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Physical Workplace Preferences across cultures: A comparative analysis between Germany, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose and Research Goal As globalization intensifies, interest has grown in how cultural contexts shape perceptions of the workspace. The central aim is to examine workplace preferences across Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia and explore how observed differences relate to established cultural models.

Theoretical Background Cultural contexts influence communication styles and workplace interactions, as reflected in the high- and low-context framework by Edward T. Hall. These differences shape organizational structures, employee behavior, and are mirrored in workplace design, reinforcing norms of communication, hierarchy, and collaboration

Methods A comparative survey was conducted among office employees in the built environment sector in Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, examining their physical workspace preferences. The findings were interpreted through established cultural models, including high- versus low-context, individualism versus collectivism, high vs low uncertainty avoidance.

Findings The analysis reveals shifting workplace dynamics, with teleworking becoming increasingly prominent across all surveyed countries. Notably, a mismatch emerged between cultural contexts and actual workspace preferences. Although Germany is typically characterized as highly individualistic, respondents expressed a comparatively weaker preference for individual offices than their Ethiopian counterparts, a country often described as collectivist. Moreover, uncertainty avoidance appeared to substantially influence preferences related to working hours.

Originality This study addresses a relatively underexplored topic by challenging prevailing assumptions about cultural dimensions and their influence on workspace preferences. The findings, particularly those related to Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, offer evidence of these preferences and thought-provoking insights.

Practical or Social Implications The paper provides a usable assessment and analysis methodology that can be used to explore associations between cultural contexts and workplace preferences using rating - and ranking-based results as an indicator, with an illustration of its use in comparing the German, Saudi and Ethiopian contexts.

Keywords

Workplace preferences, National culture, Comparative analysis, Survey, Equality

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalized economy, organizations operate across diverse cultural contexts and employ workforces with varying cultural backgrounds. As cross-border

collaboration and international mobility increase, understanding how cultural context shapes workplace preferences has become increasingly important (Arseneault, 2020).
Culture is a historically developed, socially constructed system of meaning that shapes how knowledge, values, and practices are interpreted across groups (Harkness et al., 2009). Religions often function as key determinants of cultural models, and social strata may be conceptualized as subcultural systems within societies (Scholz et al., 2024). Cultural values influence reasoning, decision-making, and interaction norms (Scholz et al., 2024), and national culture refers to shared systems of beliefs, values, and behavioral expectations (Bond et al., 2018).
Understanding employee integration in culturally diverse environments is essential for multinational organizations seeking to maintain engagement, well-being, and productivity (Avramov, 2016). Cultural composition (Stahl et al., 2009) and effective integration processes are critical to high-performing multinational teams (Powell et al., 2004; Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2009). However, international employees continue to face challenges, including workplace bullying (Bergbom et al., 2015) and poor working conditions (Bertotti et al., 2017). Accordingly, organizations seek to facilitate international employees' support cultural adjustment through home-country support (Yao et al., 2015) and cross-cultural coaching (Ramirez et al., 2020), as well as individual competencies such as cultural sensitivity and language proficiency (Subramaniam et al., 2018).
Although cultural values in organizations have been widely studied and workplace design is expected to increasingly incorporate cultural and societal values alongside functional requirements (Francis, 2013), the relationship between cultural context and physical workplace environments remains underexplored (Plijter et al., 2014; Vogl and Caniullan Kaiser, 2024).
This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between cultural contexts and physical workplace preferences from a cross-continental perspective. It focuses on professionals in the built environment sector in Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, considering their cultural backgrounds.
The findings are intended to inform strategic decision-making in corporate real estate management (CREM). In short, the study addresses the following two research questions:
RQ1: What are the physical workplace preferences for German, Saudi Arabian and Ethiopian office workers in the built environment sector and how do they differ from each other?
RQ2: Do workplace preference rankings differ across the selected countries, and how strongly are they correlated between national samples?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 High- and low-context cultures

Many political contestations and disputes originate in differing values concerning human life and co-existence, including cooperation and rules in public spheres (res publica). Values determine what individuals or groups consider "good" or "bad," provide orientation for human action, and relate to emotions as well as ethical or moral reasoning (Scholz et al., 2024). Different value systems lead to distinct approaches to problem framing, understanding root causes, and prioritizing solutions. Modern societies are often characterized by a plurality of values, which are constitutionally recognized and promoted as an element of democratic systems. This pluralism requires democratic modes of political discourse, communication, and decision-making, with opposing value sets frequently represented in political parties (Siebenhühner, 2018).
The classification of "high- and low-context cultures" is a communication-oriented framework developed by Hall (1976). It categorizes cultures according to the role of context in communication and the way information is exchanged among individuals (Korac-Kakabadse, 2001). Cultural context therefore plays a pivotal role in social interactions and communication

across different societies (Kim et al., 1998). In low-context cultures, the meanings and intentions of messages are explicitly stated, with minimal reliance on surrounding context, whereas in high-context cultures, messages are often layered, with much of the meaning implied rather than directly expressed. Low-context cultures include Northern European and North American countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, while high-context cultures include Southern European, Asian, and Arabian countries (Würtz, 2006).

2.2 Cultural theories and the physical workplace

Cultural differences shape office design by reflecting underlying norms of communication, hierarchy, and social interaction (Haynes, 2012). In high-context cultures, typically characterized by collectivism and stronger hierarchical structures, office layouts are more formalized and structured, whereas low-context, individualistic cultures tend to favor shared or activity-based environments (Haynes et al., 2017). Spatial openness or enclosure thus reflects communication and authority structures; for example, structured layouts in high-context contexts can reinforce hierarchical order (Steelcase, 2012).

More broadly, national culture affects workplace outcomes through a chain of effects in which cultural values shape perceptions and attitudes that influence behavior and performance (Taras et al., 2011). Empirical evidence supports this mechanism. Differences in power distance and collectivism between Korea and Canada create expatriate adjustment challenges (Arseneault, 2020). Similarly, open-plan offices initially resisted in Mexican subsidiaries of Scandinavian firms became more accepted following managerial changes, reflecting the diffusion of low power distance and egalitarian values (Ramirez et al., 2020).

Comparative European studies further show systematic cultural embedding in office design. Office layouts range from cellular configurations in Germany to open-plan environments in Great Britain, reflecting differences in privacy, hierarchy, and innovation associated in part with uncertainty avoidance (Plijter et al., 2014). Likewise, Nordic countries, characterized by low power distance and high individualism, tend to emphasize interaction, trust, and well-being in workplace design (Nenonen et al., 2017).

Beyond Western contexts, cultural and religious frameworks also shape workplace environments. In India, vastu shastra principles guide architectural design in relation to well-being (Rao, 2012), while the importance of physical ambiance for employee well-being is emphasized in broader organizational contexts (Singh et al., 2011). Collectively, these studies show that workplace design is embedded in cultural value systems beyond functional requirements.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Country selection

Germany is a federal parliamentary democracy and major EU economy with strong political and economic influence, with a religious landscape shaped mainly by Catholicism and Protestantism. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy in Western Asia with a predominantly Islamic population. Ethiopia is a federal democratic republic in North-Eastern Africa characterized by substantial ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity and remains largely rural, with persistent poverty despite sustained economic growth (The World Bank, 2022).

Beyond these demographic and economic differences (see Table 1), the three countries also differ substantially in their cultural profiles. According to Hofstede's six-dimensional cultural model (Hofstede, 2025), Germany scores low on power distance (35), indicating a preference for decentralized authority and limited acceptance of hierarchical structures, compared to higher scores in Saudi Arabia (95) and Ethiopia (70). In terms of individualism and long-term orientation, Germany (67; 83) reflects a highly individualistic and pragmatic cultural orientation relative to Saudi Arabia (25; 36) and Ethiopia (20; 10).

Table 1. Comparison of the demographic data of the selected countries

Aspects	Germany	Saudi Arabia	Ethiopia
GDP*	4,456 billion USD	1,067 billion USD	163 billion USD
Religion	Christianity	Islam	Christianity and Islam
Geographical size and location	357,592 sqkm North-Central Europe	2,150,000 sqkm West Asia	1,112,000 sqkm North-Eastern Africa
Climate	Temperate and marine climate 1.5°C to 29°C (2022)	(Predominantly) Desert climate 27°C to 43°C (2022)	(Predominantly) Arid climate 23.38°C to 23.35°C (2022)
Population*	84 million	37 million	127 million
Average age	44.7	29.8	25.1
Annual net migration (= immigration - emigration)*	155,751	28,998	-11,999
Linguistic diversity	German	Arabic	80+ Languages, Amharic official
Individuals using the internet (% of population)*	92	100	19
Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)*	35	20	41

Source: Own elaboration (*World bank, 2023)

3.2 Description of sample and procedure

A questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale and multiple-choice items, adapted from Vogl and Orel (2023), was translated into German, Arabic, and Amharic and distributed among built environment industry workers in Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia. The initial sample comprised 577 respondents (Germany: 66%; Saudi Arabia: 15%; Ethiopia: 19%), of which 237 valid responses remained after data cleaning.

The sample is predominantly male across all three countries (Germany: 58.6%; Saudi Arabia: 97.4%; Ethiopia: 71.7%) and largely composed of respondents born between 1980 and 1999 (Germany: 82.8%; Saudi Arabia: 85.3%; Ethiopia: 89.1%). German respondents reported lower religious importance (78.6% indicating low importance), whereas Saudi Arabian and Ethiopian respondents reported higher levels of religiosity (75.9% and 70.9%, respectively); all Saudi respondents identified as Muslim, while 93.48% of Ethiopian respondents identified as Christian.

Sample size considerations were guided by the central limit theorem, suggesting a minimum of 30 observations per group for inferential analyses (Barri, 2019; Chang et al., 2008). Data collection was conducted over six months (October 2022–February 2023) via email and direct messaging.

3.3 Used Variables

The selection of variables was guided by the research questions and structured into two categories: (1) demographic and religious variables and (2) workplace-related variables. The analysis included both independent and dependent variables.

(1) Demographic variables comprised country of origin, gender (male, female, other), age (six categories ranging from 1950–1959 onward), profession (nine categories), and education level (five categories), forming the basis for subgroup comparisons.
Religiosity was measured by self-reported religious affiliation (eight categories) and the perceived importance of religion on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important).

(2) Workplace-related variables were used to assess preferences for workplace factors. Respondents rated the importance of each factor on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important).
These variables included *physical* factors such as (1.) thermal comfort, (2.) visual comfort, and (3.) acoustic comfort (Al Horr et al., 2016; van den Berg et al., 2020).
Workplace layout was operationalized through facilities supporting (4.) concentration, (5.) communication, (6.) recreation, and (7.) religious or cultural practices.
Other variables included (8.) office cleaning services, (9.) safety and security, (10.) office services, and (11.) healthy workplaces (Jensen & van der Voordt, 2020). (12.) Aesthetic design (Candido et al., 2019), and (13.) office location were also included (Vogl and Arkesteijn, 2025; Al Horr et al., 2016).

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

For each sample, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, the collected data was processed and analyzed statistically using Microsoft Excel. The personal, multiple answer, and single answer questions were descriptively analyzed by calculating the percentage frequency of each choice (Anderson et al., 2015). For the 5-points Likert scale questions, the relative importance index (RII) was used as a measure of the rate of importance. The RII has been used by different scholars to arrive at prioritization or ranking of considered variables of interest associated with a certain theme based on the outcomes of a 5-points Likert scale questionnaire (Hamida et al., 2022; Hassanain et al., 2020). Following is the used equation to calculate the RII (Holt, 2014).

$$Relative\ Importance\ Index\ (RII) = \frac{\sum_{i=0}^{4} (a_i)(X_i)}{(4\sum X_i)} \times 100$$

Where:
i: Response category index where i = 0,1,2,3,4
ai: Weight given to i response where i = 0,1,2,3,4
xi: is the variable expressing the frequency of i

Table 2 presents the adopted scheme for analyzing and interpreting the data of the 5-points Likert questions, in which each satisfaction level has a corresponding weight and a range index. According to the calculated RII for each indicator in both samples, the indicators were descendingly ranked in both samples.

Table 2. The adopted scheme for analyzing and interpreting the different rating levels of satisfaction and importance included in the questionnaire

Importance level of job-related aspects			**Importance level of workplace-related aspects**			**Satisfaction level with workplace**		
Importance level	Corres-ponding	Range	Impor-tance	Corres-ponding	Range	Satisfac-tion level	Corres-ponding	Range

	weight		level of	weight			weight	
Utmost importance	4	87.5 - 100%	Neutral	-		5 (Very satisfied)	4	80% ≤ 100%
Very important	3	62.5 - < 87.5%	Very important	3	75-100	4 (Satisfied)	3	60% ≤ 80%
Moderate important	2	37.5 - < 62.5%	Somewh at impor-tant	2	50 -< 75%	3 (Satisfied enough)	2	40.00 % ≤ 60%
Little importance	1	12.5 - < 37.5%	Slightly impor-tant	1	25- -< 50%	2 (Dissatis-fied)	1	20% ≤ 40%
Very little or no importance	0	0 -< 12.5%	Not impor-tant at all	0	0 -< 25%	1 (Very dissatis-fied)	0	0 ≤ 20%

Source: Own elaboration

The Spearman rank coefficient of correlation between ranks (ρ-value) was calculated to determine the extent in which both samples agree with each other based on the received ranks to all indicators. This coefficient has been broadly used in literature as a measure of the agreement between different samples of population on given variables (Hamida et al., 2022; Hassanain et al., 2020). Following is the used equation in calculating the coefficient of correlation between ranks (Fellows and Liu, 2015):

$$\rho = 1 - \frac{6 \sum D^2}{n(n^2-1)}$$

Where:
ρ: The coefficient of correlation between ranks
$\sum D^2$**:** Sum of the squared differences in ranks of the paired values
N: Number of parameters for which the ranking in made

To make sense and interpret the calculated coefficient of correlation between ranks, the proposed rule of thumb by Mukaka (2012) for interpreting different ranges of coefficient of correlation was used in this paper.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Differences between workplace preferences across samples

As illustrated in Table 3, descriptive importance rankings (RII) were conducted to examine the differences between the selected countries and their workplace preferences, including physical workplace factors, layout and other factors.

Table 3. Assessment of the importance of indoor environmental quality aspects as well as other service-related considerations

Factor	Saudi Arabia	Germany	Ethiopia

	Impor-tance index (%)	Impor-tance rate	Rank	Impor-tance index (%)	Impor-tance rate	Rank	Impor-tance index (%)	Impor-tance rate	Rank
1. Thermal comfort	80,65%	VI	5	74,13%	SI	6	80,83%	VI	9
2. Visual comfort	72,41%	SI	11	74,23%	SI	5	80,00%	VI	10
3. Acoustic comfort	79,76%	VI	6	76,94%	VI	2	85,83%	VI	6
4. Facilities for concentra-tion	67,95%	SI	13	72,75%	SI	8	79,49%	VI	11
5. Facilities for communi-cation	74,07%	SI	10	76,01%	VI	3	86,18%	VI	5
6. Facilities for recreation	69,33%	SI	12	68,17%	SI	9	77,78%	VI	12
7. Facilities to perform traditions or religious practices	86,46%	VI	2	27,78%	SLI	13	66,67%	SI	13
8. Office cleaning services	87,50%	VI	1	75,25%	VI	4	91,11%	VI	1
9. Safe and security	86,02%	VI	3	58,10%	SI	11	89,15%	VI	4
10. Office services	75,86%	VI	9	51,75%	SI	12	85,00%	VI	7
11. Healthy workplaces	78,89%	VI	7	77,62%	VI	1	89,92%	VI	2
12. Aesthetic design	78,67%	VI	8	64,10%	SI	10	81,20%	VI	8
13. Office location	82,05%	VI	4	73,83%	SI	7	89,63%	VI	3

Note: VI = Very important; SI =Somewhat Important; SLI = Slightly important
Source: Own elaboration

The Relative Importance Index (RII) reveals distinct differences in workplace preferences across the three samples. In the German sample, “healthy workplaces,” “acoustic comfort,” and “facilities for communication” were ranked as the most important factors, whereas “facilities to perform traditions or religious practices,” “office services,” and “safety and security” were ranked lowest.

In contrast, the Saudi Arabia sample prioritized “office cleaning services,” “facilities to perform traditions or religious practices,” and “safety and security” as the most important factors. The least important factors were “facilities for concentration,” “facilities for recreation,” and “visual comfort.”
The Ethiopian sample showed partial overlap with both groups. The most important factors were “office cleaning services,” “healthy workplaces,” and “office location,” while “facilities to perform traditions or religious practices,” “facilities for recreation,” and “facilities for concentration” were ranked lowest.

4.2 Workplace preferences rank across sample countries

A pairwise Spearman rank correlation analysis was conducted to assess the similarity of workplace preference rankings across the national samples. Overall, no consistent pattern was observed across the three groups. As shown in Table 4, the correlation between the German and Saudi Arabia samples is negligible ($\rho = -0.07$), indicating virtually no agreement in ranking patterns. The correlation between the Saudi and Ethiopian samples is low and positive ($\rho = 0.46$), suggesting limited similarity. In contrast, a moderate positive correlation was found between the German and Ethiopian samples ($\rho = 0.52$), indicating a higher degree of alignment in workplace preferences.

Table 4. Correlation analysis of ranked preferences across samples of the workplace place-related preferences

Parameter	**Pairwise comparison**		
	Germany and Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia	Germany and Ethiopia
6∑ D2	2328	1188	1056
N(N2-1)	2184	2184	2184
P (Spearman)	-0,07	0,46	0,52
Interpretation	Negligible (very weak negative)	Low positive	Moderate positive

Note: Correlation strength was interpreted following commonly used thresholds (e.g., negligible < 0.1, low 0.1–0.3, moderate 0.3–0.5, strong > 0.5).
Source: Own elaboration

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion of key results

This study examined physical workplace preferences among office workers in the built environment sector in Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia. The findings show cross-national variation, with only partial alignment to established national culture models.
The Ethiopian sample partially aligned with both the German and Saudi samples, particularly in rating “office cleaning services,” “healthy workplaces,” and “office location” as highly important, while assigning lower importance to “facilities for religious practices,” “recreation,” and “concentration.” Despite similar classifications as high-context and highly religious cultures, Saudi and Ethiopian preferences regarding religious workplace facilities diverged, indicating that cultural context alone does not fully explain workplace preferences.
“Office cleaning services” ranked among the most important factors across all samples (Germany: rank 4; Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: rank 1), suggesting a shared baseline preference. This partly aligns with uncertainty avoidance scores (Germany: 65; Saudi Arabia: 80; Ethiopia: 55) and preferences for structured environments (Migliore, 2011), though it may also reflect pandemic-related hygiene concerns during data collection (2022-2023) (Vogl and Micek,

2025). Importantly, this convergence suggests that basic environmental hygiene may represent a universally prioritized workplace requirement across cultural contexts.
Contrary to expectations of individualism–collectivism differences in spatial preferences (Plijter et al., 2014), results do not support a clear divide between private and shared office preferences. Although Germany ranked "facilities for concentration" higher than the other samples, the overall pattern suggests a stronger emphasis on interaction and communication, which is more consistent with findings by Nenonen et al. (2017). This pattern is consistent with interpretations based on low power distance and egalitarian workplace norms in shaping preferences for collaborative environments in Western contexts (Andreassi et al., 2014).
The correlation analysis further underscores the complexity of cultural effects. The negligible correlation between Germany and Saudi Arabia aligns with low- vs. high-context distinctions (Hall, 1976), whereas the moderate Germany–Ethiopia and lower Saudi Arabia–Ethiopia correlations challenge the assumption that similar cultural contexts yield similar preferences. This suggests that national culture models only partially explain workplace preferences and overlook important country-specific differences.
Overall, workplace preferences vary across contexts but are only partly consistent with established cultural models. While cultural context remains relevant, generalized national culture frameworks are insufficient as universal design guidelines.

6 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Reflection on the implications

This study offers theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to research on national culture and workplace design by showing that workplace preferences are only partly aligned with established national culture models. While these models remain useful for interpreting cross-national patterns, the findings suggest that contextual factors beyond generalized cultural contexts also shape workplace preferences. Accordingly, such models should be interpreted as explanatory rather than predictive tools.
Practically, the findings provide guidance for workplace designers, CREM managers, and real estate developers in adapting office environments to culturally diverse user groups. They also support multinational strategies that account for cross-cultural variation and suggest policymakers should incorporate cultural diversity into workplace regulation. Methodologically, the study introduces a comparative approach using rating- and ranking-based indicators across three countries.

6.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the relatively small, non-representative, and predominantly male sample limits the generalizability of the findings and may have influenced the observed workplace preferences, as potential gender differences could not be examined. Differences in sample composition across countries may have further affected the results. However, as the study aimed to identify patterns rather than provide population-level estimates, the findings offer insights into cross-cultural differences and a methodological framework for their analysis. Second, national culture models may overlook within-country and professional-group variation, which was not examined. Moreover, cultural values were not directly measured but used as an interpretative framework, limiting causal inference. Consequently, the observed differences cannot be attributed solely to cultural context and may reflect other contextual factors. Third, the focus on three countries and a single industry limits the transferability of the findings to other cultural and occupational settings. Finally, the absence of control variables limits the ability to account for potential demographic and contextual confounders.

6.3 Future research direction and recommendations

Future studies should use larger, more diverse samples across industries and contexts and directly measure cultural values to test causal relationships. Additional variables such as religion, language, socio-economic background, organizational context, and institutional conditions may help disentangle cultural from non-cultural effects (Bond et al., 2018).

Practically, organizations should integrate cultural, organizational, and demographic factors into workplace design. Policymakers should reflect cultural diversity in regulation, and designers should prioritize flexible, adaptable solutions.

Overall, cultural context is important but should not be treated as a universal design framework; rather, cultural awareness can enhance well-being, satisfaction, and productivity in multinational workplaces.

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