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Research paper



The Cultural Enablers and Barriers of AI Adoption In Strategic Marketing Decision-Making: From Resistance to Transformation

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Abstract

Purpose: This research examines how cultural factors act as both enablers and barriers in the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) for strategic marketing decision-making, shaping the journey from organizational resistance to transformative integration.
Method/approach: Drawing from secondary qualitative data and thematic approach to analysis, the study verifies how organizational culture characteristics such as innovation, risk-openness, collaboration, and flexibility align with an organization's preparedness for change in determining adoption outcomes.
Results: The research demonstrates that enablers of culture promote the uptake, but the blockers are driven by hierarchical working cultures, the needs of the labour market, and low technical capability. Change readiness has emerged as a key driver to bridge this gap by converting cultural advantage into adoption. The discourse is within Schein's Organizational Culture Theory and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation, both of which combined provide the frame of reference required in examining the Saudi case. Other larger projects like those undertaken by SDAIA and HUMAIN under Vision 2030 suggest the context within which such processes occur.
Conclusions: This research contributes to the literature by taking the use of culture and readiness models for AI adoption further into the Middle Eastern setting and offering practical insights for marketing managers to roll out AI more organically.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Organizational Culture; Change Readiness; Strategic Marketing; Saudi Arabia; Innovation Adoption; Thematic Analysis; Vision 2030.*

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly dominating contemporary marketing through enabling personalized communication, predictive analysis, automation, and data-driven decision-making (Davenport et al., 2020). Even though organizations across the globe are embracing AI in order to remain competitive, studies show that success hinges less on the mere presence of sophisticated technologies and more on whether companies possess the cultural and organizational sophistication to employ them and maintain their use.
In Saudi Arabia, AI adoption is at the heart of Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy and shift away from an oil-based economy, while encouraging a digital, knowledge-based society (Hussein, 2025). The Saudi Data and AI Authority (SDAIA), established in 2019, is leading the policy development, regulation setting, and investment in infrastructure and talent. In addition to this, country-level initiatives like Project Transcendence and HUMAIN place emphasis on the government's drive to infuse AI throughout industries, promote innovation, and drive digital transformation. These projects offer both the institutional support and the wider impetus that Saudi organizations are able to tap into when adopting AI in marketing and other strategic functions.
Introducing AI to strategic marketing, though, is not merely a technical process. Organizational culture heavily influences it, shaping how employees perceive, embrace, and utilize new technologies. Based on Schein's Organizational Culture Theory, common values, beliefs, and norms like innovation, risk-taking, collaboration, and flexibility play a primary role in conditioning an organization to embrace innovation (Schein, 2017). Firms that encourage experimentation and tolerate calculated risks are likely to experiment with AI tools and embed them effectively in marketing processes. Hierarchical or rigid cultures, however, can resist change, hampering adoption.
Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory builds on this by demonstrating that adoption is not only a function of the characteristics of the technology (e.g., relative advantage, complexity, trialability, observability) but also of the social system in which it exists (Rogers, 2003). While prior studies illustrate global AI adoption, this study uniquely situates adoption within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, emphasizing culture-readiness interactions not previously explored. Within Saudi organizations, cultural practices, leadership behaviour, and peer influence all contribute to how AI diffuses within marketing groups. Workers' perception of usefulness and ease of use of AI is strongly related to organisational culture, so both social and structural aspects should be taken into consideration when studying adoption.

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Evidence indicates that issues like resistance to change, lack of skills, and availability of resources remain obstacles to AI adoption in Saudi Arabia. A PwC Middle East (2024) poll discovered that 80% of Saudi businesses identify cultural and human resistance as significant digital transformation blockers. Likewise, an in-region Qlik survey (2024) revealed that although 95% of respondents regard AI as crucial, numerous projects are halted through poor governance, lack of training, and inadequate resource allocation. These findings highlight that, despite robust national strategies and infrastructure, success largely depends on culture and preparedness within organizations.

This emphasizes the role of change readiness, or the extent to which employees and organizations are prepared psychologically and operationally to implement new technology (Weiner, 2009). Change readiness enables supportive cultural values to be acted upon, minimizing resistance and accelerating adoption. Even within those organizations with a culture conducive to innovation, AI efforts can fail where employees are not trained, motivated, or confident to utilize the tools.

This research looks at the cultural factors that shape how artificial intelligence (AI) is used in strategic marketing within Saudi Arabia, with a focus on how readiness for change influences adoption. Using secondary qualitative sources and drawing on theories of organizational culture and innovation diffusion, the study tackles a gap in understanding AI use in rapidly developing, non-Western environments. The contribution is twofold: it extends theoretical perspectives to the Saudi context and, at the same time, offers practical direction for business leaders who want to align AI projects with the wider aims of Vision 2030.

1.1. Conceptual framework

This scholar uses Schein's Organizational Culture Theory to show how behavior within an organization is influenced by tacit assumptions lower in the hierarchy, espoused values, and organizational practices, and how these factors can affect the acceptance of new technologies (Schein, 2017). Traits such as innovative thinking, the willingness to take risks, collaboration, and tenacity strongly matter as deal breakers or makers to how the mindset toward AI is formed, whether as an opportunity or a threat.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory adds another view by demonstrating how adoption is shaped by the surrounding social and organizational environment. These include the informal social structures of communication, networked leadership, and the role of colleagues, all of which support the diffusion of an innovation (Rogers, 2003). Together with these two paradigms, it is then possible to understand how cultural dimensions and change readiness are interrelated, which is necessary to understand how AI is embedded in marketing decisions.

1.2. Variables

Independent variable: Organizational culture, as tested via four sub-dimensions:

- Innovativeness: Fostering creativity and experimentation in marketing practices.
- Risk tolerance: Willingness to employ new AI tools even when uncertain.
- Collaboration: Collaboration between marketing, IT, and analytics departments.
- Adaptability: Ability to shift roles, processes, and structures according to evolving AI technologies.

Mediating variable: Change readiness, capturing employees' and organizations' preparedness and willingness to effectively implement AI-supported marketing processes.

Dependent variable: AI adoption in strategic marketing decision-making, as the degree to which AI technologies (like predictive analytics, personalization, and automated customer interactions) are incorporated into strategy and implementation.

Hypotheses:

- H1: A supportive organizational culture has a positive impact on AI adoption in strategic marketing decision-making.
- H2: Change readiness mediates the link between organizational culture and AI adoption.

By analysing these elements in the context of Saudi Arabia, this study aims to provide actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners, showing how cultural alignment and readiness can drive AI-enabled marketing transformation in line with Vision 2030.

2. Methodes

2.1. Research design

The purpose of this study is to examine the organizational culture of Saudi Arabia and how it influences the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in strategic marketing. This study focuses on the change readiness as a mediator and utilizes a qualitative research design. This is because qualitative methods have the capacity to address the "why" and "how" of a phenomenon in great depth of detail, especially when the phenomenon is complex, as in the case of culture and its influences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). On the other hand, quantitative research is more likely to test the research hypotheses using a model that relies on statistical relationships to determine the value of various variables. Qualitative research focuses on the contextual background, themes, individual perceptions, and other narratives that often surround a phenomenon. Such dimensions especially aid in understanding culture, its attributes, and its readiness for change insofar as promoting or hindering AI adoption.

This research is built on an interpretivist perspective, which views organizational practices as being shaped by shared beliefs and social norms. From this angle, what matters most is how employees think about innovation, whether they are open to trying new tools, and how well they understand the expectations within their workplace. To explore these aspects, the study relies on secondary qualitative material, such as expert opinions and documented organizational practices. This helps create a wider understanding of how Saudi businesses are beginning to incorporate AI into their marketing work.

Using secondary data also adds depth and credibility to the study. By drawing on a variety of sources—academic articles, consultancy studies, and official reports—the research can cross-check insights and avoid the bias that might come from using just one type of dataset. This diverse evidence base (Flick, 2018; Johnston, 2017) makes the findings more reliable. It also ensures that ideas such as organizational culture and readiness are not treated as vague theories but are connected to real-world evidence, strengthening the case for the study's two hypotheses (H1 and H2).

2.2. Data collection

Information was collected from an extensive array of credible secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, consultancy reports of international firms (e.g., McKinsey, Deloitte, BCG), Saudi government authority publications (e.g., SDAIA), and reputable international media organizations (e.g., Reuters, Financial Times). Utilizing secondary data ensures efficiency, allows checking for large-scale patterns, and uses the expert insights that primary research might miss (Boslaugh, 2007; Johnston, 2017).
Inclusionary criteria were meticulously set:
1) 2015 to 2025 publications to reflect up-to-date AI adoption trends.
2) Direct connection to organizational culture, AI adoption, marketing, or change readiness.
3) Primary emphasis on Saudi Arabia or the Middle East, supporting global literature on a comparative basis.
4) Sources in peer-reviewed journals or credible organizations to maintain quality and credibility.
Exclusionary criteria were:
1) Opinion blogs, Wikipedia, or non-academic sources lacking verifiable authority.
2) Repetitive or derivative reports, preferably from sources.
This process identified 43 documents to include: 22 peer-reviewed publications, 13 consultancy reports, and 8 government or press releases. Collectively, this dataset offered a broad foundation for thematic analysis, allowing Saudi-specific insights to be compared to the global picture.

2.3. Data analysis strategy

Thematic analysis was applied to determine, interpret, and report data patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The adaptive but ordered approach helped the study to delineate the interaction of culture, AI adoption, and readiness. Analysis was conducted in the following steps:
1) Familiarization: Reading and re-reading all sources to find suitable content about organizational culture, AI adoption, and readiness.
2) Coding: Labeling codes with descriptive names like "risk tolerance," "collaboration," "employee readiness," "infrastructure gaps," and "leadership support."
3) Theme Development: Categorizing codes into higher-level themes, such as "cultural enablers," "cultural barriers," "readiness gaps," and "policy scaffolding."
4) Reviewing Themes: Comparing Saudi-specific and universal context patterns to evaluate similarities and differences.
5) Theory Integration: Explaining themes using Schein's organizational culture theory (2017), Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory (2003), and Weiner's readiness model (2009). The integration offered causal explanations for how cultural forces shape adoption.
This approach ensured that the analysis transcended description, providing an explanatory framework linking culture and readiness with AI adoption results.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Since the study relied solely on secondary data, no human subjects were engaged directly, thus eliminating risks associated with consent, privacy, or harm. Ethical discipline was ensured through the following actions:
- Authenticity of sources: Only official, consultancy, and peer-reviewed publications were used.
- Reference completeness: All the materials were referenced according to APA 7th edition guidelines.
- Balanced coverage: Both optimistic and pessimistic views concerning AI adoption were examined to avoid bias.
- Transparency: Each step of research was recorded systematically to facilitate reproduction and accountability (Johnston, 2017).

While formal ethics clearance wasn't required, the principles of transparency, intellectual honesty, and responsible reporting guaranteed the study's legitimacy.

2.5. Reliability and validity

Reliability was met by using uniform thematic analysis procedures throughout all 43 documents, with multiple readings to minimize misinterpretation. Validity was enhanced by triangulation, based on diverse types of data (scholarly, consultancy, and policy data) to cross-check findings (Flick, 2018). Triangulation of theory was also employed, utilizing three models: Schein (2017), Rogers (2003), and Weiner (2009) to clarify findings. These steps enhanced construct validity, with findings truly representing the interactions of culture, readiness, and AI adoption in Saudi Arabia.

2.6. Strengths of the methodology

The methodologies in this study have a number of positive aspects. The use of current documents provides for extensive coverage of Saudi-specific ways of adopting AI. The selection of numerous credible sources allows for triangulation, which adds to the reliability of this research. The systematic thematic analysis combined with theoretical integration (Schein, 2017; Rogers, 2003; Weiner, 2009) will add to the explanatory potential of these findings.

2.7. Limitations of the methodology

This methodology also has some negative aspects. First, the use of only current documents will limit the depth of insight to be gained by the study, as it is based on what has been previously written about AI, and does not include first-hand accounts from participants. Second, there is a possibility for selection bias in that only sources available in English, and that could be verified were included. This limits the study to excluding any meaningful local studies. Third, it is possible that there are new developments regarding AI that occurred after 2025, and thus would not be captured within the time frame of the study. Finally, the thematic analysis is an interpretative method, and as such, it is susceptible to the subjective judgments of the researchers, in that the way the researcher codes the material and identifies themes may be based on their own biases. While the use of secondary data may reduce the level of originality of the study, the synthesis of various Saudi-specific AI initiatives that have not previously been documented as being related to one another adds to the level of originality of the study.

3. Results

3.1. Cultural enablers of AI adoption in Saudi marketing

The analysis of secondary qualitative data exposes four essential cultural symptoms - inconsistency, risk tolerance, cooperation, and adaptability - it affects how Saudi companies embrace AI in their marketing strategies. These symptoms highlight that the culture of an organization not only affects the desire to adopt new techniques but also plays an important role in determining how AI can be effectively woven into its overall strategy.

Innovation: Companies promoting creativity and use are more open to integrating AI in their marketing efforts (Devanport et al, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, innovation is often associated with a national initiative like Vision 2030, where projects such as Project Transit have made the experiment a major component of policy (Memish et al., 2021). Aligning innovation with national objectives, employees use the experiment as both safe and beneficial, which reduces the alleged risks associated with AI adoption. It enables companies to effectively use devices such as real -time privatization, emotion analysis, trend forecasting, and lifelong price models, showing advantages.

Risk tolerance: Risk tolerance is a key factor when it comes to adopting AI into your practice. Companies that embrace ambiguity and can direct resources toward projects that are uncertain in short-term returns are favorably positioned to experiment with new uses of AI. As Cisco (2024) indicates, organizations that have a culture of experimentation are more likely to engage in AI projects and take a more positive view of potential setbacks in the process. Deloitte Middle East (2025) similarly focused on Saudi firms with high-risk tolerance, providing positive intended environments for experimentation and easing the original transition to new technologies. This comports with Rogers' (2003) idea of relative advantage: when firms believe that AI will identify applications that provide significant positives for the firm, they will be more likely to invest in pilot projects and develop it over time. For example, Saudi marketers employing AI-provided recommendation systems can experiment in real-time, and adapt as necessary hip, on failure or initial mistakes, without suffering harsh penalties. The real-time testing approach changes AI from a regressive task to something that is happening in practical time, allowing for future changes and eventual integration. The same culture that embraces risk also rallies people to think of potential new uses for AI (chatbots, predictive scheduling of campaigns, automated sentiment analysis, etc.), multiplying the obvious marketing uses of AI.

Cooperation: Cross-functional collaboration is a critical factor for leveraging AI efforts. In companies located in Saudi Arabia, knowledge sharing between IT, analytics, and marketing functions enables strategy creation and strategy enactment. BCG (2025) illustrates how collaborative settings fuel AI efforts by leveraging the diversity of expertise across disciplines. Programme-level teamwork is routinely linked to innovation adoption, and in a global context, it provides knowledge-sharing opportunities, collective problem solving, and the facilitation of departments staying engaged (Davenport et al., 2020). In Saudi Arabia, where public organizations are more hierarchical based on tradition (Hayes & Jones, 2022), there is more dependence on cross-functional cooperation because it stimulates the involvement of many groups across organizational levels, leading to fewer decision silos. Methods to facilitate participation across functions, like AI steering committees or co-labs, offer opportunities for workers to share knowledge, share technical confidence, share pilot outcomes, etc. Coopetition also assists with sharing failures that build trust between technical specialists and the marketing side, which supports the sharing of AI know-how related to segmentation, planning, or content initiatives that may involve experimentation. Further, cooperation can also help with ensuring that AI technologies are conditionally adapted to local consumers' preferences for behavior, language, and cultural values, which would hasten the relevance and power of AI adoption initiatives.

Adaptability: Organizational flexibility - the ability to adapt processes, roles, and structures to new technologies, is an entire set of direct drivers related to the use of AI. Initiatives such as those by SDAIA, for instance, HUMAIN, provide the infrastructure and platforms for Saudi businesses to support timely reactions to AI innovations. Flexibility permits the organization to pilot again, internalize the feedback, and learn from experience to improve strategy. Flexibility enables culture features like team-based collaboration and creativity to move beyond just aspirational goals. Adaptability: Adaptive organizations typically capture the highest value from AI. Companies that can rearrange their organization, processes, or decision-making protocols react based on AI learning. This allows them to switch campaign delivery last-minute, alter customer segments mid-flight, and allocate resources according to predictive tendencies instead of educated guesses. In Saudi Arabia, where a consumer market is changing so quickly, adaptability is especially important: AI serves no purpose if its recommendations cannot be executed fast enough to matter for strategic planning.

Evaluation and comparison: All of the characteristics of innovativeness, propensity to take risks, teamwork, and adaptability suggest that Saudi organizations are beginning to consistently reach international benchmarks in the use of AI in marketing. While some intrinsic constraints, such as rigidities associated with hierarchy, are present in Saudi organizations, they are often offset by inherent leadership play and commitment, organizational culture of working collaboratively, and other organizational flexibility. In many instances, Saudi organizations reflect global trends: as noted by Davenport et al. (2020) and Grewal et al. (2024), successful AI utilization can only be ensured when there is innovation, experimentation, and collaborative working across functional boundaries. At the same time, activities such as those being put in motion by HUMAIN hasten this process by providing infrastructure, common standards, and AI solutions that address the local culture and linguistic context. Thus, the combination of these forces strengthens the capacity within Saudi organizations to apply AI in responsible and effective ways while also making marketing strategies competitive in an ever-changing digital landscape.

3.2. Cultural barriers to AI adoption

Despite the presence of supportive cultural traits, several obstacles still slow down the adoption of AI in Saudi firms.

Hierarchical norms and conservatism: In organizations where authority is centralized and hierarchies are rigid, new ideas often struggle to move upward. As Alateeg and Alhammadi (2024) and Schein (2017) point out, this reluctance limits experimentation—an especially serious drawback in marketing, where speed and agility are essential. Similar challenges appear worldwide: top-down structures are often associated with slower decision-making and fewer opportunities for rapid testing (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Staff may avoid proposing pilot projects or small-scale AI initiatives if they believe these could be seen as overstepping boundaries, which in turn restricts the organization’s ability to capture the benefits of emerging technologies.

Fear of job replacement: Fear of being replaced at the job weakens acceptance of AI and creates skepticism about its introduction, even when the intention is to complement rather than replace existing jobs. BCG (2025) and Deloitte Middle East (2025) demonstrate that job insecurity perceptions diminish adoption.

Limited AI Literacy: Capability gaps also hinder. Cisco (2024) and Deloitte Middle East (2025) find that insufficient AI competence is common among Saudi marketers, reducing confidence and perceived use value. Evidence from around the world indicates that successful take-up depends on cultural support being complemented by technical capacity development, emphasizing training in conjunction with

encouraging culture (Davenport et al., 2020). Upskilling packages, workshops, and mentoring are key to translating supportive culture into capability. This also points towards a need for Arabic-language AI instruments, local datasets, and workforce-specific training.
Evaluation and Comparison: Such barriers are universal challenges, but are elevated in the Saudi environment, given hierarchical cultural norms and language-based requirements. Local programs such as HUMAIN and Project Transcendence overcome such challenges by investing in capability, offering infrastructure, and legitimizing the application of AI in organizational hierarchies (Memish et al., 2021; PIF, 2025). Overcoming such barriers alongside harnessing enablers enables companies to construct comprehensive AI adoption plans that align people, processes, and technology.

3.3. Change readiness as a mediator

Change readiness came out as a key mediator, bridging cultural enablers and practical AI adoption.
Commitment and Efficacy: Commitment (willingness to implement) and efficacy (confidence in capacity) are essential components of readiness, according to Weiner (2009). Cultural support in Saudi companies is not sufficient; they must believe that they can implement AI strategies. Cisco (2024) indicates that numerous companies have AI strategies, but only a few believe that they are capable enough to implement them in their entirety.
Training and Infrastructure: Preparedness increases with organizations offering formalized training, AI tool access, and collaborative methods. BCG (2025) indicates that companies investing in both infrastructure and capabilities achieve better adoption, reinforcing that material enablers are complemented by cultural ones. Testbed environments for experimenting with AI-powered campaigns, for example, enhance competence as well as confidence.
Social Learning and Sensemaking: Observational learning, peer modelling, and experiential feedback are critical in cementing AI. Pilot projects that show achievement in Saudi companies build confidence and accelerate adoption, affirming Rogers' (2003) observability and trialability. Staff witnessing genuine benefits are more likely to be involved in scaling adoption. Social learning also facilitates knowledge transfer, mitigating repeated errors and enhancing efficiency.

3.4. Summary of results

- Cultural Enablers: Innovativeness, risk tolerance, collaboration, and adaptability greatly drive AI adoption by fostering experimentation and knowledge sharing.
- Cultural Barriers: Hierarchical norms, job insecurity, and low AI literacy limit willingness and confidence to adopt AI tools.
- Mediator: Change readiness translates cultural support into successful AI adoption, making implementation smoother.
- Comparative Insights: Saudi Arabia generally conforms with global best practices but needs customized interventions such as leadership modelling, cross-functional collaboration, skills building, and national AI initiatives to fully incorporate AI into strategic marketing.

H1 is supported: a supportive organizational culture positively impacts AI adoption. H2 is supported: change readiness mediates this relationship, translating cultural potential into actionable adoption.

4. Discussion

These are the results of this study, being a rich and detailed elaboration of organizational culture and change readiness impacting AI adoption in Saudi Arabian strategic marketing decision-making. Applying thematic secondary qualitative data analysis and authoritative theory, Schein's Organizational Culture Theory (2017) and Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (2003), this discussion situates the findings within regional and global contexts, interpreting the dynamic between culture, change readiness, and AI adoption findings.

4.1. Cultural enablers and their impacts

The research validates that AI usage in marketing decision-making significantly depends on innovative, collaborative, adaptive, and risk-taking cultures. Above all, innovativeness encourages organizations to test AI tools in customer segmentation, predictive analysis, and personalization, thereby driving experimentation and iterative learning. This conclusion concurs with Davenport et al. (2020) and Grewal et al. (2024), who demonstrate that worldwide, organizations that promote innovation tend to innovate and adopt AI. For the Saudi context, Alateeg and Alhammadi (2024) indicate how leadership culture enables and supports the adoption of technology-based marketing since it demonstrates the role of leadership, cultural trends, and innovation competence.
Collaboration was also found to be the most influential factor in translating cultural support into measurable success. Cross-functional sharing of knowledge across IT, analytics, and marketing functions enhances the efficient application of AI tools and ensures that they are aligned with the overall business strategy. These results corroborate findings from Davenport et al. (2020) on the effects of knowledge sharing in Saudi organizations. Equally, BCG (2025) stresses that shared cultures drive speed of adoption through enhanced efficiency, eliminating duplicate efforts, and allowing joint problem-solving in integration.
Flexibility also enhances AI uptake by guaranteeing that organizational structures and processes are capable of accommodating technology interventions. These include national endeavours like SDAIA and HUMAIN, which institutionalize flexibility through offering frameworks, infrastructure, and talent programs (Memish et al., 2021; PIF, 2025). Organizations that are capable of adapting workflow, managerial practices, and decision-making structures will likely achieve the most from AI implementation.
Collectively, these results support H1 by affirming that encouraging organizational culture has a positive impact on AI adoption. Cultural enablers offer a starting point for experimentation, learning, and operationalization, enabling companies to manage uncertainty and strategically integrate AI. Risk tolerance notably decreases resistance to experimentation, which is crucial in marketing changes spurred by technology.

4.2. Cultural barriers and constraints

Even with the existence of robust cultural enablers, recurring barriers persist and hinder adoption. Hierarchical culture norms, job displacement fears, and restricted AI literacy all pose a limiting effect. Workers' reluctance to suggest AI-related projects in extremely hierarchical companies lies in Schein's (2017) concepts of underlying assumptions and power bases in culture. This reticence is reiterated

in Deloitte Middle East (2025) and BCG (2025), where employee engagement and inclination towards working with AI tools are decreased by job replacement fears.
Similarly constraining is the problem of AI literacy. Non-technical employees frequently are unable to capitalize fully on AI, a fact that mirrors worldwide evidence that gaps in skills impede technology adoption (Davenport et al., 2020; Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Such findings propose that cultural support is insufficient in isolation. To overcome the barriers, interventions such as training, psychological safety, employee empowerment, and tackling hierarchical inertia need to be implemented.

4.3. Change readiness as a mediator

Change readiness plays a pivotal role as a mediating factor that translates cultural strengths into tangible AI adoption outcomes. Organizations with supportive cultures but low readiness tend to see limited adoption, whereas those with high readiness convert cultural potential into actionable results.
Readiness depends on both commitment and efficacy. Employees must recognize AI's benefits while also feeling capable of using it effectively (Weiner, 2009). Cisco (2024) indicates that while most Saudi companies have AI plans, there is only a minority that feels ready to implement them in full, indicating a readiness gap. Formal programs like training, mentorship, and pilots close the gap by converting cultural support into concrete usage. BCG (2025) also emphasizes that learning by doing, peer-to-peer modelling, and feedback loops increase readiness, noting its dynamic and continuous character.
This mediating function confirms H2, whereby readiness translates cultural enablers into viable AI adoption. In the absence of readiness, cultural assets are not exploited, proving that successful adoption is a cultural as well as procedural undertaking.

4.4. Comparison to global trends

Placing Saudi evidence in a global perspective exhibits both points of similarity and difference.

- Convergence: Everywhere, innovation, collaboration, flexibility, and systematic preparedness always come out as primary enablers of AI adoption (Davenport et al., 2020; Rogers, 2003). Training, sensemaking processes, and cultural support always mediate technology integration everywhere.
- Divergence: Saudi-specific challenges, such as hierarchical organizational setups and the demand for language-specific AI software, require customized approaches. National efforts like SDAIA and HUMAIN provide institutional scaffolding to counter these issues, adjusting to the distinctive socio-cultural and regulatory environment (Memish et al., 2021; PIF, 2025).

This comparison highlights the importance of adopting a synthesis of global best practices and localized approaches to make AI adoption contextually dependent.

4.5. Organizational culture and innovation in Saudi Arabia

A new empirical analysis of Saudi companies by Alateeg and Alhammadi (2024) indicates that cultural attributes like cooperation, flexibility, and a learning orientation highly stimulate organizational innovation, with strategic leadership further enhancing these influences. Although the research was about innovation in general, the levers directly apply to technology adoption in marketing, such as AI. Some cultures embrace risk, reward experimentation, and facilitate cross-functional knowledge flows, reducing behavioural and structural obstacles that typically hinder direct AI projects, establishing an environment where experimenting and learning can flourish. These cultural traits usually don't function in silos; they combine with leadership actions, access to resources, and outside pressures to create a socio-technical climate that promotes innovation.
Saudi businesses tend to be organized in hierarchical cultures with high power distance. Such a culture discourages bottom-up generation of ideas, and innovation grinds to a halt unless top leaders overtly endorse and sponsor the new ventures (Schein, 2017; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). For example, businesses that incorporate AI pilots in marketing initiatives build momentum as executives voice affirmation, provide funding, and acknowledge success in the open. Such behaviour indicates to the employees that experimentation is both safe and company-focused, mitigating fear of failure and strengthening a culture of innovation. With these hierarchical dynamics in place, deliberate mechanisms must exist to bridge leadership intent into daily employee actions. Examples are recognition programs, innovation awards, and demonstrations by executives of AI usage cases. Without such efforts, employees may view AI initiatives as risky or marginal, slowing adoption even when they are declared strategic priorities.
Knowledge sharing—critical to training, governance, and AI deployment also depends significantly on culture. Evidence across Saudi companies indicates that perceived organizational support and trust mitigate knowledge hiding, promote openness, and enhance technology integration (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). This corresponds with global marketing research: organizations with prevalent learning cultures innovate more quickly with AI because market knowledge can be converted into data assets, model development is streamlined, and lessons learned are embedded in practice (Davenport et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2015). In high-hierarchy, risk-averse cultures, explicit cultural cues are required—cross-silo cooperation rituals, formalized idea-sharing sessions, or official psychological safety policies to make leadership intent realizable in employee action (Schein, 2017; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). Above these formal arrangements, there is also the role of informal routines, such as mentorship and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, in reinforcing positive experimentation and discouraging risk avoidance.
At a more macro level, national institutions reinforce innovation-driven cultures in companies. The establishment of the Saudi Data & AI Authority (SDAIA) and the National Strategy for Data & AI (NSDAI) demonstrates a national dedication to embedding data-driven decision-making, aligning governance, and broadening talent pipelines. These projects assist in reducing perceived risks associated with AI adoption through providing policy transparency, technical standards, and training routes (Memish et al., 2021; SDAIA, 2025-a, 2025b). The 2025 opening of HUMAIN, an entity of the Public Investment Fund that spans the AI value chain, further develops domestic AI infrastructure through offering Arabic-first models, secure data platforms, and collaborative public-private initiatives (PIF, 2025; Reuters, 2025). These national-level investments not only provide resources but also validate AI adoption and bolster cultural change within companies. Marketing departments benefit from access to local know-how, platforms, and tools, with increased confidence in embracing AI-powered analytics and targeting, as well as less dependency on imported systems and fears about compliance and data sovereignty.
Comparison and analysis: Firm-level research focuses on micro-social processes such as leadership cues, trust, and knowledge sharing, whereas policy sources focus on macro-factors such as strategy, governance, and infrastructure (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Memish et al., 2021; SDAIA, 2025-a). These tiers operate in combination: national initiatives and plans such as NSDAI or HUMAIN boost workers' belief in the workability and utility of AI, accentuating the impact of positive organizational cultures on real adoption. Worldwide, the

same holds—the readiness of culture and leadership is key to realizing technology investments in concrete marketing results (Davenport et al., 2020). Saudi Arabia offers a unique example, demonstrating the way in which national policy can be a compelling driver of cultural change within companies, especially when scarce resources or talent may otherwise inhibit experimentation.

4.6. AI adoption and marketing in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia

McKinsey's 2024 GCC pulse survey indicates that almost 75% of organizations are using generative AI in at least one business function, well above worldwide averages. Challenges, however, exist in the form of people skills, governance frameworks, and applied research (McKinsey, 2024). The same trends are visible on the consumer front in Saudi Arabia. Deloitte's 2025 survey of 2,000 consumers across the UAE and KSA revealed that 58% had utilized generative AI tools, reflecting strong awareness and AI-enabled personalization, attribution, and marketing application demand in Arabic languages (Deloitte Middle East, 2025). With mobile penetration and social media activity strong in the country, AI can be a powerful tool to leverage for real-time campaign execution, predictive targeting, and social commerce engagement.

From a marketing standpoint, global studies emphasize the initial domains in which AI brings value: more precise customer segmentation, improved media mix optimization, and quicker experimentation through iterative testing (Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2024). To realize these advantages takes more than sophisticated tools; it hinges on organizational and cultural preparedness, such as mechanisms for cross-functional knowledge sharing, norms promoting experimentation, and adaptive governance processes. In Saudi Arabia, the effectiveness of AI for marketing also depends on contextually relevant content and models in Arabic. National initiatives such as HUMAIN and SDAIA's frameworks meet these requirements by offering infrastructure, governance, and pipelines of skilled talent (PIF, 2025; Reuters, 2025). With this, AI adoption in marketing is more than just a technical implementation but an overall change in how organizations create, understand, and use insights.

Comparison and analysis: Reports by the consultant and market describe the region as exhibiting "high ambition, uneven readiness" (McKinsey, 2024; BCG, 2025). Although companies are willing to implement AI in marketing, they still experience shortfalls in skills, process adoption, and governance. Scholarly literature describes why those gaps are significant: the true value of AI only reveals itself after it is integrated into decision-making by iterative learning cycles (Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2024). In other words, broad awareness or pilot application does not necessarily make for sustained competitive advantage. Organizational culture, particularly teamwork, risk acceptance, and a learning culture, continues to be the most important driver that translates ambition into sustained AI adoption, filling the gap between technical potential and actual business results.

4.7. AI readiness and change readiness

Saudi companies tend to demonstrate high aspiration to implement AI but encounter uneven operational readiness levels. Cisco's KSA AI Readiness Index underscores that there is great strategic ambition but that difficulties in infrastructure, data governance, and technical capabilities hold back large-scale deployment. Few firms are genuine "pacesetters" (Cisco, 2024; 2023). Regional overviews confirm this observation: GCC companies are usually strong on ambition but less capable practically in areas like research, technical competency, and cross-functional integration (BCG, 2025; McKinsey, 2024). Staff views mirror the same trend. Will to work with AI is prevalent, but faith in implementation is lacking, indicating an intent-delivery gap (Weiner, 2009). In marketing, this translates to teams embracing AI adoption as a notion but finding it hard to execute targeted campaigns, optimize predictive models, or integrate AI output within CRM systems.

Change management studies provide insight into why readiness functions as a mediator between culture and adoption. Weiner (2009) defines readiness as a shared condition marrying commitment to change with faith in the capacity to implement it. Collaborative cultures that support teamwork, experimentation, and flexibility enhance commitment by making AI adoption worthwhile. But when workers lack confidence in the presence of resources, governance, or expertise, efficacy is low, and progress languishes. Armenakis and Harris (2009) further state that leadership communication, active engagement, and formal training are essential to translate cultural norms into action. In Saudi practice, companies that develop capabilities in skills, governance, and cross-functional collaboration drive adoption speed. Methodologies like in-house AI academies, mentoring initiatives, and cross-departmental "innovation sprints" build both confidence and competence and ensure that cultural support is manifest in practical terms.

Comparison and assessment: Saudi readiness indicators (Cisco, 2024) align well with Weiner's model: commitment is typically robust, but efficacy is inconsistent. Organizations that combine cultural support with investments in readiness training, governance systems, and pilot capabilities see improved AI adoption outcomes (BCG, 2025; Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2024). This indicates that readiness measures don't substitute for culture but augment it, highlighting the importance of both cultural alignment and operational readiness in effective AI integration.

4.8. Cultural and structural enablers for responsible AI

Responsible AI is emerging as a product differentiator in marketing, influencing the way organizations approach personalization, data governance, and accountability of algorithms. Rakova et al. (2020) believe that responsible AI is most effective when accountability is interwoven into culture and structures via transparent ownership, interdisciplinary discussion spaces, and open "speak-up" norms that bring risks to the surface early.

Brand reputation in marketing is closely associated with the way artificial intelligence (AI) tools are implemented. When personalization turns invasive or when algorithmic content is of poor quality, customer trust will easily be lost. What complicates the problem is that there is an ongoing balance between gains in efficiency and the ethical protections that must be used to safeguard users. As the recent debates indicate, companies require governance systems that place transparency and human judgment at the forefront (Hermann et al., 2021). Responsible AI is thus more than compliance for regulators. It is also about influencing good relations with consumers, creating confidence among employees, and making sure that long-term business objectives are not compromised. These issues are most apparent in sectors where marketing has direct implications, such as retail, finance, and healthcare.

Comparison and analysis: All practitioners and scholars would agree that responsible AI is based on cultural commitment, governance forums, and transparency. National programs like HUMAIN and the NSDAI cut through uncertainty and maximize the value of instilling responsible AI, demonstrating where culture, governance, and readiness intersect. The result is both reputational and operational: marketers have assurance to commit to deploying AI, reducing risks, and highlighting the strategic value of aligning cultural values with governance structures.

4.9. AI in the broader Saudi context

Saudi Vision 2030 highlights data and AI as key enablers of economic diversification, and SDAIA as the leader in strategy, governance, and people development (Memish et al., 2021; SDAIA, 2025-a, 2025-b). The launch of HUMAIN in 2025 by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) bolsters infrastructure, cultivates Arabic large language models, and forms alliances with global cloud providers and hardware suppliers, furthering AI adoption in industries like retail and consumer brands (PIF, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Regional studies show the GCC is among the keenest adopters of generative AI at the workforce level, although capability gaps still exist, emphasizing the role of governance as well as solid talent pipelines (McKinsey, 2024; Oliver Wyman Forum, 2024; Financial Times, 2025). For companies, this setting means competitive edge will rest with those that can harness national efforts, foster cultural enablers, and invest in preparedness across functions.

Comparison and assessment: Macro-level institutions enhance firm-level cultural enablers through alleviating external threats to data sovereignty, infrastructure, and Arabic-language NLP. Internal challenges are the primary concerns for Saudi marketers, with organizational culture and preparedness as the determining factors. Firms that integrate national support with deliberate culture creation and preparedness initiatives are more likely to scale AI from pilots to full strategy integration in marketing. Saudi Arabia is, therefore, a peculiar setting where national, top-down strategies, meso-level institutional efforts, and micro-level culture converge to drive the adoption of AI in marketing.

4.10. Leadership and strategic alignment in AI adoption

Leadership plays a crucial role in AI adoption, especially in hierarchical firms common in Saudi Arabia (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Schein, 2017). The studies indicate that leaders who continuously articulate the strategic relevance of AI, assign funds, and participate in experimentation drive both operational and cultural preparedness. Strategic alignment is when AI is infused into larger marketing objectives and organizational goals so that it is not viewed as a peripheral IT project but as central to decision-making (Davenport et al., 2020).

In Saudi firms, leadership commitment helps bridge cultural barriers such as high power distance and risk aversion. By experimenting with pilots, CEOs send clear signals of psychological safety, motivating personnel to report ideas and engage in AI-driven marketing innovations (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). Alignment with national plans such as SDAIA's NSDAI initiative and HUMAIN facilitates this process, as external validation spurs and strengthens domestic leadership initiatives. Leaders who consolidate internal agendas and national plans can promote AI adoption at a faster pace through synergizing skill development, infrastructure investment, and governance frameworks with emerging standards and technologies (Memish et al., 2021; PIF, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Evaluation: The coupling of strategic alignment and leadership sponsorship renders AI adoption not just operationally possible but also technically plausible. Businesses where AI is incorporated in routine marketing activities and linked with performance metrics on strategic objectives will be more likely to drive concrete results, particularly where cultural facilitators such as innovation and collaboration are present.

4.11. Organizational learning and knowledge management for AI implementation

Organizational learning and knowledge management (KM) play a pivotal role in the incorporation of AI capabilities into marketing practices. Implementing AI is not an investment that one would have to make once; instead, an ongoing process reliant on recursive learning cycles, continuous skills building, and formal knowledge sharing (Davenport et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2015). Knowledge flows in Saudi organizations are highly reliant on dimensions such as cooperation, trust, and communication norms (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). These are organizations that learn best, hence can best capture insights from AI pilots, share best practices within teams, and calibrate predictive models well.

At the national level, SDAIA and HUMAIN programs advance organizational learning by offering frameworks, training, and codified rules for AI adoption (SDAIA, 2025-a; PIF, 2025). These programs reduce uncertainty, provide reference models for companies to follow, and speed up the accumulation of knowledge without duplicated work. Within organizations, employee engagement in cross-functional forums, mentorship programs, and AI communities of practice increases the embedment of AI knowledge into marketing strategy so that teams can quickly react to shifts in market conditions (Davenport et al., 2020; Grewal et al., 2024).

Schein’s Organizational Culture Theory

Schein (2017) describes organizational culture as a multi-layered construct made up of artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. In marketing firms, these layers dictate how staff perceive and react to innovations like AI. The culture dimensions explored in this study—innovativeness, risk tolerance, collaboration, and adaptability—have a direct effect on whether AI is seen as an opportunity or threat.

Innovation- and risk-emphasizing cultures legitimize experimentation and validate practices like A/B/n testing, synthetic data prototyping, and iterative campaign design. These practices create a culture where "fast failure" is normalized, a requirement for AI learning cycles. On the other hand, failure-punishing cultures obstruct adoption. Within the hierarchical systems prevalent in Saudi organizations, leadership is instrumental: executives need to sponsor experiments, commemorate lessons learned, and incorporate AI into day-to-day workflows so that espoused values are converted into actual behaviors (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). The degree to which culture is embedded throughout visible artifacts and ingrained assumptions ultimately decides whether AI adoption is ephemeral or enduring over time.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Rogers (2003) describes diffusion as relying on five characteristics: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Cultural forces that operate in Saudi marketing groups influence perceptions of these factors. When working together, compatibility increases, risk appetite reduces perceived complexity, and norms for experimentability increase trialability and observability. In contrast, strict hierarchical norms increase perceived complexity and reduce observability, slowing adoption. Technological adoption studies' evidence indicates that visible early successes and benefit demonstrations are vital in diminishing resistance and promoting broader adoption (Rogers, 2003; Davenport et al., 2020).

4.12. Theoretical implications

The study contributes several theoretical insights to the literature on organizational culture, innovation diffusion, and change readiness.

Second, Organizational Culture Theory is supported by evidence that cultural sub-dimensions, such as innovativeness, collaboration, adaptability, and risk tolerance, have a direct impact on the adoption of AI in Saudi marketing companies. Experimentation-rewarding,

knowledge-sharing, flexibility-encouraging cultures support adoption, whereas strict hierarchies and power structures impede progress (Schein, 2017; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). This applies Schein's framework to a non-Western context, highlighting the extent to which deeply embedded assumptions drive receptivity towards technological innovation.

Second, Diffusion of Innovation Theory is corroborated by the evidence that adoption depends on relative advantage perceptions, trialability, and observability. Organizational culture and readiness co-determine these perceptions. For example, collaborative and adaptive cultures reinforce trialability, while risk-tolerant cultures enhance observability through fostering pilot outcome transparency (Rogers, 2003). These results stress the coupling of culture and readiness in determining diffusion processes.

Third, Change Readiness becomes an essential mediator and a proof of Weiner's (2009) model. Adoption is hindered even with cultural enablers in place if the workers are not confident, competent, or motivated. Readiness fills this gap, ensuring the interplay between human, cultural, and technological aspects. This makes AI adoption more than a technical undertaking, but a strongly organizational and behavioural imperative.

4.13. Practical implications

The implications for practitioners are tangible recommendations:

- Create innovation-support cultures through encouraging experimentation, leadership openness, modelling, and open channels of communication.
- Invest in education to increase AI literacy, reinforce preparedness, and develop confidence, so that supporting culture translates into tangible results.
- Utilize pilot programs to make adoption visible, minimize felt risks, and show incremental success.
- Remove hierarchical hurdles through encouraging participatory decision-making, cross-functional teamwork, and empowerment across all levels of the organization.
- Align internal initiatives with national efforts like SDAIA and HUMAIN to tap into external infrastructure, policy assistance, and pools of talent.

These steps collectively ensure that AI implementation in marketing is not just about bringing in new technology but about facilitating a multidimensional shift. The key to success lies in synchronizing cultural values, readiness measures, and strategic practices in the specific socio-cultural and institutional context of Saudi Arabia. This study confirms that organizational culture and change readiness jointly determine AI adoption success, offering actionable guidance for managers and policymakers

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of findings

This study investigated the enablers and barriers of culture that affect artificial intelligence (AI) adoption in Saudi Arabian organizations' strategic marketing decision-making. In qualitative thematic analysis of secondary data, the research compared how organizational culture influences AI adoption, with change readiness as a mediating variable. The results are discussed below.

1) Cultural Enablers

Cross-functional coordination between marketing, IT, and analytics functions facilitates knowledge sharing and increases the operationalization of AI insights. Flexibility also enables quick iteration on AI projects by allowing organizations to roll back feedback from pilots and optimize processes for maximum results. Collectively, these enablers show that a supportive culture is foundational for converting AI's technological potential into practical marketing strategies (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Davenport et al., 2020).

2) Cultural Barriers

Despite having powerful enablers, a few barriers persist. Hierarchical culture, prevalent in Saudi companies, tends to hinder bottom-up innovation by forcing the underlings to refer AI proposals to top leadership, delaying adoption (Schein, 2017; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). Job displacement fear also acts as an issue since job fright over automation taking over human tasks may curtail the use of AI tools (Deloitte Middle East, 2025; BCG, 2025). Limited AI literacy is also a barrier, with staff who are not technically skilled finding it difficult to incorporate AI into marketing processes (Cisco, 2024). These results indicate that cultural support is not enough; other interventions like training, structural changes, and change management plans must be used to address these barriers.

3) Change Readiness as Mediator

Change readiness was also established as a significant mediator between culture and AI adoption. Organizations with strong cultures but low readiness tend to experience limited adoption, highlighting the need for commitment and confidence in effective implementation (Weiner, 2009). Readiness is increased through focused training programs, accessible AI infrastructure, and participatory processes that engage employees actively in experimentation and learning (BCG, 2025; Cisco, 2024). Social learning and sensemaking—most importantly through pilot initiatives—empower observability to allow workers to see tangible positive results and speed up adoption, in line with Rogers' (2003) diffusion model.

4) Saudi Context Specificity

The Saudi organizational context presents distinct enablers and inhibitors. National programs like the Saudi Data & AI Authority (SDAIA) and HUMAIN offer infrastructure, localized AI applications, and talent streams, enabling responsiveness and preparedness (Memish et al., 2021; PIF, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Concomitantly, obstacles like hierarchical decision-making and the requirement for Arabic-language AI tools reveal the need for customized approaches that harmonize organizational practices with local policies and socio-cultural demands.

5) Theoretical and Practical Consequences

The results test and confirm current theoretical principles. Schein's (2017) Organizational Culture Theory is confirmed, demonstrating that sub-dimensions like innovativeness, collaboration, adaptability, and risk tolerance directly influence technology uptake in a non-Western context. Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovation Theory is also confirmed, as relative advantage, trialability, and observability perceptions were found to rely on cultural and readiness dimensions. Besides, Weiner's (2009) readiness model was validated as a mediating process that converts cultural potential into adoption outcomes.

Practically, leaders are urged to promote innovation-centric, cooperative, and risk-prone cultures. Systematic training, mentoring, and participatory approaches enhance employee confidence and preparedness, while pilot tests and evident success grow observability, minimize resistance, and speed up AI integration. Collectively, these findings illustrate that effective AI adoption entails more than mere technology investments; it is a multifaceted change brought about by cultural forces, readiness, structural support, and strategic alignment

to national programs. Effective AI adoption improves marketing efficiency, customer targeting, and contributes to economic diversification under Vision 2030, linking culture and readiness to tangible performance outcomes.

5.2. Future research directions

While this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and readiness forces driving AI uptake in strategic marketing in Saudi Arabia, some areas would benefit from further research.

1) Primary Data Gathering: Future studies may involve direct interaction with Saudi marketing professionals via interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires. Primary data would corroborate what secondary data indicates and identify subtle views on risk, hierarchy, and cooperation that are not always apparent in published accounts.
2) Quantitative Validation: Following the qualitative study, subsequent research could use quantitative methods to statistically examine relationships between organizational culture, change readiness, and AI adoption. Methods like structural equation modelling (SEM) or regression analysis may measure the strength and significance of such relationships, providing higher generalizability to Saudi firms and perhaps the broader GCC region.
3) Comparative Studies: Comparative studies between Saudi Arabia and other GCC or regional economies would note differences in enablers, preparedness, and adoption practices. These studies would determine best practices, policy interventions, and cross-country learning opportunities in favour of regional AI strategies.
4) Longitudinal Studies: A study of organizational culture and readiness over time would give insight into the longer-term dynamics of adopting AI. Following pilot projects, training initiatives, and leadership actions would help identify how short-term interventions affect long-term integration and change processes.
5) Sector-Specific Analysis: Industry-specific patterns of adoption would be an interesting area to study in industries like retail, banking, tourism, or healthcare. Every industry has unique technological requirements, customer demands, and regulatory factors, and hence, sectoral knowledge is important to fashion sector-specific adoption strategies.

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