

## THE CULTURE IMPACT ON PRODUCT CHOICES BY WOMEN CONSUMERS OF MIDDLE EAST: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF OMANI CONSUMERS

Thomas P Chandy\*

B Sriram\*\*

### *Abstract*

There are various factors that influence women consumers that need in-depth studies to succeed in the market. In particular, the women consumers of Middle East countries have constrained environment in choosing the products. They have impacts of various conditions and factors in product choices. The aim of this research is to determine and evaluate whether there is any significant impact of culture on women's product choices in Middle East. Furthermore, the research was conducted in order to identify certain key culture attributes that influences their buying decisions. Some key factors related to such as national culture, other national culture, consumer loyalty and product communication were considered for this study. The data were analyzed with various statistical methods such as ANOVA, regression analysis etc for drawing the conclusion. The findings recommend that managers in multinational organizations should be concerned with the specific culture dynamics of women consumers as part of their communication and promotion strategies within their overall marketing strategies in Middle East countries. The impact of culture factors will assist managers to guide the specifications required for the development of customer decision support systems.

**Key words:** women consumers, national culture, other national culture, consumer loyalty, product communication.

---

\* Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Sur University College, Sur, Sultanate of Oman.

\*\* Lecture, Quality Control Officer, IST Department, Sur University College, Sur, Sultanate of Oman.

## INTRODUCTION

The product choices of the consumers vary with respect to different factors. The place where the live, culture, product information, personal buying decisions, friends and relatives are some of the major impact factors that they change the consumers buying choices. The consumers in different nation prefer goods based on the needs and features. Another important factor that influences the consumer product choices is gender. The men consumers have different perspectives of product choices than women consumers.

In western countries, the women buying decisions depends basically on individual traits. The women have freedom of choices to select their products. But, in Middle East countries, women buyers vary in choosing the product. They have constraints in selecting the products. They have influences of various factors other than the general buying conditions. One such factor is culture. Culture plays an important role in product choices of Middle East consumer irrespective of the gender.

Business organizations primarily exist and thrive because of the presence of customers. The customers are the lifeblood of the business and therefore knowing them, their preferences and how they are affected by internal and external factors are crucial to the organization's success. Corollary to this, knowing how culture affects consumer buying pattern and their behaviour towards specific products or product groups is one of the most essential needs for any product related business.

The world economy is becoming increasingly 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 world are becoming more independent and are decision makers and they are becoming a very large segment of the total consumers for most products. While they are increasing in numbers, in many countries women are still controlled by the culture there. This has resulted in marketers focusing on how women's choice of products is governed by the culture that is present in the society where they live. Hence a study is needed to ascertain the impact of culture on how women make product choices.

One of the most important social influences which have 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 1994). 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. 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 1994).

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 lifestyles of people in many countries and Middle East is no exception.

In this research we examined the culture impact factors such as national culture, other national culture, product information and loyalty to the product due to culture as the main factors. We defined an impact factor model based on the analyses and findings.

### 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, Hofstede (1994) identified seven independent dimensions of national culture. These dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism /collectivism, and masculinity/femininity, Confucian work dynamism, High/Low context cultures, Immediacy and expressiveness.

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.

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.

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 Questions:

The following research questions were formulated to study the culture impacts on product choices of women consumers in Middle East.

- 1) Does the national culture have impact on the women consumer's product choice?
- 2) Do the Middle East women have impact of other national culture in product choices?
- 3) Do the products that communicate the local culture have more preferences than the other products?
- 4) Does the consumer's product loyalty due to culture play a role in women consumers' product choice?

### Objectives and Hypothesis

***Obj 1: To know the impact of national culture on product choices of women buyers in Middle East Countries***

Middle East has a traditional culture that is different from western and European cultures. The buyers may have the impact on product choices due to their national culture. The attitudes towards the product will either increase or decrease based on the national culture. Some products may not be picked by the consumer due to national culture barriers. Thus the national culture has been selected as one of the variables of impact factors.

Hyp 1: National culture has impact on women consumer's product choice.

***Obj 2: To identify the impact of other national culture.***

Buyers are greatly influenced by the other national culture. The buyer choices of a product may vary if it has been chosen by numerous consumers. Apart from that, the products are developed based on the international market requirements. The mindsets of consumers are

influenced by the other national culture impact. A certain amount of acculturation takes place. Thus, other national impact has been selected as one of the variables of product choice impact factors.

Hyp 2: Other national culture has impact on women buyer's product choice

**Obj 3: To find the impact of product communication and advertisements**

The product choices are generally influenced by different advertisements. These advertisements play a vital role in buyer behavior. The consumers' product choices are changed because of these advertisements. The products that always try to communicate more information and suitability are purchased by the consumers. Thus, the products that communicate and advertise based on the local culture has been opted as an impact variable.

Hyp 3: The products that communicate the local culture has more preference than other products

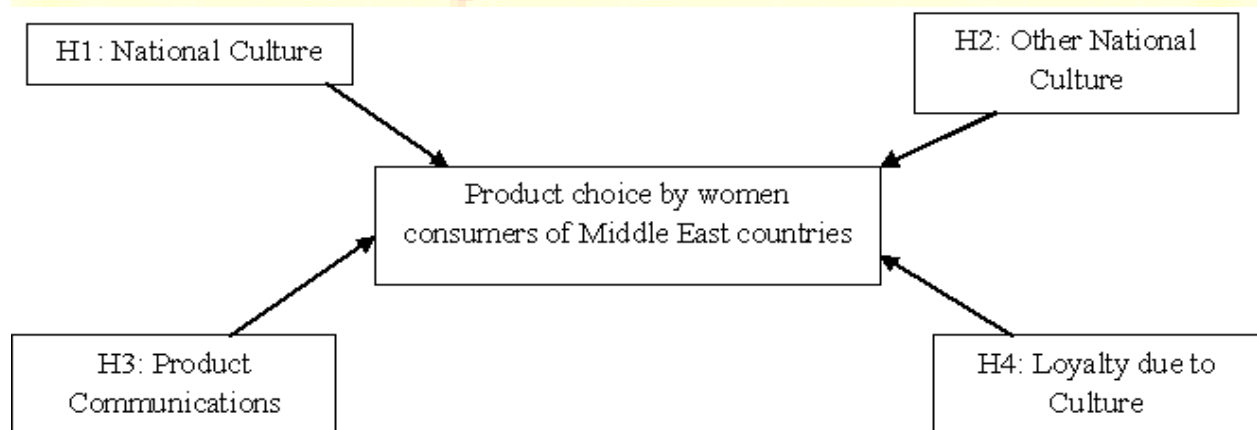
**Obj 4: To identify the impact of consumer loyalty due to culture.**

The consumer's loyalty towards the product they buy in general is one of the important marketing goals. This plays a vital role in product determination. The consumer choices vary due to the loyalty that is developed by the culture. Thus, loyalty towards the products the generally buy has been selected as an impact variable.

Hyp 4: The consumers are loyal to the product they generally the buy because of the influence of culture

**Model Specification**

Figure 1 shows the proposed model on product choices of women buyers.



### Fig 1: Proposed Model Acknowledgement

We want thank Sur University College student Jawahar Said Abdullah Al-Maqbali for her valuable support in distributing and collecting the questionnaire from women consumers. Also, we would like to thank her for helping in translation of the responses. We thank Sur University College Management and Dean for research and financial supports.

### Research Methodology

A questionnaire was prepared and distributed to the women respondents with questions reflecting the following impacts: Local national culture, other national culture, products that communicate the local culture and loyalty of the women buyer due to culture. The questionnaire was distributed to women consumers in some villages, towns and cities of Sultanate of Oman. The study was conducted among various age groups working in different sectors. Non working women were also included in the study to know the product choice. The quota sampling technique has been used to collect the primary data from sample respondents. The data were collected from 118 respondents. Due to improper filling of the questionnaire, 4 samples were rejected and finally the sample size considered was 114. (n = 114).

The research used structured questionnaire to collect primary data. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts. The first part was for collecting demographic information about the women. The second part was for collecting information pertaining to objective variables and their impact on purchase decisions. The questions were framed in such a way to get this information. 5 points likert scale was used to assess the respondent's views.

### Equation Formulation

The variables (impact factors) have been considered as follows for formulating regression equations.

- National Culture –  $X_1$
- Other National Culture –  $X_2$
- Product Communication –  $X_3$
- Loyalty due to Culture –  $X_4$
- Individual Decision –  $Y$

In the above formulation  $X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4$  are the independent variables. The individual decision ( $Y$ ) is dependent variable.

### Analysis on Questionnaire

57.69% of respondents were between the age group 21 to 40. 57.89% respondents were married. 81.58% respondents were employed. There were 37.72% respondents working in public sector, 44.74% respondents were working in private sector and 8.77% respondents were self employed and 8.77% respondents were housewives. 42.11% of the employees were getting salary less than Omani Rials 600 (1 OMR  $\approx$  2.57USD). 54.39% of the respondents were from cities and towns.

64.04% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their national culture, belief and customs affect their choice of buying an item. 13.16% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed on this statement. 56.14% of the respondents agreed that they are loyal to the products that generally they purchase. They purchase repeatedly the same product which they buy before. This loyalty is due to the culture impacts. 50% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed on the statement that they have authority to buy any product they buy. Only 27.19% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed on this statement.

12.28% and 15.79% of the respondents respectively agreed or strongly agreed that they need to take the approval from the male relatives like father brother or husband to purchase a product. 40.35% of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed on this statement. 31.58% of the respondents said that they need not take the approval from male relatives. 50.88% respondents said that they make their decision on buying products and all other issues without asking anyone. 23.68% of the respondents disagreed on this statement.

36.84% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed on the statement that they chose the products without any influence from others including family, friends and colleagues at work. 44.74% of the respondents disagreed on this statement. 18.42% of the respondents do not give any response to this. 46.49% of the women respondents strongly agreed and agreed that they need not get the approval of others even when they make the decision to buy costly products like car, mobile etc. 35.96% of the respondents disagreed on this statement. 38.6% of the respondents said that they are concerned about what other people think of them when they purchase any product. 31.58% of the women respondents agreed that they check with other women before they buy any personal product. 47.37% of the respondents said that they do not check with other women. 21.05% of the respondents do not make any comments on this statement.

35.09% of the women respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they are influenced by the advertisement that communicates their culture while buying the product. 38.6% respondents disagreed on this statement. 31.58% of the respondents indicated that they will buy the product that gives enough and clear information about the product. 47.37% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed on this statement. 32.46% of the respondents

answered that they will buy the product that interest them without checking the consequences. 53.51% of the respondents disagreed on this statement. 61.40% of the women buyers either strongly agreed or agreed that they like to do shopping themselves.

### Results on Research Questions

Table 1 shows the analysis on research questions and hypotheses. The Table 1 shows the number of respondents strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed on the questions pertaining to the research questions.

**Table 1: Responses related to research questions**

Research Questions	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
National culture has impact on product choice	35	38	26	8	7
Other national culture has impact on product choice	21	14	25	38	16
The products that communicate the local culture has more preference than other products	17	23	30	25	19
The consumers are loyal to the product they generally buy	28	36	27	13	10

Figure 2 shows the questionnaire analysis on research questions and hypotheses.

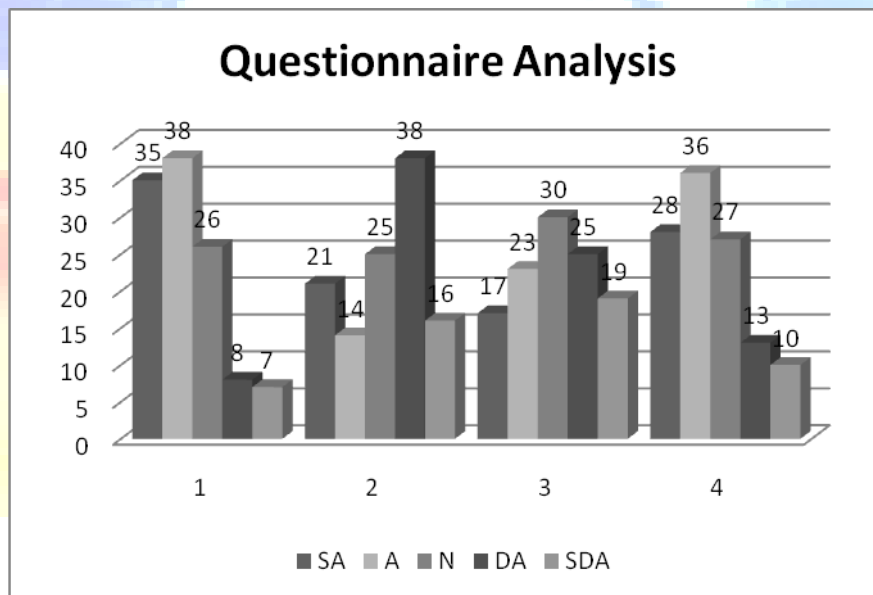


Fig 2: Questionnaire Analysis

The mean, standard deviation, coefficient of variation, standard error in mean, skewness and kurtosis values of the corresponding sections of the questionnaire are shown in the following Table 2.



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

Variable	Sum	Mean	Sample SD	CV	SE Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	Rank
X <sub>1</sub>	428	3.75	1.15	30.60%	0.11	-0.79	-0.02	1
X <sub>2</sub>	328	2.88	1.32	46.04%	0.12	0.35	-1.05	4
X <sub>3</sub>	336	2.95	1.30	44.19%	0.12	0.05	-1.06	3
X <sub>4</sub>	397	3.48	1.21	34.85%	0.11	-0.52	-0.57	2

The average mean (M) of the four questions are 3.27 and average SD is 1.25. The above results show that national culture has the higher impact on product choice by women as Middle East consumer. Consumer loyalty holds the second position in this impact. The means of above two questions are higher than the average (M). The skewnesses of the above two questions are negative. This shows that most of the respondents lie on the right, which is either agree or strongly agree on the facts. These two factors have higher positive impact as their skewnesses are higher negative values.

The products that communicate local culture have 3<sup>rd</sup> rank with positive skewness. This mean is lower than the average (M). The other national culture's impact is in 4<sup>th</sup> position with positive skewness. This mean is also lower than the average (M). The skewnesses show that most of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed on these statements.

### Simple Linear Regression Analysis and ANOVA Values

Regression analysis test shows the following results. Regression analysis was conducted to know the impact of each hypothesis on buyer behavior. The results are tabulated in Table 3.

**Table 3: Individual Independent Variable Impact**

Factor	Regression Equation	R <sup>2</sup>	p – Value	Rank
National Culture (X <sub>1</sub> )	0.93X <sub>1</sub> + 0.14	0.805	1.32E-41	1
Other National (X <sub>2</sub> )	0.66X <sub>2</sub> + 1.71	0.549	4.21E-21	4
Product Communication (X <sub>3</sub> )	0.68X <sub>3</sub> + 1.62	0.552	3.07E-21	3
Loyalty (X <sub>4</sub> )	0.84X <sub>4</sub> + 0.70	0.732	7.79E-34	2

From the above results, it is evident that national culture has highest impact with 80.5% ( $r^2 = 0.805$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The women buyer's loyalty towards the product due to the influence of the culture has second level significance with 73.2% ( $r^2 = 0.732$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Products that communicate the local culture has the 3<sup>rd</sup> level significance with 55.2% ( $r^2 = 0.552$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Finally, other national culture due to friends and people in the surrounding has the least impact with 54.9% ( $r^2 = 0.549$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

From the above results, for national culture and loyalty due the culture, the  $r^2$  values nearer to 1. Apart from the above reason, the  $r^2$  values 0.805, 0.732 are higher than the average of  $r^2$  value 0.660. Thus, the two variables have higher impacts on product choice of women consumers of Middle East. The products that communicate the local culture and other national culture have  $r^2$  values nearer to zero and lesser than the average of  $r^2$ . Thus, they have lesser impacts on product choice of women consumers of Middle East.

### Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was also conducted to test the consistency of the independent variables. The analysis is shown in Table 4. The analysis shows that all the variables are consistent with 84.6% ( $r^2 = 0.846$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Thus the regression equation is linear on assumed variables national culture, other national culture, product advertisements, loyalty of the women buyer. This shows that the independent variables have significant impact on product choice of the women buyers of Middle East.

**Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**

Regression Equation	$R^2$	p – Value
$Y_i = -0.19 + 0.94X_1 - 0.48X_2 + 0.13X_3 + 0.37X_4$	0.846	2.85E-43

### Discussions:

The women consumers buying decision vary based on various factors. The financial background the buyer basically influences the product choices. As Solberg (2002, p2) said, the western exports to Middle East countries are still stumble upon the exotic culture. They are experiencing various challenges due the cultural impacts on consumer buying behavior. Though the Middle East countries have similar culture, there are some differences in the some areas.

The individual consumer has their own freedom of choice in to buy the product based on their personal income. The family background also has impacts on buyer choices. Especially some Middle East women are in a constraint environment. Their choices of products are highly influenced with various environmental factors. In general, the women product choices depend on the family circumstances, friends circle and personal experiences.

Though, there are several factors influences the product choice of women consumers, the study was conducted to identify the impacts of the culture variables on women buyers product choice. The study revealed that the fundamental principles of national culture have the greatest impact on the buyer choices. Irrespective of the place where they live, nearly 85.1% of the women buyers agreed that the national culture has the first choice in buying the products. The

loyalty due to culture has the second impact on women product choices. 67% of the respondents irrespective of their nature of job agreed on this point. Also, it has been observed that the respondents those who disagreed or strongly disagreed on first factor have either strongly agreed or agreed that the loyalty due to culture.

More or less same number of respondents agreed and disagreed on the fact that the products that communicate the local culture have impact on their product choice. Some of the products available in Middle East need to follow local requirements to achieve their goals. Around 73% of the respondents irrespective of their qualifications either disagreed or agreed on this fact. The other national culture has lesser impact on the product choice. Nearly 90% of the respondents from village agreed in this fact that the other national culture has lesser impact on their product choices. The respondents between the age group 21 – 30 agreed that they have impact on other national culture in the product choices. This may be due to advertisements and promotions by the products.

## Findings and Results

### *Obj 1: To know the national culture impact on product choices of women buyers*

The results in Table 2 show that, the sample SD of the factor  $X_1$  (1.15) is least of all other factor. The coefficient of variation (CV = 30.60%) is also lesser than all other values. This is evident that the responses for the impact of national culture on women's choice of product are consistent. From Table 3,  $p = 1.32E-41 < 0.05$ . Thus, the hypothesis H1 is accepted. This has the highest  $r^2$  value. Thus from the above analysis, H1 "The national culture has impact on women consumer's product choice" has the major positive impact on women choice of products.

### *Obj 4: To identify the impact of loyalty due to culture*

The results in Table 2 show that, the sample SD of the factor  $X_2$  (1.21) is the second least of all other factor. The coefficient of variation (CV = 34.85%) is second least of all values. This is evident that the responses for the impact of loyalty due to culture on women's choice of product are consistent. From Table 3,  $p = 7.79E-34 < 0.05$ . Thus, the hypothesis H4 is accepted. This has the second highest  $r^2$  value. Thus from the above analysis, H4 "The consumers are loyal to the product they generally buy because of the influence of the culture" has the second major positive impact on women choice of products of Middle East.

### *Obj 3: To find the impact product communication and advertisements*

The results in Table 2 show that, the sample SD of the factor  $X_3$  is 1.32 and the coefficient of variation is 46.04% which are the highest values. From Table 3,  $p = 4.21E-21 <$

0.05. Thus, the hypothesis H3 is accepted. But as  $r^2$  value is nearer to zero and skewness is positive, though H3 is accepted, it has lesser impact on the product choice of Middle East Women. Thus, H3 “The national products that communicate the local culture has more preference than other products” has the minor impact on women choice of products with third position.

**Obj 2: To identify the other national culture impacts**

The results in Table 2 show that, the sample SD of the factor  $X_1$  is 1.30 and the coefficient of variation is 44.19%. From Table 3,  $p = 3.07E-21 < 0.05$ . Thus, the hypothesis H2 is accepted. But as  $r^2$  value is nearer to zero and skewness is positive, though H2 is accepted, it has lesser impact on the product choice of Middle East Women. Thus, H2 “Other national culture has impact on women buyer’s product choice” has the minor impact on women choice of products.

**Conclusion:**

The study unveils that the Omani women buyer product choice with respect to national culture, other national culture, product communication and loyalty due to culture. The study identified that national culture has the highest impact on the choice of product selection by the women consumers of Middle East customers. The outcomes show the product choices of the women consumers of Middle East in line with the existing literatures. This study will add a significant contribution to the literature. Thus, figure 3 shows the impacts on the proposed model.

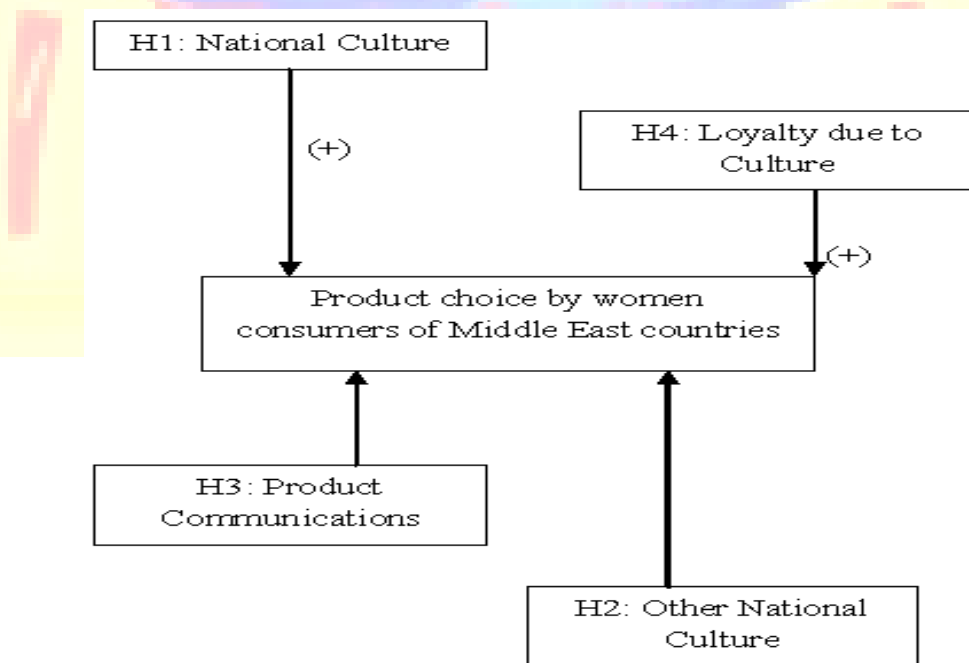


Fig 3: Model Impacts

The producer should keep in mind that the culture has the greater impact on women consumers buying decisions. The products should be produced and communicated in such a way that the women consumers will get attracted towards product. Apart from that, Middle East women consumer's loyalty has the second greatest impact on women consumer. This is due to their culture and environment. The producers should be loyal to the consumers and sustain the quality of the product in order to increase the loyalty of the consumers. Though the product communications have lesser impact, the producer must communicate with the help of proper advertisements to reach the consumers of different environments and culture.

### Future Scope

This study shall be further studied and enhanced with respect to various impact factors like cultural variables impact, demographic variables impact. Also, the study may be further increased in number of respondents from different regions to know the impacts. The external and internal variables of product choices may also be studied by future researchers.

### 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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. Triandis, Harry (1989) - “Culture.” Psychological Review vol 96 pp 506-510

