Influence of Social Network Websites over Women Consumers from Islamic Religion: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach

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Abstract

The paper intends to design and test the influence of pertinent variables i.e. internal (marketing mix) information variables, and external information variables obtained through social network websites over women consumers buying behaviour from Islamic religion in Middle Eastern countries. The constructs focus on testing the impact on the aforesaid aspects. The paper uses structural equation modelling to find the influence and the results revealed that (i) external

information variables found to have more influence than that of internal information variables (ii) It is found society, brand reputation and reference groups exert more influence over women consumer buying behaviour through social media websites.

Keywords: **Information variables; Internal and external; Social network websites; Women consumers; Consumer buying behaviour; Structural equation modelling; Islamic religion; Middle eastern countries**

INTRODUCTION

The Internet plays a pivotal role in today's business and helps corporate to achieve success at different levels. In earlier days, companies used internet as a powerful communication medium to reach the target consumers and it has been evolved into a powerful business medium [1] through which companies sell products/services to target consumers. It shows the rapid evolution of internet from communication to business medium and it evolved into yet another level and become a powerful information sharing medium i.e. emergence of social network websites. Recent days witnessed the rapid emergence of powerful social network websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. which enabled the people to connect, share and exchange personal to professional information [2-4]. The earlier version of internet has a commercial approach as the companies use the same to communicate and sell products/services to target consumers. The present version of internet has a social approach which enabled the consumers to connect, share, exchange and communicate among themselves without the intervention of companies with commercial motive. It is no denying the power of such medium in spreading information among the users with reference to influencing their behavior towards products/services [5-9]. Hence, it is imperative to conduct a detailed study to identify the impact of such websites on consumer buying behaviour. Therefore, the researcher selects women consumers as target population for conducting a study to identify the aforesaid websites on buying and decision making behaviour on the target population selected for the study. The study selected is of exploratory in nature in order to understand the influence of social network websites on women consumer buying behaviour in Middle Eastern countries.

The increasing evolution of internet led the companies to use the same in different uses such as communication, business and influencing medium. Internet enabled the emergence of blogs (independent and sponsored), a independent media which enables the consumers to share their views, opinions, suggestions and reviews (in some cases) on products/services which would act as discussion boards for consumers who intend to buy new products/services.

However, the fragmentation nature of such blogs did not elicit much power and influence among consumers' decisions. However, the emergence of social network websites consolidated such fragmentation and enabled consumers to connect, share, exchange and communicate among themselves [5-9]. Unlike blogs, the social network websites provide security and privacy which enabled consumers to connect with people who they like and trust. Moreover, the websites follow a social approach and restrict the commercial aspect in its operations. At this juncture, the researcher intends to study the role and influence of social network websites on consumer buying and decision making behavior. Albeit, the websites encourage users to connect socially, there is no aspect explored or identified the sharing or exchanging of information with related to buying products/services. Hence, the researcher intends to identify and explore the influence of social network websites on women consumer buying behaviour with reference to choosing two major constructs such as providing marketing mix information variables and external information variables. The study of this nature is very vital at this stage and intends to make a vital contribution to the existing literature and provide a much needed direction to academia and industry for further research and devising effective marketing strategies and implement through such websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Constatinides [5] said, the explosive growth of internet is the main catalysts for the drastic changes in the retail landscape. The web, particularly known as social media has given the control, information and power over the market processes to the consumers. They said that the social media has made the direct contact between producers and consumers, making the physical retailer of information – based products or intangibles redundant. Bakshi and Gupta [10] had studied the advertisement factors that influence the consumer purchasing intention. They suggested that the organizations should select target rich websites and ad placement and sizes to attract the customers towards the product.

Hennig-Thurau [6] said that the social media had made the customers to take more active role as market players. The consumers' communication in exchanging the information had been drastically changed. In their framework they suggested that the new media should shift its marketing thinking by considering the customers as active partners who are strongly connected with the network of other consumers. Naveed [11] studied the impact of social media on Pakistani consumers. He said that the social media enables the consumer to gather sufficient information and compare different products. He identified that the social media has a strong impact on public relation, brand involvement, buying behavior and brand commitment.

Chu and Kim [7] studied the social and communal characteristics of social

networking sites. They identified that the tie strength, trust, normative and informal influence are positively associated with users' overall electronic Word – of – Mouth (eWOM) whereas they found a negative relationship with homophile. Yang [8] studied the impact of transferring message through media. He identified that the advertisements by the close friends affect only the brand attitudes of the customers. But the advertisement messages given through the media affects both customer brand attitudes and purchasing intentions. He said that the social media necessarily need not affect the consumer decision making and possess a mediating effect.

Mangold and Faulds [12] said that the impact of consumer – to – consumer communications has been greatly magnified in the market place due to the emergence of internet based social media. They suggested that a new paradigm should be developed which considers social media to be a hybrid element of marketing mix. They also suggested that the organizations should leverage emotional connections of the consumers. Nasir [13] studied the impact of communication media on purchase of decision making of Pakistani customers. They found that the family/friend's referrals are more influential than that of online recommendations. They also identified that social networking sites are less authentic than the WOM.

Trusov et al. [14] studied the effects of WOM marketing at an internet social networking site. They identified that the WOM referrals have substantially longer carry over effects than the traditional marketing actions. Also, they identified that the WOM referrals have a strong impact on new customer acquisitions. Yazdanifard et al. [15] said that the people are increasingly using the social internet websites to communicate with each other, elicit information, and find recommendations and interacting with associates. Social networks are proved to be cost effective new tool for any business. They said that these social networking sites force the organizations to form their strategies accordingly.

Khim, Cheng and Zhijie [16] studied the impact of user generate contents and marketer generated content of social media on consumer. They identified that the social media brand communities positively affect the purchase expenditures. Also they identified that UGC and MGC have significant impacts on consumer purchase behavior through embedded information and persuasion. Khong et al. [17] said that the social media has become one of the facilitator or the enabler for the critical influencing factor of consumer behavior. They identified that the network effect and consumer orientation empowerment have significant impact on trust and trustworthiness.

Mir and Zaheer [18] verified the social impact theory in the social media environment. They identified that the social media had changed the consumers' way of thinking. They found that the number of users of the social media have positive impact on perceived creditability of user generated content. Also their

showed that there was a positive relationship between the perceived creditability of user generated content and attitude towards the product related content embedded in user generated contents. Rich [19] examined the impact of social media on consumer behavior. He identified that the social media had played a major role in the expectations and consumer behavior. The companies shall utilize the social customer relationship management to increase the customer interaction on the online customer forums.

Dawn et al. [20] studied and provided the practical implications for the use of internet as a promotional tool. They studied the relationship between the purchasing professionals and usefulness of internet, usage of internet communities, influences on buyers' purchase decision and perceived influences of suppliers' websites. Gary et al. [21] studied the impact of the photos provided by the producers on the social media on the buying behavior. They identified that the trustworthy photos and positive reputation contributed towards higher purchase rates. Unworthy photos had worst impact than that of completely missing information such as no photo and no reputations.

Jothi et al. [22] states that advertisers prefer to use the social networks in order to promote and market their identity among the focused market and also suggested to communicate more about the product than advertising so that the promotion through social networks will get more advantage in marketing the products. Borgesexplores the older market practices will not work further to attract the current buyers, hence the social networks are the innovatory way to interact and build solid relationship with buyers, other than this, reliability, brand building, low price are the benefit of the social networks.

Tariq and Ghaffer [23] conducted a study that revealed that social networks are in rudimentary phases of its development and it is trying to work as main marketing channel. This is because the people takes some time to adopt to the new technologies and they mostly prefer to use to exchange their views and ideas and their personal stuffs like sharing personal stuffs and to make impression in social media for attracting the other users of networks. Eric and Karrie [24] finds that a precise system by which tie strength apparent itself in social media and reveals that the founders of social networks always try to influence the users by their products and promotions, and it may find grip blending a tie vigour model with wide range of social media essentials, which includes the confidentiality control and prioritization of in sequence which they deals with.

Nielson [2] revealed that the amount of users of top social media sites in United States has been grown from 46.8 million to 68.8 million in one year itself. According to Trubitt and Overholtzer [25] social media of the electronic diversity have become methodically entrenched in modern ethnicity. People have wicker these media into their day today activities, using Titter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and

other tools to construct and sustain multifaceted webs of personal and professional interaction. Mitrano [26] suggests the three important concepts on social media that is client edification, particularly for adolescents and elders, innovative features connecting advanced education's missions to the accepted policy deliberations on a universal extent.

Freeman and Chapman [27] revealed that the possibilities occurs when marketing companies take benefits of social networks to generate blogs for customers to post reviews, advertisements and replies, as it is properly illustrious by marketers that the brands are the most flourishing are the ones that take on the customers the most. Kaplan and Haenlein [28] explored that social networks was built on technical and ideological fundamentals of web 2.0 in order to permit the formation and exchange of content generated by the users that arise at an international level.

Strater et al. [3] analyzed and found that the expectations of the users about their privacy settings could not match what actually occurred, which results in unintended information revelation. This was happening when the user goes on using various kinds of applications by joining and providing some information on the unknown applications and even sometimes they forgot to go and recheck the privacy settings at the time of installations. Helkala [29] has studied and concluded the users in the social networks should be continuously reminded by alerts and also the author suggests for a system should be developed in order to tutor and evaluate the complete process at a time to time regulations by using a password authentication. Wu et al.[30] conducted a study and found that users are not aware of anti-phishing toolbars that is tools which visually point out that a website might not be genuine.

Sakkthivel et al. [1] conducted a study to identify the impact of promotion variables on consumer behaviour in a growing competitive marketing environment. Sakkthivel [31] examined the impact of advertising tools on consumer behaviour towards different technology products. Sakkthivel [32] explored the impact of advertising variables of consumer behaviour towards consumer durables in a matured marketing environment. Sakkthivel and Babawale [33] conducted a study to identify the variables that impact customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. They found that the product, price and promotion influence customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. Sakkthivel [33] conducted a study identify the impact of promotion variables on consumer buying behaviour and found internet plays a vital role. Manickam and Sriram [9] conducted a study to identify the impact of promotion information i.e. advertising on consumer buying behaviour. Sakkthivel [34] discussed the possibilities of the impact of promotion of consumer behaviour in a restricted marketing environment.

Sakkthivel [35] examined the influence of advertising tools in creating awareness, providing necessary information and knowledge to the audience and found the

advertising tools do create awareness, provide necessary information and knowledge. Though aforesaid studies provided a much needed direction to develop a theme for the study, few studies have been attempted on the variables selected for the study. Therefore, the present study would intend to fill the gaps found through the reviews. The results would intend to provide a much needed direction to the future researchers with reference to the role of social network websites in providing necessary information to influence women consumers buying behaviour. The reviews motivated the researchers to develop the hypotheses with related to information variables such as internal or marketing mix information variables, and external information variables. Such hypotheses would be tested through the collected data and find the impact of the same over women consumers buying behaviour.

HYPOTHESES FORMULATION

To identify the influence of social network websites in providing marketing mix information (product, price, promotion, distribution) variables by impacting women consumers buying behavior.

Various studies were conducted by researchers in this regard. Distribution [5,9,23], promotions [1,7-10,13,20,22,24,27,31,32,34,35] products [9,11,21,24] price[21].

H1: There is a positive influence of social network websites in providing marketing mix information (product, price, promotion, distribution) variables by impacting women consumers buying behavior.

To identify the influence of social network websites in providing external information variables (peer groups, opinion groups, society, brand reputation etc,) by influencing women consumers buying behavior.

Some studies related to this hypothesis were: Individual consumer's opinion [6,12], Social and Communal characteristics [7,18], peer group [13,26], opinion group [14,15].

H2: There is a significant role of social network websites in providing external information variables (peer groups, opinion groups, society, brand reputation etc,) by influencing women consumers buying behavior.

RESEARCH   PROBLEM   FORMULATION/CONCEPTUAL

MOTIVATION

Figure 1 shows the expected research problem formulation model.
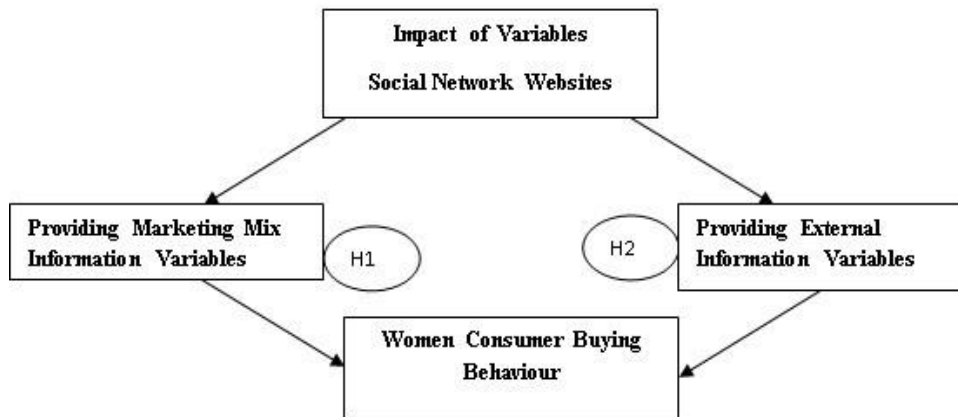

Figure 1: Research problem formulation/conceptual motivation of the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample selection

The primary data has been collected through collection tool (both English and Arabic) from the selected respondents (women) of the study those who reside in various cities of Oman. The sampling unit for this research work are women respondents who represent different demographic profiles viz. age, marital Status, literacy, occupation, employment status, income, family size, place of living and reside in various cities of Oman. The study used Quota sampling technique as the respondents (women) represent different demographic variables. The sample size used for this work is one hundred and fifty (N=150) out of 163 samples and the aforesaid samples have been selected as they were appropriately answered by the respondents. The remaining 13 samples were considered unviable for the final analysis and left out.

Instrument development and collection methods

The study used structured questionnaire to collect primary data from the target respondents selected for the study. The questionnaire consists of two major sections as the first one would focus on collecting demographic information of the respondents and second section would focus on collecting the information pertaining to impact of social network websites on women consumers buying behaviour towards products/services through providing marketing mix information variables and external information variables through using attitude scale (5 point Likert scale). The study used personal interview method to collect the data from

the respondents by the researchers. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to the respondents, in order to ensure that they properly understood the questions before answering them.

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis has been conducted to test the validity of collection instrument which produced 0.910 (overall collection tool) and 0.884 and 0.925 (Attitude Scale) which revealed very high reliability. KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.934 which shows that the factors analysis may be useful to the collected data. The Bartlett's test of sphericity significance was 0.000 which shows that selected variables are related and suitable for the study (Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability statistics on the variables selected for the study – Conceptual model.

Internal Information Variables **VS1 (4)**	**External Information Variables** **VS2 (4)**
Product Information, Price Information, Promotion Information, Place/Distribution Information	*peer groups, opinion groups, society, brand reputation etc*
Cronbach's 0.884; KMO 0.813	**Cronbach's 0.925; KMO 0.857**

Face validity

The collection tool has been developed in bi-lingual (in both English and Arabic language) and tested with selected respondents before used for final study. Doing this, the study ensured the face validity of the study as the respondents could understand and answer appropriately to the questions asked in their own language (Arabic).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study has been conducted among 150 women participants' with different demographic profiles such as age, occupation, employment status, marital status, literacy, income, location etc. Table 2 shows the demographic analysis of the respondents.

We used structural equation modelling to find the influence of the selected variables over women consumers buying behaviour. We used AMOS to analyze the collected data and found the following results. The results have been

depicted as follows:

Table 2: Demographic analysis.

S No	Demographic Variables	No. of Respondents
1.	Age	< 20 (N=12); 21-30 (N=53); 31-40 (N=65); 41-50 (N=15); > 50 (N=5)
2.	Occupation	Student (N=7); Ministry (N=47); Banks (N=27); Company (N=33); Teacher (N=23); Doctor (N=4); Housewife (N=9)
3	Literacy	Primary School (N=7); Secondary (N=18); Diploma (N=74); Bachelor (N=42); Masters (N=5); PhD (N=3); Others (N=1)
4	Marital Status	Single (N=26); Married (N=124)
5	Income (RO) (1 RO = 2.6 US$ Approx.)	<500 (N=21); 501-1000 (N=95); 1001-1500 (N=22); >1501 (N=12)
6	Location	City (N=54); Town (N=23); Village (N=73)

Structural equation modeling

Model Specification: To identify the influences of internal and external variables considered for the study on the women consumer buying behavior, SEM has been developed. Based on the assumptions and hypotheses, the following expected model has been developed. Figure 2 shows the expected SEM model.

Model Specification: The model contained 8 observed endogenous variables and 10 unobserved exogenous variables with 8 error variances. The model had 36 distinct sample moments and 17 distinct parameters to be estimated. Thus, the degrees of freedom of the model were 19.

Model Fit Results: To test the model fitness, various analyses were conducted. The model fit values were found using SPSS 21 and AMOS 21 and the corresponding acceptance levels were analyzed [36].
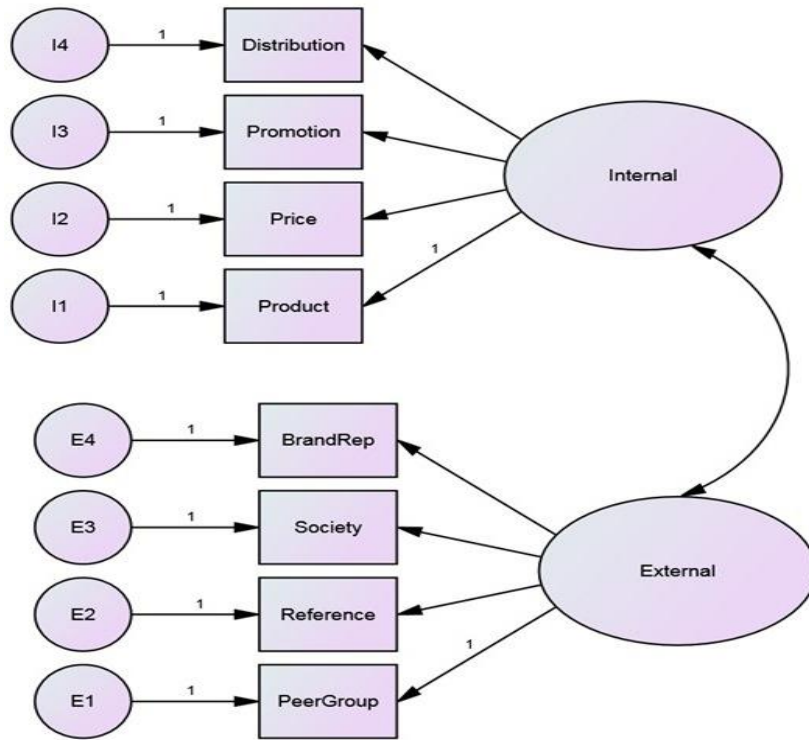
Figure 2: Expected model.

The Absolute fitness indices were analyzed to measure the base comparisons. The Chi-Square (χ2) value was 43.049 with p = 0.000. The Chi-Square/df value was 2.27 which showed the model fall in good fit range. The RMSEA was 0.092 which showed the mediocre fit. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI = 0.94 > 0.90) showed a good model fit. The adjusted GFI (0.88) showed the moderate fit and the RMR (0.02) was very close to 0 and showed a best fit.

The incremental and comparative fit indices were studied to compare the absolute fit of the models. The indices vales were: NFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, IFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97. All the above values are greater than 0.95 and showed a good fit between the specified model and the independence model. The RFI value (0.94 > 0.90) also showed a good fit among the model.

The Parsimony fitness indices fell in acceptable fitness range (0.5 – 1.0) with PNFI = 0.65 and PCFI = 0.66. The information theoretic indices were also showed an acceptable fit of the model with ECVI and MECVI values 0.52. The minimum value discrepancy index CMIN = 43.05, which showed an acceptable fit of the model. The CMIN/df (2.27) showed a good fit of the specified model. From the above analyses, it is clear that the SEM model fits to the data in all aspects. Thus, the data were analyzed further for regression weights and covariance and correlation. Table 3 shows the regression weights of the default model.
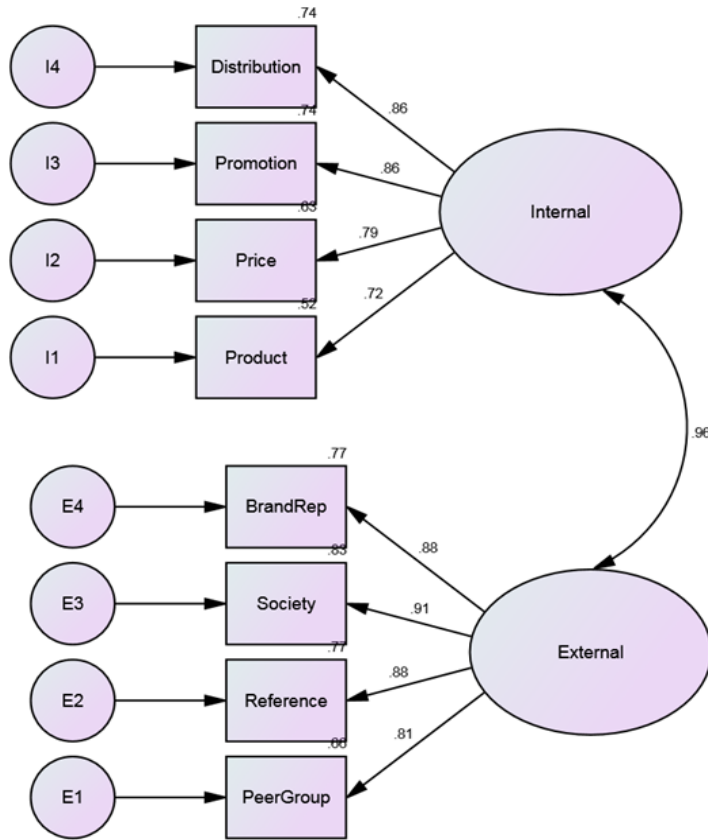
Figure 3: Standardized estimate model.

Table 3: Regression weights.

Measured Variable		Latent Variable	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Product	<---	Internal	1.000				
Price	<---	Internal	1.060	.111	9.509	***	par_1
Promotion	<---	Internal	1.154	.112	10.326	***	par_2
Distribution	<---	Internal	1.395	.135	10.317	***	par_3
PeerGroup	<---	External	1.000				
Reference	<---	External	1.010	.077	13.059	***	par_4
Society	<---	External	1.133	.082	13.807	***	par_5
BrandReputation	<---	External	1.131	.087	13.038	***	par_6

From the above analysis, the internal variables estimates of the coefficients lie between 1.000 and 1.395. Distribution variable is highly influenced by the consumer behavior with maximum value whereas the product variable has the least influence on the consumer buying behavior with lowest estimate values. When external variables are considered, estimate values are between 1.000 and 1.133. Society has the highest impact on theconsumer buying behavior maximum estimate value whereas peer group variable has the lowest impact with least estimate value. All the critical ratio values are greater than 1.96 which shows that the estimated path parameter is significant at the 0.05 level. The p values show that the significance is smaller than 0.001 (P<0.001). When critical ratio values are compared, the external variables have higher values than that of the internal variables. This shows that the external variables have higher impact on the consumer buying behavior. The standardized regression weights are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Standardized regression weights.

Measured Variable		Latent Variable	Estimate
Product	<---	Internal	.719
Price	<---	Internal	.794
Promotion	<---	Internal	.861
Distribution	<---	Internal	.861
Peer Group	<---	External	.812
Reference	<---	External	.879
Society	<---	External	.911
BrandReputation	<---	External	.878

From the above table, it is clear that all the measured variables have significant impact on the latent variables as all the estimates are > 0.7. The external variable society has the highest impact on the consumer behavior with highest estimate 0.911. The internal variable product has the least impact on the consumer behavior with estimate 0.719. When the estimates are compared, it is evident that the external variables have higher impact than the internal variables. The covariance estimate between the latent variables (internal, external) was 0.367 with standard error coefficient 0.058. The critical ratio between the variables was 6.371 with p < 0.001.   From the above analysis, it is clear that the variables are significant as CR > 1.96. The correlation between the latent variables is found to be 0.956. Thus, the variables are significant.
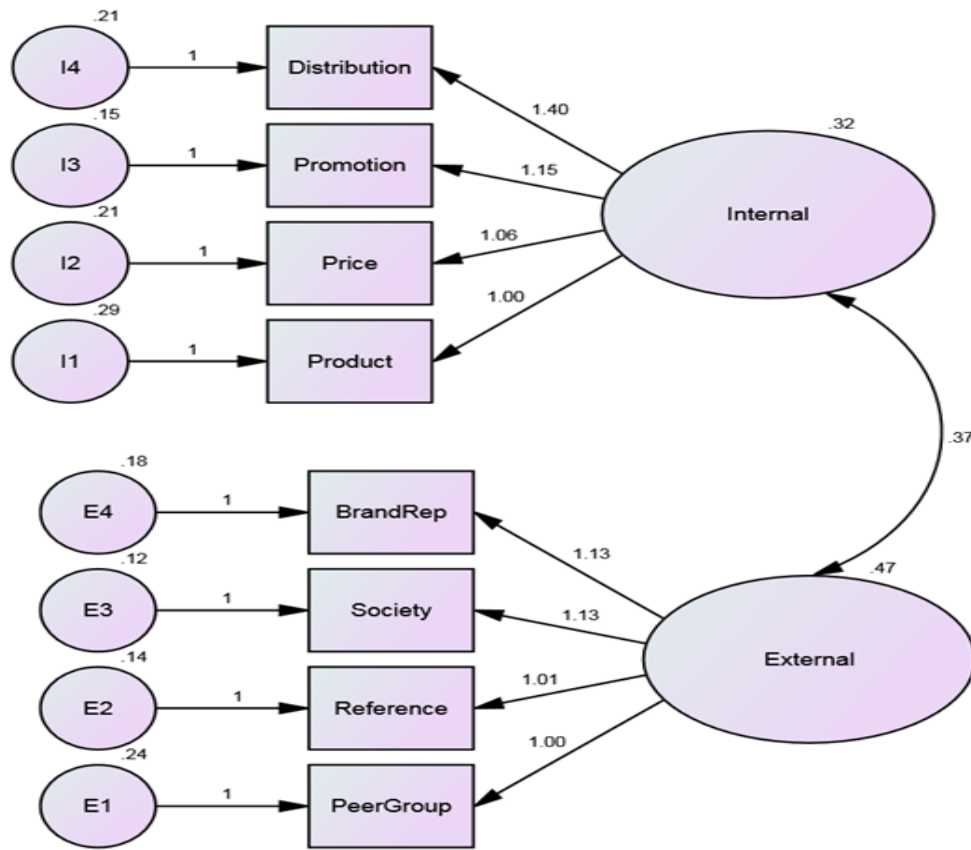
Figure 4: Unstandardized estimates.

Table 5: Squared multiple correlations.

Variable	Estimate
Brand Reputation	.770
Society	.829
Reference	.772
Peer Group	.660
Distribution	.741
Promotion	.742
Price	.631
Product	.518

Squared multiple correlations of the observed variables are shown in Table 5. The squared multiple correlation analysis shows that the external variable "Society" has the highest impact on the consumer buying behavior with 82.9%. The external variable "Reference Group" has the second highest impact with 77.2%. The external variable "Brand Reputation" has the third highest impact with 77%. The internal variable Promotion" has the 4th level impact on the consumer buying behavior with 74.2%. The internal variable "Distribution" has the 5th level impact with 74.1% which is very close to "Promotion". The external variable "Peer Group" has 6th level influence with 66%. The "Price" variable has the 7th position on impact with 63.1%. The internal variable "Product" has the least impact on the consumer buying behavior with 51.8%. All the variables have the estimates greater than 0.5, which shows that all the variables have impacts on the consumer buying behaviour.

Table 6: Variances.

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Internal	.315	.063	4.971	***	par_8
External	.468	.079	5.955	***	par_9
I1	.294	.037	7.969	***	par_10
I2	.207	.027	7.562	***	par_11
I3	.146	.022	6.785	***	par_12
I4	.215	.032	6.798	***	par_13
E1	.242	.031	7.688	***	par_14
E2	.141	.020	6.965	***	par_15
E3	.124	.020	6.220	***	par_16
E4	.179	.026	6.980	***	par_17

The variance analysis on error coefficients are shown in Table 6. From the above table, it is evident that all the critical ratio values are greater than 1.96 which shows that the estimated path parameter is significant at the 0.05 level. The p values show that the significance is smaller than 0.001(p<0.001). Figure 4 shows the unstandardized SEM model for the default model.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study had been attempted to unveil the influence of social network websites in providing marketing mix and external information variables that impact women

consumer buying behaviour. The study selected the major constructs viz. marketing mix information variables (product, price, promotion, distribution) and external information variables (peer groups, reference groups, society, brand reputation) and test the influence of the same among the target respondents selected for the study (women consumer). The study revealed that the selected variables have significant impact over women consumer buying behaviour. With reference to identify the impact and model fit; structural equation modelling has been used. The results revealed that all the selected variables (internal and external) found to have a positive influence over women consumer buying behaviour, thus proving the hypotheses set for the study H1 and H2. However, in order to identify the degree of influence, further analyses on the SEM model revealed that the society elicit a highest impact, followed by reference groups, brand reputation, place (distribution) and promotion elicit a higher impact over women consumer buying behaviour through providing the aforesaid pertinent information. Therefore, it is found the results are consistent with the previous studies [5,7-11,13,20-24,26,35]. It is found that the price and product elicit a lowest impact. With regard to identify the influence of external and internal information variables, it is found external information variables found to have a higher influence than that of internal variables. Therefore, it may be inferred that the women consumer buying behaviour has primarily been influenced by society, brand reputation, reference groups, followed by information related to place of selling, and promotion of products/services. It is evident the social network websites play a vital role in providing pertinent information related to brand reputation, place of selling, and promotion related to products/services thus, influencing the women consumer buying behaviour. It is imperative to reveal the influence of social variables and reference groups over the decision of women consumer buying behaviour. Hence, the study revealed that the social network websites do have influence over consumer buying behaviour and indeed could play a commercial role which is different from for what they have been created in the first place. Such outcomes would largely help the practicing managers to understand the behavioural aspects of people using social network websites, and utilize such websites to target, reach and market products/services, thus increasing revenues, sales, and profit. Moreover, the social network websites may allow the companies to utilize their websites to market products/services, thus generating revenues through such sources. Therefore, the study provided a vital and direction to the practicing managers, social network websites, and researchers in this field, thus revealing the commercial side, and its influence over consumer buying behaviour. This denotes the commercial dimension of social network websites in enabling the corporate world to reach the target consumers, influence them to buy different products/services that are acceptable to culture, society and family.

Future Scope

The study has been conducted to identify the impact of the market mix variables

on women consumer. This may be further intensively studied with respect to defined age groups with familiarity in using media in consumer purchases. The study shall also be conducted to identify the impacts of products and services provided by the companies.

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