Original Article

A Study on Online Shopping Behavior of Customers with Special Reference to Al Dhahira Region in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract - *As established many times, individuals' behavior is an outcome of the culture they belong to. Lifestyle is one of the most important outcomes of the cultural impact on individuals. Extending the lifestyle and related variables will shape the shopping behaviour of any individual in a particular situation and for a particular product/service. Considering online shopping, which is at élan in contemporary times impact of culture is undoubtedly a lot. There is a clear difference between traditional and virtual marketplace. Customers tend to buy more and regularly based on perceived trust in E-commerce and the experience of using the virtual shopping platforms. This brief research article has explored the cultural impact on the online shopping behavior of citizens in the Al Dhahira region of the Sultanate of Oman. The author has elaborated on the impact of culture in reference to Hofstede's cultural values model. This is not the first time that impact of culture is being explored on the purchase intention or behaviours of online customers. However, there has not been a prior attempt to explore the impact of culture on the online shopping behavior of customers, especially in the Al Dhahira region of the Sultanate of Oman.*

Keywords – O*nline shopping, Customers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a driver of attitude formation in relation to normal acceptance for feeling right and desiring things (Products/Services). It is understood that consumers potentially settle down for products that are culturally accepted. Culture as an entity is the sum of emotions, social norms, attitudes, experiences, values, and behaviours. Under the impact of culture, they may be groups like families, friends, shopping groups, and peers at the workplace, which may directly or indirectly impact the shopping desires, intentions, attitudes, and the final choice of a product. With the advent and growth of online platforms and E-commerce, this impact has shifted to other groups like social groups, online communities, and brand advocates. Culture always initiates the usage of web experience, perceived market orientation, risk of using the web and overall trust while shopping online. A further word of mouth may bring a positive and negative image to the brand being shopped.

In 2018 Facebook, for the first time, had come up with language interfaces in many regions for its users. With this introduction, Facebook was able to increase their growth by 153% on the site and ultimately resulted in 25% growth worldwide in terms of the users (Global Advertising, 2009).

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS
A. Review of Literature

Explanation of Hofstede's model: Hofstede's model was originally developed in 1991, however in 2011, it was used to examine the impact of national culture on the employees of IBM (Smith et al., 2013). As per the framework, culture was disintegrated into 5 dimensions individualism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity and long-term orientation.

According to Rinne et al. (2012), *Power distance* is about the closeness of the relationship between an individual and authority. Sometimes it can be taken as social inequality. Some of the low power distance nations are the USA, Australia, Israel, while examples of low power distance nations are China and India.

According to Fam & Waller (2003), *Individualism-collectivism* refers to the understanding and level of mutual respect between any individual and the group. Conformance to group norms and decisions is very important in individualistic countries like India Africa.

According to Hofstede et al. (1998), *Masculinity-femininity* refers to belonging to a particular gender and its social implications in terms of beliefs and actions. Mostly the East Asian countries showcase a lower degree of masculinity than the Western countries.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), *Uncertainty avoidance* is about controlling emotions, aggression and facing uncertainty in a particular situation. In fact, countries that are geographically located in Asia show different levels of uncertainty avoidance character. Japan comes higher in this index in comparison to China and Singapore.

Long-term orientation refers to long terms planning and efforts rather than focusing on immediate results (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011). The changing times have given evolution to one more dimension, which is *Indulgence-restraint.* Mostly the Western culture favours indulgence in terms of self-gratification, while Asian and African culture favours a higher level of restraint. While using virtual online platforms, usability can be used synonymously with "ease of use" in e-commerce literature (Flavián et al., 2006).

According to Pookulangara & Koesler (2011), collectivistic cultures show stronger bonds than the individualistic in terms of social interactions and referent power. Individualistic cultures support the information search process for their own benefits by the usage of electronic media, but in the collectivistic culture, people use electronic media for social wellbeing and sharing of opinions (Goodrich & Mooji, 2013). Moreover, uncertainty avoidance is an indicator of perceived risks while shopping online. Based on the level of uncertainty avoidance, customers will show different behaviours and involvement while shopping online (Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky, 1999). It is very important to understand and monitor the users' social interactions and their culture by the marketers. Hallikainen & Laukkanen (2018) have discussed that the feminine culture encourages values and harmonious relationships more than the masculine ones. Individuals belonging to the masculine culture or societies don't trust each other easily and are driven by competitiveness. Further, in the masculine oriented culture, the integrity of any online brand will be evaluated based on its competencies and efficacies (Schoorman et al., 2007).

Goodrich & de Mooji (2013) have found out that individuals belonging to low power distance cultures look for facts and data while talking decisions during online shopping. They are interested in gathering more information during the decision-making process. In addition, a report by Mediascope Europe (2008) proves that individuals belonging to low power distance societies spend more time researching brand information in comparison to individuals of high-power distance societies. These individuals rely more on online reviews and recommendations for choosing their brands. In other words, impersonal sources are less important to them than personal recommendations (Pornpitakpan, 2004). According to Hallikainen & Laukkanen (2018), individuals belonging to high power distance are driven by the image and integrity and evaluate their choices accordingly. While in the low power distance society's individuals follow a more participative decision-making process (Doney et al., 1998).

Individuals belonging to short terms-oriented cultures are driven by national traditions, pride and serving others, while adaptation and circumstantial problem solving are the drivers for long terms-oriented cultures Goodrick & de Mooji (2013). Individuals who belong to low avoidance and short-term oriented cultures prefer other individuals as the primary sources of information; otherwise, in other situations where individuals belong to high avoidance and long-term oriented culture prefer facts and search engines to decide. In the collective cultures, individuals with short term orientation are interactive and expressive, while individuals having long terms orientation are passive users of social media and want to be anonymous to society (Goodrick & de Mooji, 2013). Further, individuals with short term orientation have materialistic pressure to keep up with the ongoing social media trends, so they adapt to new technology faster than those with long term orientation (Dwyer et al., 2005).

According to Arens and Bovee (1994), there is a nonrandom relationship between Hofstede's cultural dimensions and advertising appeals as the advertisements are supposed to look after the needs and satisfaction criteria of potential customers. In fact, advertising which is liked by people, is a reflection of cultural acceptance (Gelb, 1996). Cultural understanding also impacts the appeal of congruent advertising (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). Hofstede's cultural dimensions behave as a tool for establishing a relationship between culture and advertising appeal (Nguyen, 2014). In the low avoidance culture, individuals get impacted by "humour appeal (De Mooji, 2010).

Table 1. The selected four advertising appeals and cultural dimensions (Nguyen, 2014)

Advertising Appeal	Cultural Dimension	Descriptions	Relationship
Freedom	Individualism	Uninhibited, Carefree, Spontaneous, Abandoned, Indulgent, Passionate, At liberty	Positive
Family	Collectivism	Having a home, Family Privacy, Nurturance within the family, Kinship, being at home, getting married, Companionship of siblings	Positive
Dear	High Power Distance	Luxurious, Costly, Extravagant, Valuable, Expensive, Rich, highly regarded, Exorbitant, Priceless	Positive
Cheap	Low Power Distance	Undervalued, Economical, Discounted, Bargain, Inexpensive, cut-rate, penny-pinching, A good value	Positive

The study was done by Goodrich & de Mooji (2013) shows different levels of impact of Hofstede's cultural differences with its dimensions on people living in the Netherlands and Vietnam. Vietnam is a Southeast Asian with Buddhism as a popular religion haven entirely different culture than the Netherlands, which is a European country with Christianity as the main religion. There is an evident impact of cultural dimensions on the way social commerce works while gathering information and taking decisions regarding brand choices. Online shopping is also impacted by the relationship among users and the level of social interaction (Hajli, 2012). In the past (Hofstede, 1980; Fukuyama, 1995; Doney et al., 1998), trust and culture have been investigated deeply as interdependent variables. As per the study done by Doney's et al. (1998), culture was shown as the main driver of the trust-building process. Further, while analyzing the level of trust and beliefs, culture plays a vital role in E-commerce (Gefen and Heart, 2006). As per a study done by Smith et al. (2013), Americans show the direct relationship between behavioural intention and perceived usability of the virtual platform. Moreover, Belanche et al. (2012) study showed a positive relationship between an individual's intention and usability of the virtual platform in terms of enhanced satisfaction.

(Ko et al., 2004) investigated the level of loss and perceived risk while shopping online. Consumers, if they are able to control the loss and minimize the perceived risk, will ultimately be influenced in relation to the frequency of usage (Park et al., 2012). So, companies should strive towards decreasing the risk and increasing the usability of online shopping platforms. As per the study done by Schultz and Block (2009), Chinese consumers are majorly influenced by word of mouth, and with the growth of the internet, the intensity of discussion and word of mouth influence has increased a lot. However, to register their post-purchase behaviour, they engage in negative word of mouth (Lowe et al., 1998). This behaviour is in line with the fact that culturally Chinese don't want to initiate disagreements on the face, thus prioritizing harmony (Goodrich & Mooji, 2013).

B. Methodology

The data was collected from 119 respondents in the age group of 18-60 years of age in the Al Dhahira region in the Sultanate. They have been asked the questions on two main parameters. First regarding their main concern while shopping online and second, about the influencing factors while choosing the virtual platform and the product/service. Concern was indicated by three dimensions: Safety (Bart et al., 2005), Usability and Perceived risk (Kim et al., 2008) in relation to the quality of product bought online. Further, the influencing factors were asked: Friends, online reviews, information from the official website of the product/brand and health-related factors. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics to discuss the results of this brief research.

C. Preparation of Tables

All the respondents who have participated in the research have shopped at least 3 times online. Table 2 shows the breakup responses from the respondents in terms of most important, important, and not an important concern while shopping online.

Table 2. Factors affecting the choice of online shopping platform

Customer's concerns	Most important	Important	Not important	Total respondents
Safety	54 (45.4%)	63 (52.9%)	2 (1.7%)	119
Usability	51 (42.9%)	56 (47%)	12 (10.1%)	119
Perceived risk in terms of quality of product/service	26 (21.8%)	67 (56.3%)	26 (21.9%)	119

Table 3. Influencing factors for the online shopping

Influencing factors	Important	Not important	Total
Friends	86%	14%	100%
Online reviews	71%	29%	100%
Information from the product/brand website	68%	32%	100%
Price	55%	45%	100%
Health related reasons	73%	27%%	100%

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 119 respondents, 52.9% chose safety as a serious concern while shopping online. 47% of respondents chose usability of the online shopping platform as a concern, while 56.3 of the respondents stated that they are concerned about the quality of the product/services while shopping online. It reflects that the customers are concerned about online payment as well as they are not sure the product delivered will be of the same quality as displayed on the website.

Table 3 showcases the respondents' percentage being influenced by various internal and external factors while shopping online. The findings reflect that 86% of the respondents consider friends as an important influencing factor, 71% of the respondents will go through the online reviews while shopping online, 68% of the respondents consider the information about the product on the official webpage of the brand, 55% of the respondents are price-sensitive while 73% of the respondents chose to shop online due to health-related factors. These are the individuals who don't want to visit the traditional stores in recent times of pandemic.

While analyzing the findings, the customers showcased the impact of cultural dimension on decisions in relation to the product choices and risk-related concerns. There is an evident impact of the various dimensions of culture on the online shopping behavior of customers in the Al Dhahira region in the Sultanate of Oman. The impact of friends as an influencing factor highlights of collectivist culture in the region. It further highlights the pressure of belongingness. However, 68% of respondents have stated that information regarding the brand is important to them while shopping online. It shows a high degree of masculinity. 67% of respondents stated that they are concerned about the quality of the product while buying online, which shows a high degree of risk avoidance. 73% attributing to health-related reasons imply the collective welfare of society with some level of individualistic wellbeing.

IV. CONCLUSION

The research supports the previous research, which shows an impact of culture on the individuals' choices of products and the decision-making process. Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions elaborates on the behaviours of these online shopping customers in the Al Dhahira region of the Sultanate. The findings indicate that the marketers need to study the cultural differences and sensitivities while designing the marketing mix of their online marketing mix in various sectors.

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