Kumar, Mukerji, Butt and Persaud, 2007). Even though e-government has been recognized as a catalyst for better service delivery, its successful acceptance and adoption by citizens remains a challenge.

Every country adopt at a different pace, which may be influenced by various factors such as supply-side determinants or the available technological infrastructure. Different national characteristics and historical experiences make it even more difficult to predict the adoption behaviors of nations. Each culture's collective programming results in different cultural norms, which directly influence the decision mechanisms of individuals (Doney, Cannon and Mullen, 1998). It is not uncommon to see that some nations show a strong resistance towards online initiatives of government (Meckel, Hoffmann and von Kaenel, 2011; Teletrust, 2010), whereas some others are willing to disclose sensitive data for the sake of more convenience (gemalto, 2010).

A detailed analysis of e-government literature reveals that most of the models, schema and concepts are derived from IS literature (Heeks and Bailur, 2007). However, knowledge transfer from one domain to another could only be justified by empirical evidence about its validity in the new domain. While being similar to e-commerce, e-government has some unique characteristics which need to be taken into account (Belanger and Carter, 2004; Dwivedi, Weerakkody and Janssen, 2011). The essential need of including national culture in diffusion research was an important learning of IS research (Srite and Karahanna, 2006; Sundqvist, Frank and Puumalainen, 2005; Zhang and Maruping, 2008). Drawing upon mature literature on IS adoption, we propose that cultural differences among the nations may be one of the main causes for the different usage and

adoption patterns of e-government. Even though there has been some initial efforts to study the influence of national culture in e-government adoption (Ali, Weerakkody and El-Haddede, 2009; Carter and Weerakkody, 2008; Kovacic, 2005), studies comparing adoption across cultures remain relatively rare.

We seek to examine the role of culture in explaining differences in adoption of e-government by comparing two nations having similar IS infrastructures but with markedly different e-government take-up levels and cultural profiles. In Germany, even the endeavors using utmost technologies often fail due to lack of citizen acceptance, while Sweden has reached to a level of service excellence and become a role model for e-government (Capgemini, 2009, 2011; United Nations, 2008, 2010). According to the most influential culture theory of social science (Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001), two nations differ in their perceptions of risk aversion substantially (Hofstede, 1980). It is measured with uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) in Hofstede's cultural model (1980), which has been identified as the most influential national culture value affecting the adoption of IS (de Luque and Javidan, 2004; Straub, Keil and Brenner, 1997). Germany is among higher uncertainty avoidance nations of Europe, whereas Sweden has one of the lowest uncertainty avoidance indices (Hofstede, 1980).

This paper addresses the following research questions: How do the enablers and barriers of e-government adoption differ between Germany and Sweden? How different are the data protection and privacy concerns of Germany and Sweden in the context of e-government adoption? The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section two, we provide a brief review of e-government development in the selected countries. Section three describes our research methodology. After presenting the findings of the study in section four, we discuss the implications of our study, limitations and suggestions for future research in the next section. The paper concludes by summarizing the key findings of our research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a brief overview of the past and present state of e-government development in the selected nations.

E-Government in Germany

Germany is the fifth largest economy in terms of total GDP in the world (Euromonitor International, 2010). It is one of the top five countries in terms of the quality of its infrastructure (United Nations, 2010; World Economic Forum, 2011). The Government in Germany (Federal Government) provides full support and dedication to enable Germany becoming one of the top players of e-government in Europe, similar to other fields. The widespread adoption of e-government services has been part of the national strategy since the beginning of the previous decade (Die Bundesregierung, 2005). The first-generation e-government initiatives 'BundOnline 2005' and 'MEDIA@Komm' have not achieved tapping the potential of e-government in Germany. The 'E-Government 2.0' initiative was introduced in 2006, however has fallen well short of its objective of "enabling Germany to become one of the e-government leaders of Europe" (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2009). Being one of the largest IT projects in Europe, the Electronic Health Insurance Card Project was planned to be introduced in 2006, however it was delayed several times due to serious acceptance problems. The Electronic Wage Verification System Project was introduced in 2009, but due to severe criticism, the German government decided to stop the project until 2014. One of the most promising projects of the Federal Government was the New Identity Cards Project. However, 85 % of the citizens are not interested in renewing their current identity cards with the new ID cards until their expiration (Teletrust, 2010).

One thing was clear in all these initiatives: lack of acceptance by citizens. Indeed, citizens hold the Government accountable and demand better service: 42 % of the citizens think that the Federal Government is bad or very bad at delivering a better quality of life (Accenture, 2009). In fact, the Federal Government has invested heavily on increasing the sophistication of its services. Consequently, Germany become *one of the top performers* in terms of full online availability and sophistication of services (Capgemini, 2011). However, the resistance of citizens towards nationwide adoption of e-government services persists. The Government is aware (PUBLICUS, 2010) and quite frustrated about this ongoing resistance in the public. In order to foster the acceptance online tax initiative – which is the most advanced e-government service in Germany – it has even initiated a lottery to win a brand-new sports car and expensive hotel vouchers (Bayerisches Staatsministerium der Finanzen, 2011).

Germany is a frequent user of other online technologies and online social networks. There are more than twenty million active users of Facebook in Germany (computerbase.de, 2011). The household Internet penetration is 75 % in the whole population (TNS Infratest, 2011). About 80 % of them use Internet banking (TNS Infratest, 2011), 81 % of them shop online (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011) while only 40 % of them use the Internet to communicate with the public administrations (Krcmar, Wolf, Wolf and Dirtheuer, 2011b).

E-Government in Sweden

Besides its well-known global leadership in mobile innovations, Sweden enjoys leading positions in various e-government rankings (Capgemini, 2011; United Nations, 2008, 2010). The project “The 24/7 Agency” has been a Swedish vision of a public administration providing online services round the clock, seven days a week (Regeringskansliet, 2011b). The high determination of the Government has enabled the public-oriented strategy vision to become a reality. According to the Swedish constitution, public agencies and authorities enjoy large autonomy. But to be public-oriented, this model had to be adapted and evolved, which meant the change of the governmental practices that was laid down almost three hundred years ago (CAIMED, 2003).

The tax return service in Sweden is one of the most advanced e-government services of the world. The groundwork for this service was laid several years ago by collecting information about everyone’s income, tax payments, assets possessed, bank statements and other necessary information by the tax authority (gemalto, 2010). Since then, citizens only report their national identity numbers via telephone, by mobile short message service or simply by ticking a box on the tax authority’s website. The flexibility provided to the population is enormous. However, it is even more astonishing to see that the Swedish Government knows every move of its citizens to the extent that it does not need any additional information other than the national identity number to complete the tax declaration process.

The Swedish Government has long concentrated its efforts on simplifying administration for its population. The main objective of the E-government Action Plan was “to make it as simple as possible” for people to access public administrative services and to achieve flexible e-government that is based on users’ needs (Regeringskansliet, 2011a). It was one of the first countries to introduce mobile signatures, which provided considerable convenience for completing public services (gemalto, 2010). The foreigners living in Sweden can access to information in several languages. For instance, the web-portal of the Swedish Tax Agency Skattverket provides information in twenty-one foreign languages in order to reach to residents who might otherwise experience language difficulties (Skatteverket, 2012).

Achieving excellence and constantly improving up on it requires a lot of effort. The recently presented IT strategy reflects that the Swedish Government focuses further on simplifying people’s lives and maintaining high standards of excellence in a changing environment (Regeringskansliet, 2011a).

METHODOLOGY

In our research, we used a repeated cross-sectional study of e-government adoption in two consecutive years. The first study was conducted in 2010 only in Germany (TNS Infratest, 2010). As one time cross-sectional designs provide only a ‘snapshot’ at a given point of time, it was repeated in the following year to validate the findings. In addition, the scope of the second study was extended to compare adoption of e-government across the selected European nations.

The online survey was conducted in August 2011 by using representative samples. The final samples included each 1,000 Internet users in private households. The data is weighted to be representative of the online population by central features of gender, age and formal education. The survey included other questions such as the satisfaction with e-government offerings, open government and the future potential usage of mobile government. Overall, the study confirmed that the two nations differ considerably in their e-government adoption rates: 40 % in Germany vs. 69 % in Sweden (Krcmar et al., 2011b).

Three specific questions of the study will be analyzed in this paper. Figure 1 presents the results of the first question, whereas Table 1 and Table 2 correspond to the second and third questions respectively. While a strong theoretical framework is not required for descriptive research (Punch, 2005), the questions were derived from prior literature (Davis, 1993; Ebrahim and Irani, 2005; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Gilbert, Balestrini and Littleboy, 2004; Schaupp and Carter, 2005). Concerns regarding data protection and privacy in the third question have been designed based on the discussions in the German mass media regarding resistance of the public towards e-government initiatives. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Germany was abbreviated with GER and Sweden with SWE respectively. The findings are presented in the next section.

FINDINGS

The first question examined the factors influencing use of e-government services, which were measured on a five-point Likert-scale. The most highly ranked factors are presented in Figure 1, which reveals that the differences were *statistically* significant, yet subtle. A closer look at the analysis shows that all factors – except convenience – were perceived as being

significantly more important by the German sample (Krcmar et al., 2011b). The top three enablers were, though, the same for both samples: data protection and privacy, security and reliability.

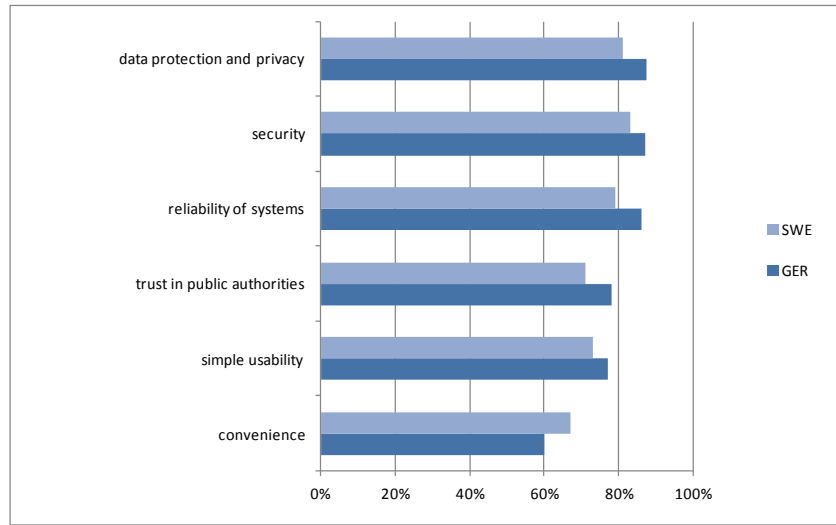


Figure 1. Comparison of enablers to adoption of e-government services (a selection based on (Krcmar et al., 2011b))

In the second question, the barriers impeding use of e-government services were investigated by using a four-point Likert-scale. It is important to note that the value one in the scale corresponded to 'strongly agree' in this question, therefore the lower mean values implied higher level of agreement. Similar to the previous question, the results did not differ immensely between the German and Swedish samples. Even though the differences were statistically significant as summarized in Table 1, they were not substantial. The independent samples t-test revealed three differences: lack of data protection and privacy, lack of integration and lack of customizability. The former two barriers were perceived as being more important by the German sample and the latter by the Swedish sample.

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Mean	t	degrees of freedom	sig. (p)	Difference
lack of data protection and privacy	GER	1000	2.281	0.921	0.029	-3.807	1998	0.000	Yes
	SWE	1000	2.438	0.927	0.029				
lack of integration	GER	1000	2.236	0.841	0.027	-2.333	1998	0.020	Yes
	SWE	1000	2.324	0.828	0.026				
lack of customizability	GER	1000	3.022	0.970	0.031	4.786	1968	0.000	Yes
	SWE	1000	2.826	0.859	0.027				
complexity of services	GER	1000	2.571	0.890	0.028	1.779	1998	0.075	No
	SWE	1000	2.500	0.883	0.028				
lack of trust in public authorities	GER	1000	2.613	0.935	0.030	-1.463	1996	0.144	No
	SWE	1000	2.673	0.911	0.029				
lack of help	GER	1000	2.440	0.868	0.027	-0.348	1991	0.728	No
	SWE	1000	2.453	0.819	0.026				
unclear structure	GER	1000	2.379	0.859	0.027	-0.848	1998	0.397	No
	SWE	1000	2.411	0.852	0.027				

Table 1. Comparison of barriers to adoption of e-government services (based on (Krcmar et al., 2011b))

The item lack of data protection and privacy in the second question did not distinguish between the technical security and privacy. Thus, the third question was developed to deepen our understanding of the specific concerns of citizens behind this barrier. It was only asked to the respondents, who had specified this item as a barrier in the previous question. Citizens may have both security and privacy related concerns, therefore it was designed as a multiple-response item.

In Sweden, about one in every three respondents (n=383) were asked this question, whereas in Germany, roughly one out of every two (n=520) was subject to it. This alone indicates that the concerns of data protection and privacy were higher for the German sample. As illustrated in Table 2, respondents in Germany were slightly more concerned in terms of data protection and privacy.

			Country of Analysis		Total
			GER	SWE	
inadequate security of transferred data	no	Count	135	136	271
		%	49.82%	50.18%	100%
	yes	Count	385	247	632
		%	60.92%	39.08%	100%
confidential handling of sensitive data	no	Count	223	227	450
		%	49.56%	50.44%	100%
	yes	Count	297	156	453
		%	65.56%	34.44%	100%
fear of central storage of personal data	no	Count	215	249	464
		%	46.34%	53.66%	100%
	yes	Count	305	134	439
		%	69.48%	30.52%	100%
fear of data theft	no	Count	202	206	408
		%	49.51%	50.49%	100%
	yes	Count	318	177	495
		%	64.24%	35.76%	100%

Table 2. Comparison of data protection and privacy concerns inhibiting e-government adoption (based on (Krcmar et al., 2011b))

To test the existence of statistically significant differences between the two samples, Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted. The differences were for all items statistically significant: $\chi^2(1) = 9.572$, $p = 0.002$; $\chi^2(1) = 23.683$, $p = 0.000$; $\chi^2(1) = 49.453$, $p = 0.000$ and $\chi^2(1) = 19.875$, $p = 0.000$ respectively.

DISCUSSION

Prior literature in similar contexts has already recognized the existence of cultural differences in adoption of new technologies. Without considerable amount of empirical evidence, however, it would be misleading to accept the validity of this premise in e-government. In contrast to our expectations, this study did not provide notable empirical evidence on the existence of cultural differences between Germany and Sweden.

Even though some subtle differences between the two nations were observable, most of them remained barely significant. The first two questions did not reveal obvious differences in terms of the enablers and barriers perceived by the two nations. In the first question, the factors related to data protection, privacy and security were rated as top priority by both samples. In the second question, the German sample perceived lack of integration as a more important barrier than Sweden, which is likely to be an indication of the relatively lower maturity of e-government services in Germany. The Swedish sample valued convenience and customizability slightly more, whereas data protection and privacy related factors were perceived as being more important by the German sample.

Although clear differences among the selected nations regarding e-government adoption were not reflected in our study, we firmly believe that Governments should offer services considering the cultural characteristics of their nations. Until now, several e-government initiatives were heavily protested, delayed or rejected in Germany due to their involvement of sensitive personal data (Akkaya, Wolf and Krcmar, 2012). Previous studies have also underlined the strong and persistent concerns of the German public regarding data protection and privacy (Accenture, 2006; TNS Infratest, 2010). In Sweden, on the other hand, the citizens do not hesitate to deliver all their personal data for the sake of convenience. While the considerably different UAI of the two nations (Hofstede, 1980) may be a possible explanation to this mentality difference, more research is necessary to explore the motives underlying the willingness or hesitation of citizens to provide personal information to their Governments.

One important point is worth mentioning. The German nation is a frequent user of online social networks. One may argue that the willingness of the German nation to disclose private information to others through online social networks contradicts with the elevated privacy concerns in the society. We have reasons to doubt it. A recent study on Facebook showed that Germans present less personal information about themselves and are more worried about privacy issues compared to lower UAI nations (Krcmar, Krcmar and Krcmar, 2011a). Moreover, willingness of an individual to disclose personal information in one context does not imply his/her consent to share personal information in another. Rather, the privacy expectations of citizens should be appraised for each specific context separately. One may value privacy less in online social networks context – or may not be even aware about the massive amount of self-disclosure due to other benefits – but expect a high privacy level in other contexts such as online shopping or e-government (Meckel et al., 2011). Recent empirical research shows that privacy concerns do not have a significant negative effect on intention to use of online social networks (Jung, McKnight, Jung and Lankton, 2011; von Stetten, Wild and Chrennikow, 2011), while being one of the highest concerns in online banking (TNS Infratest, 2011) and e-government (Krcmar et al., 2011b). This may be explained by the differences of motivations and received benefits in using different online platforms. People use online social platforms mainly for hedonic and social benefits. Indeed, Krasnova et al. (2010) found recently that users are primarily motivated to disclose information because of the convenience of maintaining/developing relationships and platform enjoyment. Thus, their privacy concerns may not inhibit them to expose personal information in online social platforms. Online banking, online shopping and e-government services are probably used only for functional benefits. Therefore, we argue that the privacy as a barrier to use of these systems is not comparable with each other.

Privacy in the context of e-government is closely related to trust in government (Belanger and Carter, 2008). If citizens perceive public authorities as ‘data collectors’ e-government initiatives can hardly succeed. It is known that individuals of higher uncertainty avoidance cultures are likely to be more risk averse, therefore need higher levels of trust for e-government adoption (Kumar et al., 2007). The findings our study confirm this argument as well. Hence, we believe restoring trust of citizens and encouraging them to use e-government services despite the threats of privacy will likely to be the critical challenges of the Federal Government in the next five years.

Future initiatives in Sweden should ensure data protection, privacy, security and reliability of systems. Compared to Germany, convenience and customizability were perceived as being significantly more important. With its recently announced strategy of ‘to create world’s simplest administration’, the Swedish Government seems to be aware of the determinants of e-government in Sweden and working on them. However, this can be a double-edged sword. Convenience is argued to be the greatest threat to security and may result in higher vulnerability to serious sources of online danger (Caloyannides, 2004). Therefore, we suggest Swedish Government to understand the citizens’ level of willingness to compromise both security and privacy for convenience.

We are aware that our research has three limitations. First, due to the use of online surveys, only households having a PC and Internet access were considered. Second, the respondents were only able to select from the provided list of enablers and barriers in the survey. However, nationwide representative samples would not be possible otherwise. We suggest future research to extend data collection methods with focus group interviews, in order to understand the remaining enablers and barriers of e-government adoption in these nations. Future research should also deepen our understanding of trust in government as well as derive concrete strategies on building trust of citizens in government (Akkaya, Wolf and Krcmar, 2010). Third, due to our specific focus of national culture, we considered only native-born citizens. It would be an interesting area for future research to investigate how do success factors of e-government differ between the native-born citizens and the residents with immigration backgrounds. Finally, we suggest future research to replicate this study with other cultural samples as well as other dimensions of national culture (e.g. power distance) to explore the possible influence of national culture on e-government adoption.

CONCLUSION

Motivated by the ongoing adoption problems in Germany and the research suggesting that espoused national cultural values influence the adoption of online technologies significantly, we conducted an online survey to observe the influence of national culture in e-government adoption. Surprisingly, the empirical results did not reflect noteworthy differences between the two nations.

National culture is known to shape the values, norms and behaviors of individuals. Although the empirical results of this study did not reveal strong support, national culture may have an influence on e-government adoption. A very successful initiative of one nation could be harshly rejected in another. Some nations expect convenience and are willing to transfer sensitive data; whereas some others perceive such initiatives as 'another Big-Brother Initiative' of their government. Hence, we believe that Governments worldwide should design and deliver their e-government services after a very careful examination of their national cultures. Best-practice services of other countries should only be applied, if they are consistent with the beliefs and values of the national culture.

In light of the findings of our research, Sweden might want to concentrate its efforts on understanding the level of willingness in the nation to compromise both security and privacy for convenience. Besides ensuring high technological security, Germany should focus on protecting the privacy of citizens as well as the strategies for fostering trust of citizens in government. Citizens need to be assured that e-government services are offered to provide benefits rather than monitoring the society. We suggest the German Government to investigate the reasons behind its middle rankings of European e-government benchmarks by conducting large-scale empirical studies. Otherwise, Federal Government may be obligated to rely on lotteries and other short-term tactics for increasing short-time e-government usage, which may, in turn, result in long-term credibility loss in the public mind.

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