IMPACT OF CULTURAL VARIABLES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON OMANI WOMEN CONSUMERS

Thomas P Chandy[*]

B Sriram[**]

ABSTRACT

Consumers buying decisions vary based on various impact factors. In particular, Hofstede's different dimensions on cultural variables have impacts on the consumers with high degree. The women consumer's purchasing decisions are highly concerned with social, cultural and ethical environmental factors. In particular, Middle East women consumer's buying behavior is different from others. A study was conducted with 122 samples to identify the level of impact of cultural variables on Middle East women consumers to identify the impact of cultural variables on product choices. The impact levels of Hofstede's dimensions have been studied. An impact model has been developed based on the outputs.

Key words: *buyer loyalty, consumer behaviour, cultural variables, Hofstede dimensions, women consumers.*

[*] Lecturer, Department of Business Administration

[**] Lecturer, Quality Assurance Officer, IST Department

Sur University College, Sur, Sultanate of Oman

Introduction

This research entitled "Impact of cultural variables: an exploratory study of Omani consumers" was an exploratory attempt to conduct a marketing research of how women are affected by various cultural variables in their decision to buy products.

Business organizations primarily exist to satisfy customer needs profitably. The customer remains the king, and therefore knowing them, their preferences and how they are affected by internal and external factors are crucial to the organization's success. Knowing how various cultural factors affects consumer buying pattern and their behaviour towards specific products or product groups is an essential input for any market oriented manufacturer.

The world economy is becoming increasingly borderless and cross-cultural. During the next decades, as marketers enter new international markets, an understanding of how culture influences consumer behavior will be crucial for both managers and consumer researchers. This would be important as the types of consumers and types of products that are available for satisfying their needs are becoming more numerous. Women all over the Middle East are becoming more independent and are decision makers and they are becoming a very large segment of the total consumers for most products. While women as a customer segment have swollen, in many countries women are still controlled by their national culture. This has resulted in marketers focusing on how women's choice of products is in some ways controlled by the culture that is present in the society where they live. Hence a study is needed to ascertain the impact of these cultural variables on how women make product choices.

One of the most important social influences which has a profound impact on the way consumers perceive and behave is culture (Clark 1990). Culture is defined as a pattern of assumptions, values, and beliefs whose shared meaning is acquired by members of a group (Hofstede 1991). Attitudes, beliefs, intentions, norms, roles, and values are aspects of the self. The self affects the way people process and assess information and promotes differential processing and evaluation of information from the environment (Triandis 1989). The self is shaped through interactions with groups, and leads to differences in social behavior (Triandis 1989). Some aspects of the self may be universal and have the same meaning across time and geography and other elements may be extremely culture specific (Hofstede 1991).

It is generally accepted that Asian and Latin nations are very different from the U.S. and Canada. Most research in consumer relationship marketing is based on theoretical frameworks developed in western cultures, primarily in the U.S. It is quite possible that the benefits received, or their importance, in business-to-consumer relationships may be very different when considered in other cultural contexts. The knowledge that all people are culturally conditioned (e.g. Hofstede 1991) and that culture affects how consumers respond to marketing efforts suggests that knowledge of the cultural similarities and dissimilarities across cultures provides an awareness of where marketing practices can be effectively transferred.

Multinational Companies introduce new products and services to different markets by trying to exploit the exposure gained by consumers of the different cultures in different markets. Consumers through exposure to different products tend to gain different cultural views. This culture transfer has helped to change the lives and life styles of people in many countries and Oman is no exception.

Hofstede (1994) identified seven independent dimensions of national culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism /collectivism, and masculinity/femininity, Confucian work dynamism, High/Low context cultures, Immediacy and expressiveness. In this research we have analyzed the impacts of Hofstede's 7 cultural variables on buying behavior of women consumers of Middle East, in particular, the women consumers of Sultanate of Oman. Women consumers' play a vital role in a country's GDP. An impact model has been developed with respect to the 7 cultural variables and the findings are summarized.

Objectives and Hypothesis

The main objective of this research is to identify the impact levels of Hofstede's 7 cultural variables on women consumers in Middle East buying behaviors. Apart from that, the basic objective of this research is to find the degree of impacts of the above foresaid cultural variables. The following hypotheses were set according to the research objectives.

Hyp1: Power distance factor has impact on women consumer's product choice.

Variable 1(V1): Power Distance

Hyp2: Uncertainty avoidance variable has high impact on women consumer's product choice.

Variable 2(V2): Uncertainty avoidance

Hyp3: Individualism / Collectivism factor has high impact on Middle East women consumer's buying behavior.

Variable 3(V3): Individualism / Collectivism

Hyp4: Masculinity/femininity dimension has impact on women consumer's product selection behavior.

Variable 4(V4): Masculinity/femininity

Hyp5: Confucian work dynamism factor has high impact on Middle East women buyer behavior.

Variable 5(V5): Confucian work dynamism

*Hyp6:* High/Low context cultures variable has impact on women consumer's product selection.

Variable 6(V6): High/Low context cultures

Hyp7: Immediacy and expressiveness of the individual has high impact on women consumer's product choice.

Variable 7(V7): Immediacy and expressiveness

Model Specification

Based on the above objectives and hypotheses the following impact model has been defined. Figure 1 shows the proposed model of impacts of Hofstede's cultural variables impacts on Middle East women buyers' product choices.
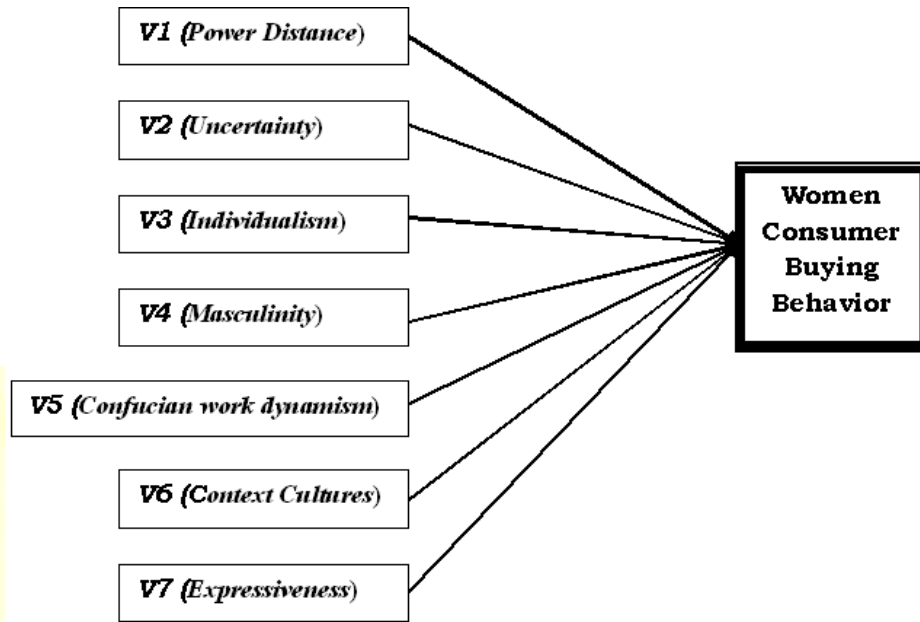
Fig 1: Proposed Model

Literature Review

Cross-cultural research has found that cultural differences can affect consumer information processing, decision-making and quality expectations (Donthu & Yoo 1998). In addition, some studies have shown that variables important to the understanding of marketing relationships can be affected by cultural differences. For example, Japanese firms were found to use more referrals and engage in more network activity than U.S. firms (Bianchi 2000) suggest that cultural differences affect the development of trust and commitment in exchange relationships. By examining between-country differences in values and perceptions through factor analysis and other statistical methods,

Dawn Chatty (2000) stated that for Middle East women, the boundary that defines what traditional cultural behavior is and what is contemporary, foreign, or unacceptable is often blurred. Abdullah et al (2011) stated that nationalism as a factor is very much related to the preference towards GCC products, while social status and quality of products are evenly related to the preference towards western products. Cheng Lu Wang (2004) stated that ethnocentrism impacts consumer willingness to buy domestic products basically when local products are of

good quality. This becomes weaker when consumers perceive local products being of lower quality.

Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) have stated that the impact of culture is so natural and automatic that its influence on behavior is usually taken for granted and only when people are exposed to people with different cultural values or customs that they become aware of how culture has molded their own behavior. Parastoo (2011) said that ethnic identity appeared to be the greater influence especially on certain categories of products. Khalid et al (2012) stated that consumers in Arabic/Islamic collectivist cultures are collectively influenced religiosity and boycotting of specific products.

Durmaz et al (2011) stated that culture, beliefs and traditions are more important than environment, friends and social groups in making purchase decisions. Soraya (2008) stated that the spread of consumerism in the Arab world has been fueled by, among other factors, increased female participation in family purchase decisions and increased per capita income. Jacqueline et al (2002) stated that although the Asian collectivist consumers possess the buying impulsiveness trait in equal measure with individualists, they act in a manner that is consistent with their cultural norms, thereby reducing their impulsive buying behavior.

Research Methodology

In the research, we used structured questionnaire technique to collect primary data from the respondents. A questionnaire with 6 demographic questions and 14 questions related to Hofseted's variables was prepared and distributed to women consumers in Sultanate of Oman. The women with various age groups from different kind of places such as village, town and city were requested to respond to the questions. Quota sampling method has been used to collect the results from the respondents. The 5 point Likert scale has been used to measure the respondents' opinions. The total number of sample size was N = 122. The primary data collected for Thomas and Sriram (2012) was analyzed with respect to Hofseted's variables.

The Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis was conducted to check the reliability of the data collected. The reliability was 0.9758 for all the 8 items. Figure 2 shows the reliability analysis.

****** Method 1 (space saver) will be used for this analysis ******

R E L I A B I L I T Y A N A L Y S I S - S C A L E (A L P H A)

Reliability Coefficients

N of Cases = 122.0   N of Items = 8

Alpha = .9758

Fig 2: Reliability Analysis

Equation Formulation

The linear equation has been formed in order to check the impact level. The following regression equation has been considered for regression analysis.

$$Y = a_0 + a_1V_1 + a_2V_2 + a_3V_3 + a_4V_4 + a_5V_5 + a_6V_6 + a_7V_7$$

Where a_0, a_1, a_3, a_4, a_5, a_6, a_7 are the coefficients and V_i (i = 1 to 7) are the variables to represent the 7 Hofstede's variables assumed in the research hypotheses. Y is the women consumer individual satisfaction on buying the goods.

Demographic Analysis

In the number of respondents, 43.44% were single and 56.56% were married. 55.74% of the respondents were from city and / or town where 44.26% were from the village. More than 80% of the women respondents were employed. Table 1 shows the number of respondents and their respective occupations.

Table 1: Respondents and their respective Occupations

Occupation	Number of respondents	%
Ministry	27	22.13
Private sector companies/Banks	34	27.87
Teacher	16	13.11
Nurse	10	8.20
Self employed	11	9.02
Housewife	24	19.67

6.56% of the respondents were getting a monthly salary less than 99 Omani Rials (1 OMR = 2.57USD). 22.13% of the respondents were getting a salary of OMR 100 to 300. Nearly 46% of

the respondents were getting a salary between OMR 301 to OMR900. More than 25% of the respondents were getting a salary above OMR900. Though 19.67% of the respondents were housewife, they would have filled the amount which they get as financial support from various resources including the government.

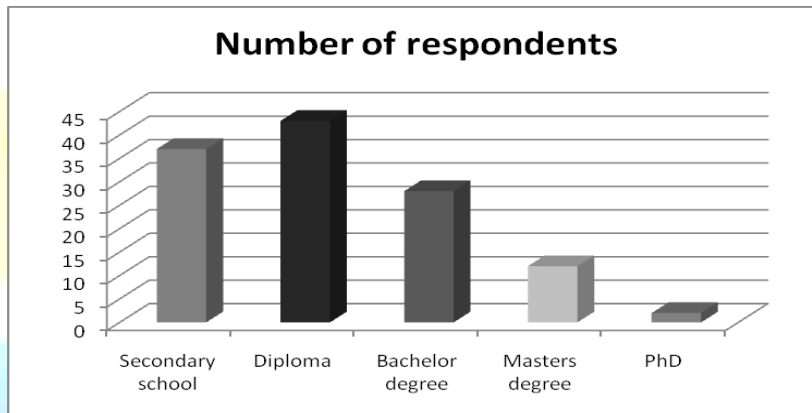Figure 2 shows the academic qualifications of the respondents.

Fig 2: Academic Qualification of the women respondents

Research Questions Analysis & Findings

Mean Value Analysis

The responses were analyzed with respect to the Hofstede's variables. Using descriptive statistics, the mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, standard error in mean values were calculated. The corresponding values are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean, SD, CV, Skewness and Kurtosis of the questionnaire

Variable	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	Overall
Mean	3.0861	3.0410	3.2828	3.0300	2.8825	3.0984	3.0328	3.0821
Sample SD	1.0009	1.2424	1.0708	1.0907	0.9847	1.1710	1.0636	0.9917
CV	0.0906	0.1125	0.0969	0.0988	0.0891	0.1060	0.0963	0.0898
SE Mean	32.43%	40.42%	32.62%	35.93%	34.16%	37.80%	35.32%	32.12%
Skewness	-0.3006	-0.1419	-0.3701	0.0577	-0.0258	-0.0998	0.0023	-0.3171
Kurtosis	-0.2552	-1.0230	-0.4727	-0.5515	-0.4929	-0.9043	-0.6035	-0.5844
Rank	*3*	*4*	*1*	*6*	*7*	*2*	*5*	

The mean value analysis shows that, 'Individualism /Collectivism" dimension has the highest impact on the women user's satisfaction. 'High / low context culture' variable has the 2nd highest impact on the Middle East women consumers. These two variables have the mean greater than the mean of 'overall' satisfaction of women in buying a product. Thus, the first two variables V3

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.

International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

182

and V6 have the highest impact on buying behavior. 'Power Distance' variable has the 3rd highest impact with mean 3.0861. This mean value is very close to the 'overall' satisfaction. Thus this variable V1 may be considered as a medium impact factor. 'Uncertainty avoidance' variable has the mean 3.04 which is lesser than the 'overall' mean value. 'Immediacy and expressiveness' dimension has the impact with mean 3.04 and in the 5th position. 'Masculinity / Femininity' and 'Confucian work dynamism' variables have the 6th and 7th positions respectively. These 4 variables have the mean values lesser than the 'overall' satisfaction of the women buyer in the Middle East. Thus, the variables V2, V4, V7, and V5 have the lower impact on the Middle East women consumer buying behavior.

Regression Analysis and Impact Levels

To measure the impact levels, simple linear regression analysis was conducted, Using ANOVA, the coefficient of determination (R^2), F – Value and p – values are calculated. The values are tabulated in Table 3.

Table 3: Simple Linear Regression and ANOVA Values

Factor	Regression Equation	R^2	p – Value	Rank
Power Distance	$0.91V_1 + 0.27$	0.847	1.08E-50	3
Uncertainty	$0.74V_2 + 0.82$	0.835	8.82E-49	4
Individualism	$0.89V_3 + 0.16$	0.925	2.93E-69	1
Masculinity	$0.79V_4 + 0.70$	0.763	2.37E-39	6
Confucian Work Dynamism	$0.87V_5 + 0.58$	0.744	2.81E-37	7
Context Cultures	$0.80V_6 + 0.60$	0.899	1.08E-61	2
Expressiveness	$0.85V_7 + 0.49$	0.821	1.03E-46	5

The above results show that "Individualism" has the highest impact with 92.5% ($r^2 = 0.902$, $p < 0.0001$). The choices of women consumers of the product with respect to "Context Cultures" has second highest impact with 89.9% ($r^2 = 0.899$, $p < 0.0001$). The "Power Distance" dimension of Hofestede's national culture has the 3rd level impact with significance 84.7% ($r^2 = 0.847$, $p < 0.0001$). The "Uncertainty" dimension has the 4th impact of 4th level with significance 83.5% ($r^2 = 0.835$, $p < 0.0001$). The consumer's expressiveness dimension has the 5th rank with significance impact 82.1% ($r^2 = 0.821$, $p < 0.0001$). The gender dimension of the national culture "Masculinity" has the 6th impact level with significance 76.3% ($r^2 = 0.763$, $p < 0.0001$). The

'Confucian Work Dynamism" dimension of the national culture has the least level impact with significance 74.4% ($r^2 = 0.744$, $p < 0.0001$).

The above results show that all the r^2 values are more than 0.7 and which are nearer to 1. The overall average of r^2 values are 0.833. The factors with r^2 value greater than 0.833, shall be considered as high impact variables. Thus, the factors "Individualism", "Context Cultures", and "Power Distance" shall be considered high impact variables. "Uncertainty" factor has nearly same r^2 value. Thus, it may be considered as medium impact factor. "Expressiveness", "Masculinity" and "Confucian Work Dynamism" variables have lower r^2 value than that of the average r^2 value. Thus, these variables may be considered as lower impact variables. All the p – values are less than 0.0001. This shows that all the national culture variables defined by Hofestede have significant impact on Middle East women buying behavior.

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to test the consistency of the independent variables to the women consumer buying decision. The multiple regression values are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Regression Equation	R^2	p – Value
$Y_i = 0.02 + 0.29V_1 + 0.16V_2 + 0.28V_3 - 0.02V_4 + 0.14V_5 + 0.13V_6 + 0.02V_7$	0.998	1.84E-147

The multiple regression analysis shows that all the variables have significant impact on the women consumer buying behavior with 99.8% ($r^2 = 0.998$, $p < 0.0001$). The regression equation is linear with all considered variables. As p - value is less than 0.0001 all the variables have significant impacts on the women consumer buying decision.

Correlation Matrix

As the linear and multiple regressions had significant high impact, to measure the dependency between the selected variables, correlation matrix was created and tested. Table 5 shows the dependency between the variables.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

	Decision	Power	Uncertain	Indivi	Mascul	Dynam	Culture	Expressi

Decision	1.000						
Power	.919	1.000					
Uncertain	.914	.760	1.000				
Indivi	.962	.846	.868	1.000			
Masculinity	.873	.874	.689	.804	1.000		
Dynamism	.859	.699	.783	.783	.801	1.000	
Culture	.949	.841	.838	.900	.910	.869	1.000
Expressiveness	.906	.921	.762	.849	.786	.725	.850	1.000
	122	sample size					
	± .178	critical value .05 (two-tail)					
	± .232	critical value .01 (two-tail)					

The above correlation matrix table also shows that the factors considered for the research purposes have the same order of correlation with "overall" buying behavior of women consumers. That is "Individualism" has the highest correlation with "Overall" and 'Confucian Work Dynamism" has the least correlation with "Overall". The values are significant at both 0.01 and 0.05 levels.

In correlation matrix, the average of correlation between the variables and "Overall" is 0.912. Thus, "Individualism /Collectivism", 'High / low context culture', 'Power Distance' and 'Uncertainty avoidance' factors shall be considered closely correlated to overall decision. The other variables shall be considered as lower impact variables.

Discussions

From the above analyses, only in Mean Value Analysis, "Uncertainty" dimension has the mean value lesser than that of the "Overall" and hence considered as a lower impact variable. But in other two analyses, "Uncertainty" has higher impact on Middle East women consumer's buying decision. So, the impact levels have been considered as High, Middle and Low. Table 6 shows the impact levels of the variables.

Variables	Level
Power Distance	Medium
Uncertainty	Medium
Individualism	High
Masculinity	Low
Dynamism	Low
Culture	High

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.
International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

185

Expressiveness	Low

Based on the above analyses, the following model has been developed. Figure 3 explains the model.
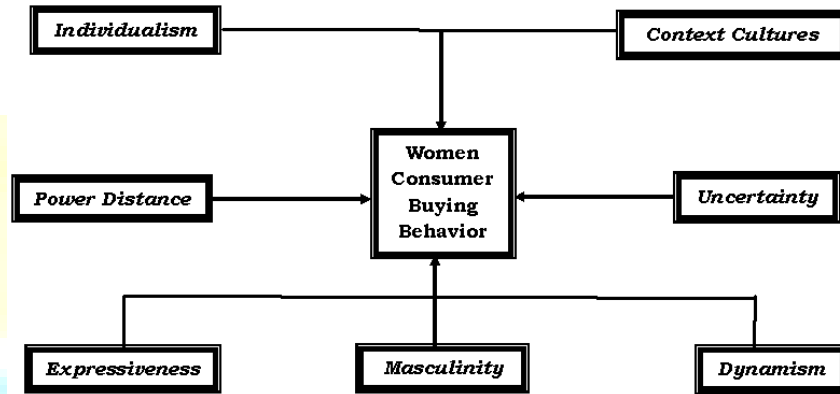

Fig 3: Developed Model

Conclusion

The life style of many Omanis is becoming a lifestyle of a consumer class. It is like a cultural orientation that perceives the possession and consumption of a variety of goods and services as the path to personal happiness, social status, and success. The economy of Oman has been given a fillip by the high level of oil prices. This has increased the national income substantially and this in turn has translated into more jobs. Women are given equal opportunity to get jobs and earn their own incomes. This in turn has increased the ability to consume. This has had a big effect on the standard of living of many Omanis.

This study shows that the Omani women consumer's buying behavior is highly influenced by individualism and context culture. Hofstede's findings corroborate the findings in our research that Omani society had regarded the individual as its fundamental component and highly accepted the individual's satisfaction on buying a particular product. The impact of high context culture proved that Hofstede's study is true with respect to women consumers.

The power distance measure has only medium impact on women buyers. This shows that the society has significantly tolerated the equality of genders. Omani women are given freedom of

choice to buy their required products as available in the market. The Uncertainty avoidance dimension has also has medium impact on the Omani women buyers. This shows that the Omani women are provided with sufficient education to deal with the uncertain and unknown situations while buying the products.

Though the Omani women are close to each other as relatives, friend and colleagues and discuss about the requirements and availabilities, this dimension has significantly low impact on buyer behavior. As Omani women are free to select their required products, the masculinity dimension is also having low impact on the buying decisions. The "Confucian work dynamism" has the lowest impact on the Omani women buyers.

The study indicates that the impact of some of the cultural variables has reduced especially for independent women. They are willing to buy products without any major interference from their husbands, parents and other family members. They are not dominated by these cultural variables. There is a shift from a very conservative society to a more consumer oriented society.

Acknowledgement

References

1. Abdullah M. A., Qadir. M.,(2011) - GCC Consumer's attitudes of local products vs products made in western countries. Tands- Journal publications November 2011.

2. Bianchi, Constanza(2000) The effect of cultural differences – Developments in Marketing Science Vol 23 pp 73-79

3. Cheng Lu Wang (2004) – Consumer ethnocentrism in a developing country setting: testing moderating effects. Journal of Consumer Marketing 2004 pp 378.

4. Clark, Terry(1990) - International Marketing – Journal of marketing 54(4) 66-79

5. Dawn. C., (2000), International Journal of Middle East studies. Pp241-254

6. Donthu and Yoo (1998) - Cultural Influence on Quality Expectation – Journal of Service Research Vol 1 pp 178-186

7. Durmaz Yakup, Celik Mucahit, Oruc Reyhan (2011) – impact of cultural factors on consumer buying behaviors examined through an empirical study. International Journal of Business and Social Science. Vol 2 No.5 special issue –March 2011.

8. Geert Hofstede and associates (1998): Masculinity and Femininity: The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures**.** Sage Publications. pp 261-262

9. Hofstede, Geert (March 1994). "Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind". *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University) 38(1): pp132–134.

10. Jacqueline J Kacen, Julie Anne Lee (2002) - The influence of culture on consumer impulsive buying behavior. Journal of Consumer Psychology. 12(2), pp163-176

11. Khalil H.A., Mohammed S.A., (2012) – Religious beliefs and consumer behavior. Journal of Islamic banking. Vol 3 issue 2

12. Parastoo N (2011), Acculturation to the Global Consumer Culture and Ethnic Identity – An Empirical Study in Iran, John Molson School of Business, Concordia University.

13. Schiffman, L.G. and L.L. Kanuk (1997), Consumer Behaviour, Sixth Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall International, Inc.

14. Solberg, C.A., (2002) – "Culture and Industrial Buyer Behavior – An Arab Experience" – Presented at 18th IMP Conference – Dijon, France.

15. Soraya W Assad (2008). The rise of consumerism in Saudi Arabian society. International journal of commerce and management. (March 22,2007)

16. Thomas P Chandy, B. Sriram – "The Culture Impact on Product Choices by Women Consumers of Middle East" – International Journal of Marketing and Technology – ISSN: 2249-1058 – Vol 2 Issue 10, Oct 2012, pp: 90 – 103

17. Triandis, Harry (1989) - "Culture." Psychological Review vol 96 pp 506-510

A Monthly Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Refereed Open Access International e-Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
Indexed & Listed at: Ulrich's Periodicals Directory ©, U.S.A., Open J-Gage, India as well as in Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.

International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

188