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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN QATAR

BY

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Abstract

Social media has evolved our lives in many ways, it has made the world seem like a smaller place. This is in particular applicable when doing business. In Qatar, there are many business retailers who are not necessarily physically existent that operate, sell and communicate through social media platforms. Because there is no legal protection and regulations on this market, confidence is definitely an issue. This research paper aims to identify how consumer behavior in Qatar has changed by using different social media platforms to purchase products and/or services from physically non-existent merchandisers. The three main dimensions were; consumer confidence, consumer correspondence and consumer empowerment. Along with the literature review conducted, an expert interview was conducted with 15 different participants who use social media in Qatar. They were from different nationalities, age group and professions. In general, there is a great positive feedback about buying products and/or services on social media in Qatar, but trust is still a critical issue. Consumers in Qatar generally do not interact easily with one another, but always seek reviews and comments before considering purchasing a product or service. In general, consumers trust what other consumers say about products and/or services that are offered on different social media platforms. However, there is always a level of uncertainty if a certain shopper is going through an unprecedented experience of shopping via social media platforms.

Key Words

Social Media Consumers Brand Merchandisers Doha Qatar Trust Correspondence Empowerment Confidence

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1- Introduction

Communication has revolutionized the lives of human beings in a sense that geographic distance is no longer a burden that stops one from taking advantage of any opportunity. People can correspond with one another by using different methods available. As time progresses, communicating and corresponding internationally is becoming more convenient and cheaper. This is also applicable to global consumers that communicate in the global markets to purchase their goods and services. According to a research conducted by Nielsen, “consumers are looking for balance in their lives and concern for work-life balance is paramount; more than 80% of global consumers cite spending quality time with friends and family as their top value” (Nielsen, 2013). This alludes that consumers are steadily reducing the physical trips to retailers and shops, and alternatively use advanced technology such as the internet and mobile apps to order their products and services. Technology is consistently advancing and becoming more convenient to use. For many consumers, this advantage could also benefit retailers to keep close contact with their target consumers, improve their customer relationship management and provide the relevant products/services according to their tastes and expectations.

In the 21st century, social media has become a big stake in global communication. The term “social media” has no standardized definition. However, according to Lisa Buyer, “Social Media is today’s most transparent engaging and interactive form of public relations. It combines the true grit of real time content with the beauty of authentic peer-to-peer communication” (Cohen, 2011). This definition signifies the transparency of social media and how important this aspect could be for interactive purposes from a public relations point of view. Furthermore, from a marketing point

of view, according to Marjorie Clayman, *“Social Media is a new marketing tool that allows you to get to know your customers and prospects in ways that were previously not possible. This information and knowledge must be paid for with output of respect, trustworthiness, and honesty. Social Media is not a fad, but I also think it’s just the beginning of the marketing revolution – not the end”* (Cohen, 2011). In this sense, Marjorie’s insights are that social media is the beginning of a marketing revolution and how businesses should perform marketing activities and interact with customers.

Traditionally, buyers and sellers communicate together in order to benefit from market efficiency. This is a process where prices in the market reflect the available information that is presented in the market (Larsson, 2011). It simply convinces the consumer the price he/she is paying for a certain product or service. From the seller’s point of view, communication with buyers is vital because it helps them to understand the updated customer trends. Customer preferences consistently alter to an extent that many products or services become “obsolete” because of the lack of demand. Sellers communicate with buyers to develop and target the appropriate and relevant products and services to hopefully gain high sales and profits. On the other hand, buyers need to effectively communicate with sellers in order to have a better understand of the product/service they are considering to purchase. Communicating with sellers enables buyers to compare similar products/services accurately and aid them to make a more informed decision on which one to purchase. The more accurate the communication between buyers and sellers is, the higher satisfaction both parties will enjoy.

As mentioned above social media is considered one of the most transparent interactive platforms between users that is conveniently and accurately used. In the social media phase, knowledge of the firm’s products and services along with consumer perceptions are effectively integrated (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2013). The

dependency on television, radio and newspaper has reduced significantly with the penetration of social media. This is particularly advantageous for consumers who consider fellow consumer's experiences on specific products or services. This means that the seller is no longer the main source of information in the market.

Contemporarily, the utilization of social media to facilitate the communication platforms between buyers and sellers is phenomenal. There are many different social media platforms that are used globally where consumers from all around the world use them to access more information about products and services. According to eBiz MBA Guide, the most populous social media site is Facebook; followed by, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google Plus, Tumblr, Instagram, VK, Flickr, Vine, Tagged, Ask.fm, Meetme and Classmates (eBiz MBA Guide, 2016). According to Deloitte's Media Consumer Report, "Younger people, aged 11 to 24 and as much as a fifth of their viewing is short form on the likes of YouTube, Snapchat and Facebook video. Even though these younger audiences may still be consuming content from traditional broadcasters, they have never got into the TV habits as much as the prior generation have" (Deloitte, 2015). This alludes to the fact the consumer behavior in terms of interaction and acknowledgment is changing significantly with the revolutionary young age group. Companies are quickly adapting to these changes in particular the ones that target these young age groups effectively.

The use of social media in Qatar is increasing quickly since there are many different social media platforms available. Each platform available satisfies different types of needs for users. Many businesses in Qatar are aware of this consumer trend and are quickly adapting to these trends in order to keep up with the market. This is changing the consumer expectations to many businesses in Qatar – as well as in the region. This

research will help to identify what are the key drivers for many consumers in Qatar to use social media to find their desired products and services available.

This research paper focuses on the role of social media and its effects on consumer behavior in terms of consumer confidence, consumer correspondence and consumer empowerment in the State of Qatar. (1) Confidence in terms of the trustworthiness that consumers place towards the product and services they are purchasing from social media platforms. Since these merchandisers are physically non-existent, it is difficult to trust the authenticity of the products and services they offer to the general public (2) Consumer correspondence refers to the extent of how much do consumers communicate with one another using different social media platforms. This is essential in this research paper as it assess the degree of trust that consumer in general have based on fellow consumer's experiences on certain products or services. (3) Consumer empowerment refers to the power consumers currently have over these merchandisers that are operating on different social media platforms and how much their reviews and evaluation affect other users on social media.

The literature review analyzes previous studies conducted about social media and their platforms. Articles and journals extracted help to support the research problem that this papers strives to present. In the literature review, the most famous social media platforms are further discussed and how they distinguish from their competitors. Taking these into consideration, fifteen expert interviews were conducted between different consumers in Qatar that use social media to purchase products or services or use social media for other purposes. Their responses were collected and used in the data analysis in order to help us assess the extent of the usage of social media as consumers. The data collected is used to compare with the information gained in the literature review to support the argument of this research.

2- Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Platforms

Different social media platforms provide different features to its users. However, in general, it facilitates the communication between users. It is a very transparent system that helps to enhance the accuracy and authenticity of the quality of information being passed among users. Hence it provides a better experience of information delivery and discovery (Society of Human Resources Management , 2012). Social media has evolved the manner of how one can search for information, due to its authenticity, a user can post a question in several platforms and receive accurate data using social media. This can also help to enhance the networking opportunity in particular between professionals within similar fields.

According to the Arab Social Media Report, social media in general has enhanced the quality of life of an Arab person across the Middle East region (TNS, 2015). Additionally, it has improved government interaction with the general public which used to be a major obstacle before its penetration within the region. In general, people within the Middle East region use social media to connect with other people. It is free of charge, entertaining and easy to use (TNS, 2015). This is particularly beneficial for people who are living in other countries and are trying to keep in touch with their friends and families in their home countries. Additionally, it is a platform where one can get instant local and international news, this supports the social integration on a global scale. Overall, one uses social media for multiple purposes such as gaining information, correspondence, entertainment and shopping.

Having said that, there are drawbacks of using social media repetitively. According to the Arab Social Media Report, excessive usage of social media can cause family fragmentation within a household. This is in particular an ongoing social problem that

the region is facing since the Arab culture is known for its intimate family ties (TNS, 2015). Moreover, the excessive usage can encourage unhealthy habits to a person since it discourages the person from being physically active. Some of the content presented on different social media platforms are incompatible to local Arab (and Islamic) culture. This can be very concerning to the society as a whole (TNS, 2015). Therefore, excessive usage of social media is quite addictive.

The quantitative and qualitative research assignments conducted by the Arab Social Media Influencers Summit highlighted that the main reason why Arabs use social media is to socially connect and communicate with one another. The smartphone is most used as a medium to use social media and its different platforms. Additionally, the preferred time of usage is usually in the evening (TNS, 2015). This could be justified as during the day the vast majority are at work/businesses/universities (or schools), hence the frequency of usage during day time is understandably minimum.

From a business perspective, using social media can be very cost effective as products and services can be advertised effectively for almost “for-free” (Society of Human Resources Management , 2012). A business can take advantage of the information clarity on social media by keeping close contact with its consumers and target consumers. Its products and services can be further discussed and thoroughly presented on different social media platforms. Since potential customers are available on social media, marketers can take advantage of that by conducting their market research and analysis in order to develop the right set of products and services that matches the current market trends and expectations. This can be in particular advantageous for new start-up businesses that are very cost-sensitive as it may be unaffordable for them to use the traditional type of marketing approaches (Salcido, 2012).

In Qatar, the most used social media platform is WhatsApp for both Qataris and non-Qataris (ictQatar , 2014). This is probably due to its mobile-friendly medium and the fact that it is free-of-charge. According to the ictQatar's study, women in Qatar tend to be more aware of new social media platforms compared to men. The reason is because they have more free time to explore different communicative applications that are installed in smartphones. Moreover, non-Qataris tend to share significantly more photos, videos and other media compared to Qataris. However, 85% of the respondents claim that rumours and speculations are easily spread through social media in Qatar. This was a major concern to the vast majority of the respondents.

Businesses that offer different products and services to different types of customers always need to keep track of their performance in order to progress efficiently. Using social media can be helpful since its measurability can be very effective. Many firms tend to use social media in order to enhance its brand popularity and try to maximise its potential by "increasing followers" or "increasing likes" (Hajli, 2014). It helps to increase the marketing function of word-of-mouth by sharing different media information on the social media platforms. Business are almost compelled to increase their consumer's involvement and empower their customer relationship management because of social media. A typical customer has access to wide information and has the option to share it among other people (Hajli, 2014). The more the business becomes involved with the customer, the more customer loyalty it will enjoy and more "new" customers will be persuaded to purchase from its products and services.

It can test different products and services using several social media platforms and assess its success by collecting consumer's responses accordingly. This helps them to make more informed decisions (Salcido, 2012). This can also serve an advantage to consumers who are trying to look for a specific products and/or service. It allows

them to compare, inquire and contrasts the different options they have available. This sort of behaviour enables businesses to compete directly by providing high quality, efficient products/service that are reasonably priced.

2.2 Facebook

Based on Facebook's official page, it was founded in 4th February 2004, its mission statement is, "Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Facebook, 2016). It was created by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes as a website to be used by Harvard University students only. Its successful launch as a local domain intranet website between students slowly expanded between universities and schools in the USA (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008). When Facebook was launched as a company, it became prevalent around the world and many users were taking advantage of its features and used it to enhance their quality of life. As of December 31st 2015, Facebook has generated sales of \$17,928 million and their net income was \$3,688 million including amortization of their intangible assets, share-based compensation and relevant payroll tax expenses (Facebook, 2016). According to the official report by Facebook, "We continue to invest in better serving our community, building our business, and connecting the world"

According to the Statista Analysis, as of the fourth quarter of 2015, Facebook has 1.59 billion active users monthly. It defines active users as a user who has logged in to his/her account within the past thirty (30) days (Statistica - The Statistics Portal, 2015). This highlights the prevalence of the usage of this social media platforms across the globe. It satisfies different peoples from different social classes. Different

users use Facebook for different reasons however in general it is commonly used to interconnect with one another and gain information instantaneously.

One main popular feature that Facebook offers are the Facebook Group, these are closed (or public) groups where it combines a group of Facebook users who have common interests within specific fields, concept or event. It displays the group's name, its members, and has an open wall where members can share information, videos, photos and other article outside the platform (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008). This would be in particular useful for businesses and firms that have a specific target segment. Many businesses can take advantage of this feature by enhancing its customer involvement and empowering its customer relationship management.

Based on the results obtained from the Arab Social Media Report, “Almost 2 out of 5 users in the Arab World stated that Facebook is the most preferred social media channel for them. Around 87% of all social media users covered by the survey are currently subscribed to Facebook. Current subscription rates for Facebook were fairly high across most of the countries covered in the survey, with the least rates recorded in Kuwait (75%), KSA (80%) and Qatar (81%)” (TNS, 2015). This shows that in Qatar, Facebook is widely used however there are preferences to other social media platforms.

A recent study was conducted by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology in the State of Qatar about the emerging social media platforms in the nation. The results obtained were interestingly set as a ratio between Qataris and Non-Qataris. According to the results obtained, 90% of Qatari people are aware of Facebook, however only 44% use it. Whereas non-Qataris living in Qatar represent 94% of their awareness and 84% of non-Qataris use Facebook. Hence, Facebook is

the fifth most popular social media platform for Qataris, whereas it is second for non-Qataris (ictQatar , 2014). This shows that Qataris as a nationality have a different approach to different social media platforms compared to other nationalities. Even though Facebook is not commonly used among Qataris, many businesses and retailers in Qatar use Facebook to advertise their products and services and enhance their relationship with their customers. This is applicable to businesses that have a wide diverse group of customers from different social classes, ethnicities and culture.

2.3 Instagram

On its official website, it claims, “It’s a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your photos with friends and family. Snap a picture, choose a filter to transform its look and feel, and then post to Instagram” (Instagram, 2013). It was first released as an application software that was exclusively installed on Apple’s software – iPhone. Afterwards, it was developed and installed in the Android software (Instagram, 2013). Facebook Inc. has purchased Instagram for \$1 billion, this took effect in September 2012. It currently has 90 million active users around the world who use both Apple and Android software.

Instagram has earned \$595 million from their advertisements worldwide. According to eMarketers, they project that Instagram’s mobile advertisement will generate \$2.81 billion worldwide by 2017 (eMarketer, 2015). This means that there are a lot of potential for businesses to target their consumers by using Instagram. The advertisements are viewed explicitly on the newsfeed page. They can also take advantage of the custom sample feature in order to make the maximum potential of their advertisement. For example, if the business is locally based in Qatar, the advertisement used can only be viewed to users who are connected on Qatar’s signal. The advertisement automatically connects to the businesses account on Instagram.

This means that consumers can easily communicate with the firm to inquire more information about the product or service. Currently, Instagram represent 5% of the advertisement revenues of Facebook as this is forecasted to increase to 17% by 2017 (eMarketer, 2015). Hence, there is a huge potential for businesses and consumers to interact and integrate within this platform.

Based on the research study conducted by the Arab Social Media Influencers, 82% of the respondents within the Arab region use Instagram daily of which 6% of them claimed that it is their preferred social media platform (TNS, 2015). A third of Arab social media users have an Instagram account, with the highest popularity in the UAE followed by Morocco. Whereas Syria represented the lowest subscription rates of 9% (TNS, 2015). This shows that the Gulf region is more active on Instagram (including Qatar). Users in the Arab world use Instagram for gaining more information, communicating with fellow Instagram users and keep themselves up to date with new products and services in the market.

The usage of Instagram in Qatar is very prevalent. According to the 2013 edition of Media Use Report in the Middle East, “The use of Instagram has nearly quintupled in the last two years. Qatar has most number of Instagram users in the Arab world, particularly among Qatari women, while the use of WhatsApp across the Arab world is extremely high regardless of the age” (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2013). This positive outcome encourages many businesses to develop their Instagram pages and use this platform locally in Qatar. Based on their research, businesses that target women in Qatar would find Instagram very beneficial since they represent the larger majority of Instagram users in the nation.

Many start-ups and small businesses use Instagram to present their products and services in Qatar. It helps them to save on renting and administration costs which can be very expensive due to their limited financial capabilities (Linaker, 2014). This could be vital for many businesses to understand their target consumer's preferences in tastes and expectations. Businesses running on Instagram in Qatar are dominated by female entrepreneurs. These are typically businesswomen who advertise their products and services to their target market. These products and services are usually food, drinks, fashion, beauty products and services such as cleaning, tutoring and wedding planning. Customers looking for these type of products and services will find many options on Instagram. Competitors tend to compete on price and quality, also, their close contact with their customers helps them to maintain their competitive advantage over others.

2.4 WhatsApp

An application that is downloaded and installed on a smartphone software and is used to share text messages, media, locations and saved files. WhatsApp was officially launched in 2009 (WhatsApp, 2016). The major advantage of WhatsApp is that it is available in all different smartphone software's (Hedlund, 2013). The application uses internet data to transfer data between users, hence, the users do not pay per message. This encourages more users to download and use the application consistently. According to their official website, "WhatsApp was founded by two guys who spent combined 20 years doing geeky stuff at Yahoo Inc. before starting WhatsApp Inc" (WhatsApp, 2016).

In 2014, Facebook acquired WhatsApp for \$19.6 million of which \$3.6 billion was added to the original price (Deutsch, 2015). This is considered the most substantial acquisition made by Facebook. The company views WhatsApp with many promising

potential as there are 500 million active users using the application. It also has an increase of 1 million users per day. This means that the applications is widely prevalent across the world. As an acquirer, Facebook believes that WhatsApp application will increase its profitability in the long-run.

In Arab World, WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular social media platforms used (TNS, 2015). Since it is instant messaging it helps to connect people more efficiently and make it seem like the distance between them has shortened. Users are exposed to new information and media consistently because of the easiness of sharing and participating on WhatsApp. Businesses that use WhatsApp have a major advantage of communicating directly with customers, help them to understand their needs and wants and understand fully the type of products and/or services they are seeking for. It also contains specific features such as message delivery and whether the message has been read or not. This helps to improve the quality of communication between different stakeholders and empowers its effectiveness.

In Qatar, WhatsApp has topped the list of top used social media platforms in 2014 (Walker, 2014), according to Lesley, “Qatari nationals in particular have embraced the technology and are using it for more than just sending simple messages to friends, with 98 percent of those polled confirming they were aware of it, and as many as 97 percent of saying they used it”. This shows that this application has become locally prevalent in Qatar. It is an easy application to use, and it synchronizes the contacts that use the application saved in the smartphone within the favourite list page. This makes it easier for the user to find his/her desired contact to communicate with.

Based on the study that was conducted by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology in Qatar, local nationals in Qatar use WhatsApp to share

photos and other forms of media among each other. This represent a low usage on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter when sharing media (ictQatar , 2014). WhatsApp tends to be very popular in Qatar since it is mobile friendly, it is accessible in the smartphone and as long the device is connected to the internet, it is available at all times. This encourages the consistent usage of this application especially that it helps to connect people better.

In Qatar, the users use WhatsApp for different purposes, but in general, the users are using WhatsApp to communicate with one another, sharing photos and other medias and posting status updates in order to keep their contacts informed (ictQatar, 2014). Additionally, WhatsApp helps users to find friends and family that one has lost touch with and re-connect. This makes the usage of WhatsApp very pleasant and encourages a loyal behaviour towards the application. This frequent usage could be a major opportunity for businesses in Qatar to target their consumers.

WhatsApp recently added PDF file share feature for its users to take advantage of. This will encourage more business communication, hence sellers and merchandisers will find WhatsApp a more facilitating application to use for their business purposes (Roy, 2016). This will help WhatsApp to become more business-friendly and encourage more business people to use the application on a daily basis. In this way, WhatsApp can consolidate different features for different users. It is expected to reduce the usage of emails since the communication on WhatsApp is more instantaneous. Businesses in Qatar can take advantage of this buy providing their bills and receipts to their customers that use this application. A major advantage of this that less paper will be wasted which supports the overall national vision 2030.

The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology in Qatar (ictQatar) has conducted a study about the privacy concern when using social media in Qatar. It claims that privacy is not a serious issue in Qatar since 31% of the respondents stated that the privacy control is sufficient. There were only 23% of the respondents who claimed that they are somewhat concerned about the privacy issues affiliated with social media in particular with WhatsApp since it involved the cell phone number and is made public to all contacts (ictQatar, 2014). This could be a risk for businesses in Qatar who are trying to target consumers by using WhatsApp. Many consumers would potentially be concerned that their cell phone numbers are being used for contacting. This could reflect a negative response by consumers and make them reluctant to cooperate with the merchandiser.

As a form of social media platform, WhatsApp can be very addictive. People are concerned that the frequent usage of WhatsApp are driving them away from family and friends. This is affecting their social relations with others. This is continuously enlarging the “generation gap” because of the lack of social orientation (ictQatar, 2014). This major concern can affect how people communicate face-to-face. The older generation are more concerned about this issue and are hoping that this will be resolved as soon as possible. While this doesn’t affect businesses and merchandiser to a large extent, it affects the society as a whole.

2.5 Snapchat

Snapchat was developed by two students named Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy who studied at Stanford University. It was officially launched in July 2011 and grew successfully (Ang, 2014). It is considered that Snapchat is a revolutionary type of application on social media. It is simply a photo-and video- messaging application and what distinguishes it from other applications is that the media shared is only

posted for a limited time (Better, 2015). According to Better, in May 2015, it was reported that there are 700 million active users on Snapchat globally. This shows that different users are using Snapchat for its convenient system of sharing media.

Facebook intended to acquire Snapchat for \$3 billion however the co-founders have refused the offer and intended to maintain their ownership over the application (Better, 2015). This shows that Facebook believed that there is a lot of potential from Snapchat due to its prevalent success across the world. It is currently popular between teenagers and young adults, since they are the typical followers of many Viners who present their daily lives and share their entertainment production. Viners are celebrities that are viewed only on different social media platforms. They share their own entertainment media and gain many followers internationally.

In 2016, the company is aiming to generate between \$300 and \$350 million in revenues because its business is growing successfully and quickly (Wagner & Kafka, 2016). This is due to more advertisers who intend to advertise on Snapchat. They have a target audience of young adults and teenagers and believe that they would respond positively to the advertisements. Snapchat facilitates different options for businesses to advertise on its application. Firstly, they have the “live story”, where the advertiser can record live moments of their event, product or service and share it with their target audience to view and hopefully follow. Secondly, Snapchat provides a discover page on its application, where the business can reserve a slot and present their own posts consistently to any user who uses the application. This flexibility allows more businesses to be willing to advertise on Snapchat.

Based on the report published by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology – ictQatar, Snapchat is moderately popular in Qatar as it is mostly used

by young Qataris and expatriates that enjoy sharing videos and photos of their daily lives (ictQatar, 2014). It is understandable to see that Snapchat is commonly used since the media shared is not permanently posted. It is only posted for 24 hours and then deleted. The report discusses that Snapchat is used equally between both genders in Qatar. This is typically more appropriate for females in Qatar, since in this conservative society, they appreciate more privacy among their followers. Its use can be very addictive since there are many users to follow. According to the study conducted by ictQatar, more than 30% of the youth in Qatar spend more than 3 hours on Snapchat per day. Hence, businesses that want to target young consumers in Qatar can use this opportunity to advertise and exhibit their products and services in order to have high sales and profits. Messaging and sharing information on this social media platform is instantaneous and simple.

2.6 Social Media Users as Consumers

Social media has affected the consumers of this generation. Since many businesses are offering their products and services through different social media platforms. However, this research project aims to assess the extent of consumer usage of social media to purchase products and services, inquire about them, research and review respectively. The main dimensions of this research are the following:

(i) **Consumer Confidence (Trust)**

To what extent do consumers trust the products and/or services available on different social media platforms? According to a research conducted by Kim Harrison, people tend to trust social media more than local advertising because they can see and view other people's experiences of using a certain product and/or service which would help them to decide on whether they should or should not purchase it (Harrison, 2016). This

means that social media facilitates them to make a better informed decision.

(ii) Consumer Correspondence

Consumer on social media are actively more engaged with one another and with their retailers. The “digital word-of-mouth” via social media has a greater impact for many businesses and retail outlets as opposed to only depending on traditional advertising (Barajas-Portas, 2015). Consumers can easily “add”, “mention”, “tag” or “comment” with other users to discuss about their desired products and/or services and evaluate the likelihood of their satisfaction if they purchase it – or not. It also allows many businesses to enhance their customer relationship management by actively interacting with their target customers and ensuring their satisfaction consistently.

(iii) Consumer Empowerment

By definition, consumer empower is the process of allowing your target customer to have the options and applicable resources to use in order to decide what exactly do they want to purchase and ensure that they have their own brand experience (Your Business AZ Central, 2016). Therefore, having social media will help many business to provide many information and content to their customers in order to build and increase brand loyalty and ensure each customer have their own customized brand experience.

2.7 Problems arising from Social Media

Sometimes marketing and selling on social media is not always pleasing as it may seem to be. According to Morrison Forester, in the future, many brands will be spending substantial amount of funds to invest in their marketing operations, however

the results will not be as it is expected due to low user engagement with different social media platforms (Dieker, 2016). This shows that consumer engagement is not always guaranteed regardless how much a business invests in its marketing operations via social media communications.

Additionally, the article discusses that many of the times where engaging consumers on social media try to interact with different brands on social media. However, the majority of the times these brands do not respond or take a considerable amount of time to respond proactively. They usually reply attaching their website name, general contact information or sometimes use a different language (Dieker, 2016). This could disappoint many consumers on social media and the business would suffer to a very large extent. If the brand is in a very competitive market, the consumer may consider switching to another brand easily.

There is a broad misconception with social media interaction between businesses and consumers where businesses have very high expectations that consumers will be following and paying attention to their products and services being presented on social media constantly regardless of any occasion or circumstance (Baer, 2016). This shows that many businesses fail to conduct thorough market research on how exactly do consumers behave and use social media. They fail to understand consumer expectation and engagement between different brands in different sectors.

Businesses and in particular brands in competitive markets worry pointlessly too much on their brand exposure and engagement within different social media platforms (Baer, 2016) and the majority of the consumers on social media do avoid this type of exposure because of the inconvenience it potentially may cause for different users. Many businesses fail to create the meaningful social content that is useful and

interesting for consumers to follow, track and interact. They fail to create the “collective interest” that grasps the attention of many consumer users or general users on social media. This also proves that many businesses do not conduct their market research extensively to understand the exact consumer behavior on social media.

The most obvious problem that many businesses and consumers face in the world of social media is the number of platforms that are penetrating continuously. Though different social media platforms are noticeably more popular than others, it is hard to consolidate all product and service information in one social media platform. Different users around the world would have different preferences of social media platforms. It can sometimes be very difficult for many businesses to keep on track with these social media trends especially when it is operating on a global scale. For example, in Qatar, Facebook is believed to be widely favored by non-Qatari expatriates living in the nation. Whereas, Instagram and Snapchat is more used among Qatari nationals. Hence, many businesses in Qatar would need to take this into consideration in order to know how to target their products and services and interact with their consumers efficiently and effectively.

3 – Methodology

The aim of this research is to assess the impact of social media on consumer behavior in Qatar. Since the usage of social media in Qatar is becoming widely prevalent, many consumers use different social media platforms to seek for certain products and services that are available. This research project focuses on three main dimensions which are the following; consumer confidence, consumer correspondence and consumer empowerment.

- (i) Consumer confidence – This is to what extent do consumers in Qatar trust different merchandisers that solely operate on social media platforms. This dimension elaborates on what it takes for business on social media to gain consumer trust and confidence in Qatar.
- (ii) Consumer correspondence – How easy and often do customers in Qatar interact with each other on social media. This could be in a form of reviews or evaluation of products and services that are offered in social media. Also, to what extent do consumers in Qatar trust fellow consumer’s reviews about products and services offered on social media.
- (iii) Consumer empowerment – This dimension aims to identify the influential power that consumers in Qatar have over businesses on social media. How responsive and proactive are businesses in Qatar are to their consumers within the social media world? As well as to what extent do businesses on different social media platform respond to consumer’s orders and requests in Qatar to increase customer satisfaction.

Social media in Qatar is a very new subject that lacks previous studies and records. Hence, to answer these essential question or this research project, in-depth expert interviews were conducted with different participants living in Qatar. Overall, 15 one-to-one interviews were conducted in Doha. It took around a month to complete all interviews and transcribe them for data analysis. Please see **Appendix 1** to view the interview questions.

All participants of the interview were residents in Qatar. From the 15, 9 of them were Qatari nationals (both male and females) from different age groups (23 years till 45 years old). The 6 remaining participants were residents in Qatar who have lived for at least 5 years. They were from Egypt, Indonesia, United Kingdom, Syria and Palestine.

Their age groups also varied (25 years old till 45 years old). Overall, all the participants that participated in this in-depth interview were working adults. Therefore, they all have income and use social media for different reasons. Please see **Appendix 2** to view the informant's personal data for each participant of the expert interview

The expert in-depth interviews took place in different locations. Some were taken at Qatar University, Qatar Foundation, private homes, cafes and hotel lobbies. Each interview took approximately 25 minutes. Many of the participant's useful responses were thoroughly explained which helped to support the argument of this research. In general, each interview conducted was very pleasant and useful for the purpose of this research.

The voice recorder used was the voice recorder application on my iPhone. Each sound-clip was recorded and saved with the participant's name and the date the interview was conducted. The sound-clips were stored a private folder on my laptop and I only have access to it for my data analysis, discussion and results.

From the 15 expert interviews, three of them were conducted in Arabic language because these three users were not proficient in English language. They preferred if they take this interview in Arabic. Therefore, I had to prepare the questions in Arabic and translate the opening speech in order to receive their approval to use the voice recorder to record their responses.

Two Qatari ladies refused to use the voice recorder, they preferred to respond to the expert interview questions without any recording devices. To respect their request, I had to record their answers by writing while conducting the interview. Their answers were consolidated with the transcriptions of the other interviews for data analysis,

results and discussions. All the participants have been promised that they will be given a copy of this research project once it has been finalized.

The data acquired from the interviews were compared and further analyzed in order to understand the extent of the impact of social media on consumer behavior from different demographics. Different demographics had different responses which made the research interestingly comparative. Due to the limited time of this research project, there were many questions eliminated from the lists of questions because it would require more effort and time. Hence, there are a lot of potential studies to be considered for this research in the future.

4 - Findings and Discussions

In general, many of the responses obtained correlated with the information extracted in literature review. Even though there is a lack of previous studies of social media usage in Qatar, the information matches many of the responses in terms of social media platforms preferences, effects from other users, reasons for using social media and being a customer on different social media platforms.

Consumer Trust

In terms of consumer trusting merchandisers in Qatar on social media, interestingly, the older the participant the less easy it is for him/her to trust these merchandisers on social media. Many participants elaborated that there have been incidents in Qatar where consumers were cheated about the products or services they intended to purchase. For example, Noora, Qatari female, age group 25-35 years old said:

“I am always careful when I want to buy from Instagram. I had a horrible experience last year with an Abaya designer who sells her products on her

Instagram page. She had a very nice design on her page that I really liked. I wanted to have that design on an Abaya so I placed my order. They asked me to send my driver to pay half of the price of the Abaya, which was 1500 QR. I was surprised when the Abaya was ready, the design was totally different than the one I requested at the time I placed my order. I was very disappointed and I tried calling their number but no one would answer. I wrote her a very long comment saying that I am unhappy and that I want to refund my money, but no one answered”.

This shows that Noora had a very unpleasant with this special encounter which resulted her to distrust the majority of the merchandisers on social media in Qatar. She seemed to be very concerned with this system. Because of this negative experience she seemed to be against the system as a whole and strongly believed that the traditional method of shopping is better and safer. However surprisingly she added:

“I noticed that everyone around me is shopping on Instagram, I felt that there are good sellers on Instagram. I purchase many sweets such as truffles, cakes and cupcakes on Instagram because they are very delicious and provide delivery service. So when the driver is not available I do not need to worry about it the sweet will come to my house anyways. I trust many of these sweet shops because the quality is very high and it is hard to find them in normal shops in Doha”.

Even though Noora was cheated from the Abaya merchandiser, she seems to have a very pleasant experience with the sweet shops that operate on social media in Qatar. She is pleased with the quality of the products and the fact that they provide delivery

service. She claims that she trusts these sweet shops because of the quality of the products that are being presented. She also explained that they are not available in the traditional sweetshops in Qatar, and therefore the ones on social media are the only options. The more she orders, the easier it is to trust these merchandisers on different social media platforms. Overall, Noora has probably gave another chance to shopping through social media platforms since it is becoming prevalent in Qatar. She didn't want to miss out the opportunity of getting certain products and/or service.

Moreover, Osama, a 24 years old Egyptian male resident in Qatar, recently bought a leather branded wallet from a local merchandiser that only sells on Instagram, he said:

“I always wanted a nice luxurious wallet but I felt that the ones they sell in the normal retail shops were too expensive. I was considering to purchase one online but then I ran into this Instagram page that sells leather goods in Qatar. I found the exact same wallet that I wanted. I called the number the posted and checked if the wallet is still available. I met the guy and he showed me the wallet. I was sure that it is original because of the texture of the leather and the packaging. So I bought it! I think I saved around 30% from the retail price in Doha – which I think is great!”

Osama had a very positive experience with purchasing on social media because of the price difference as well as the good met his expectation. Based on his response, as a consumer, Osama trusted this merchandiser quickly after meeting up and checking the product. It seems that Osama was very confident with the originality of the product that he has purchased. He seemed to be very pleased that the delivery was on the same moment of purchasing the actual product, as opposed to purchasing it online and waiting for it to be delivered by international courier.

Looking at this from a different perspective, Soud, Qatari male, 28 years old stated firmly during the interview

“I never bought anything from social media and I never will because I simply do not trust any of them. You can never guarantee if the seller actually has the product. So why should I put myself in this risk? If I want to purchase something other than the traditional method, I will only purchase from Amazon or E-Bay”

Soud is insistent that the merchandisers on social media are non-trustworthy and he is determined that he will never place any order or purchase any product or service via social media. This extreme response supports the fact that it is hard to combine all consumers to purchase in one distribution channel. Regardless of its convenience or accuracy, he will not purchase anything on social media. He would only purchase online on the internet browser such as Amazon and E-Bay since he views them more trust worthy and can track his shipment easily. This option is not available with shopping on social media. He is not willing to take risk of any malpractice. Based on his bold statement, he is convinced that merchandisers on social media are not authentic and cannot be trusted. As a customer, Soud would purchase products and/or services from other types of distribution channels.

When consumer trust was questioned to Fatma, Qatari female, 25-25 years old age group, she claimed she always has positive experiences with merchandisers on social media and that they always do what they promise:

“I have always had a great experience with shopping on social media especially on Instagram. They are always available and it is so easy to place your order. You do not need to worry about traffic just send the driver with the

money and you will get your order easily. I was never cheated and I always got what I ordered for. I will always continue using social media for shopping because I trust them and it is very convenient always”

Fatma demonstrates the majority of the responses obtained about consumer trust. Where after the first successful experience, it becomes easier to trust the merchandiser. This becomes advantageous for both the consumer and the merchandiser on social media. It becomes easier to increase brand loyalty as well. Fatma’s confidence made it seem like she is willing to continue shopping on social media for different products and services. This is probably due to the fact that the majority of these merchandisers provide delivery services. She currently works and is a mother, so not having to worry about delivery is very convenient for her. Fatma expressed that she looks into consumer comments without engaging with them. This is probably due to the fact that more information about the products and/or service is provided from different consumers interacting on different social media platforms.

Interestingly, Abdulla a Qatari male, 25 – 35 years old age group argued that he only uses different social media platforms as an intermediate channel to gain information about product and services, but does not purchase anything on any social media platform. Abdulla claims:

“I am a frequent user of social media and I use it on a daily basis. There are some people that I enjoy following on social media. They talk about certain products and/or services that are useful They tell us where we can find it and how we can order it. I only trust websites such as Amazon and E-Bay to purchase something online. However, I do not trust purchasing anything on social media because you are not protected by law as a consumer in social

media. Therefore, I only purchase using official website that are known internationally”

This illustrates that Abdulla is an example of a social media users that does not trust purchasing anything from its platforms. However, he does take advantage of the information and data shared about different product and services on different social media. This shows that consumer trust on purchasing via social media is somewhat skeptical for many of its users because of the absence of legal protection. As a customer, it seems that Abdulla is very concerned about the lack of legal protection because he would never purchase anything on social media. Since there are many different sources of different products and/or services on social media platforms, he would initialize thoroughly with the information available on social media only. He feels more secure to purchase from online websites such as Amazon, since they are credible, and shipments of the purchased products can be tracked easily. He assures that he is more confident using Amazon to purchase products and/or services.

During the interview sessions, each participant was asked what it would take for different social media platforms to gain their trust as consumers and start to feel more comfortable purchasing different products and/or service. Different participants had different suggestions and level of expectations. In general, the social media concept is very new to this world, there is not adequate experience with its usage in order to guarantee trust permanently.

Mariam, a Qatari female, 25 – 35 years old age group, discussed different indicators that would make her trust merchandisers more. She said:

“In general, I trust merchandisers in the United States more than any other country because of their experience and knowledge of using social media.

When I look at different social media pages, usually the number of followers is a big indicator. The more followers the page has, the more valid it is. I also like to read the feedback of people using their page. Maybe they will say about their experience and how it was. This might let me trust the merchandiser more on social media. You have to read the comments and evaluate yourself whether you can trust them or not.”

This shows that Mariam is very observant on different social media pages. She pays attention to specific details such as the content of the social media page, the number of followers, the engagement of customers (or followers) before determining how trustworthy the merchandiser is on social media. As a social media user, Mariam pays deep attention to other user’s feedback about the products and services being offered on different social media platforms such as Instagram. She considers their feedback an important indicator about the authenticity of the merchandiser as well as the actual product and/or service being offered. But she does not explicitly engage with other social media users because she feels that it is unnecessary and it would be a burden on others. People do not only use social media for communicating about products and/or services.

Shinta, an Indonesian female, 25 – 35 years old age group elaborated about different ways that merchandisers could do in order to gain her trust as a potential customer. She claimed:

“Those sellers on social media should try to send us samples of their products because we need to make sure that what they are saying is actually true. The only way we can believe is by receiving some samples in order to try the product. This will help us to trust these sellers on social media easier. I also

think that there should be a review page on social media about different sellers. For example, booking.com and Amazon.com have review pages about the products and services they offer. If you are unsure about any product or service before purchasing, you can simply read the reviews and rates. It helps you to make a more informed decision on whether you should buy it or not.”

Shinta believes that she should practically see the product before considering purchasing it or not. This can be done by sampling. She believes that if the merchandisers provide samples to their customers they will be more willing to purchase from them. Having review pages for each merchandiser will help her to consider whether she should purchase on social media platforms or not. She seemed to be very dependent on other customer's experiences with the actual product and/or service being offered on different social media platforms. It seems that Shinta requires samples because she wants to test the products and assess its authenticity, however she made no mention about services.

Ahmed, a Palestinian male, 28 years old believes that there should be a certification system to any merchandiser that guarantees social media users that based on the certification, the merchandiser is authenticated and is permitted to trade on social media. Ahmed explained:

“The management of each social media platform should conduct a certification program on each merchandiser who intends to sell products and services on their platform. This certification guarantees the social media user that they are dealing with a registered merchandiser and that there is a very minimum chance of experience any commercial malpractice. This could enable more social media users to become more comfortable to purchase

more products and services. If any problems arise, they management of this certain social media platform can track down that merchandiser and bring back the right of the social media user. In this way, the social media users are more protected against any cheating or commercial malpractice.”

Ahmed discussed that the internal management of each social media platform should form a trade registration permit “certification” that will show on the merchandiser’s account that he/she is verified. This will make the social media customer feel that it is safer to purchase from that specific merchandiser who has been certified. If any problem occurs between the customer and merchandiser, the management can intervene and help the customer to track down the merchandiser. Once more merchandisers become certified, more customers will be trusting them on social media. This will increase the competition and product variety which is better off for any customer. This will need to be arranged by the management and has to be implemented in a sense that satisfies all different users of that specific social media platform.

Customer Correspondence

During the interview sessions, the participants were asked if they communicate and interact with other social media users before considering purchasing a certain product and/or service on a certain social media platform. The majority of the participants stated that they do not communicate with other customers that they do not know. However, they communicate with family and friends who are on these social media platforms to take their opinions or insights.

Fahad, a Qatari male, 27 years old said that he only communicates with the merchandiser after taking all information into consideration. He said:

“I never communicate with other social media users that I do not personally know for privacy reasons. It does not make me comfortable to talk about a certain product and/or service with someone that I do not know. However, if there is a product and/or service that I am interested about, I would read the comments and reviews about it. I use this information and then decide whether I should contact the merchandiser for further inquiry or not. The only person I communicate with when doing business is the actual merchandiser – that’s it! And the rest, I only read their comments”

Fahad seemed to be a conservative type of social media user who takes privacy very seriously yet makes good use from social media. The only person he would directly contact is the actual merchandiser after reading the comments and reviews that talks about the certain product and/or service. He does not feel comfortable discussing about the product and/or service with people that he does not know. This shows that as a customer he chooses not to engage actively with other customers. However, he does take their comments into considerations. This would help him to understand how good that certain product or service is.

Rebecca, a British female, 25 years old explained that she personally doesn’t feel comfortable discussing with other social media users about certain products and/or service. She said:

“Even though I know many people who contact other social media users on Instagram and Facebook that talk about different products and/or services available. I personally would never do it because it makes me feel not comfortable talking with people that I do not personally know. I do read the comments and definitely consider them when I am searching for a particular

product or service. These comments are usually written by other users like me, therefore it is definitely trustworthy. But of course you cannot guarantee all comments to be valid so you still have to be careful.”

Rebecca represent the majority of the responses obtained when asked about contacting other social media users. It is believed because social media is a new concept in our lives, people are still experimenting it and trying to normalize their actions as much as possible. Reading certain comments from other social media users helps to give an insight about the product but there is no need to further discuss about it with other unknown social media users.

Abdulaziz, a 24 years old Qatari male said that he is open to contacting other social media users about a certain products and/or service that is only available on social media platforms. He said:

“Until now I have never tried contacting someone on social media that I do not know to ask about his or her experience of a certain product and/or service. I am a very big shopper on social media and I like to always surf on social media and check out if there are new products and or services that I would like to purchase. Normally, I go ahead and read the comments of previous customers or clients that talk about their experience with that specific merchandisers. I usually read three or four comments and then make the decision on whether I should purchase it or not. I was never put in a situation where I felt like contacting someone to make sure about the product.”

Abdulaziz seemed to be very open about it and has no problem with contacting a social media user to discuss about a certain product and/or service. He seemed to be

very confident with the comments that he reads before making the purchasing decision. Overall, he is sufficient with the information gathered about the product and customer comments on specific social media platforms such as Instagram. He seems to be very comfortable talking with social media users as long it is related about a certain products and/or service.

Shinta, an Indonesian female, 25 – 35 years old shared an example of contacting a user on social media for an immigration service she was previously seeking for. She stated:

“Before, I was looking for Canadian immigration to settle there with my family. I found a post where there is an immigration representative that helps to facilitate your immigration application to Canada. I found the post on Facebook. There were many comments and reviews about the post. Some people were talking very positively about the immigration application services they provided. Some others criticized them harshly and were saying that they are very disappointed about the overall service they have received. So what I did, I contacted some of these Facebook users under the post and asked them why were they disappointed. I introduced myself and told them that I am interested in applying for Canadian immigration for myself and for my family. After discussing this with different Facebook users of the post, I decided to contact the immigration representative and I managed to file our Canadian immigration application successfully. We are just waiting for the reply.”

This shows that Shinta was exposed to mixed views about the immigration services that this Facebook page had to offer. She contacted the users who criticized the immigration service in order to make sure whether it is worth using them for her

immigration application. Clearly, she was able to clarify their experience before going ahead and filing her application. This shows that Shinta as a social media user is actively engaging with other social media users and trust their comments and reviews about the different product and/or services being offered. However, she stresses that she does not believe entirely to everything social media users say or claim. Sometimes the judge with no base and this makes more biased comments. This is because not all customers what write on social media have equal understanding and competencies, therefore, this may lead to many biased reviews that do not accurately reflect about the effectiveness of the product.

Customer Empowerment and Preferences

In general, the participants that responded to the in-depth interviews had similar preferences based on common demographic characteristics. For example, the Qatari participants have high preferences to social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Their least favorite social media platforms were Facebook and Twitter. Here are some of the statements extracted from the interview

Abdulrahman, 26 years old Qatari male said:

“My favorite social media platforms are Instagram and Snapchat. They are very visual and entertaining. There are a lot of pictures and videos, it is easy to share and show what you think. Snapchat is even more private, people can see your photos or videos only once and you can track who sees your photos and videos which is very good. I do not like Facebook because it is very outdated and I do not get its concept. I have tried using it before but I immediately lost interest. I do not think I will ever use Facebook again because I do not see myself I have any needs to use it.”

It seems that Abdulrahman prefers to use Instagram and Snapchat since these social media platforms are more visual. They are easier to use and accessibly convenient compared to other social media platforms. As a customer, Abdulrahman is the type of customer that does not want to spend too much time reading long texts and reviews about different products and/or services.

Abdulaziz, 24 years old Qatari male said:

“I really like Instagram because of the many entertainment pages it has. I really enjoy following them because they are funny and creative. It is easy to use and it is accessible on the mobile phone. I can access it whenever and wherever I am. I dislike Facebook because it is confusing and no one here in Qatar uses it. I do not know anyone from my friends and family that actively use Facebook so why should I make an account? It would be very boring and it would definitely waste my time.”

Abdulaziz enjoys using social media for entertainment purposes via Instagram and Snapchat. He doesn't seem to be a very big shopper because he mostly referred his usage of social media as keeping in touch and entertainment. He seems to dislike Facebook because of its complexities and lack of familiarity of the new application.

Abdulla, 25-35 years old age group Qatari male said:

“I enjoy using WhatsApp because of its privacy and easiness to use. It is very easy to find your contacts. You can send media files, locations and change your display picture. I really enjoy using it. I also like to use Instagram because I like to follow some people that I am interested with who share useful information and give us good advice. I have a YouTube account because there are many famous people there that I like watching and follow always. It is

very easy to use and very convenient. I do not use Facebook because it is hard to use. I do not know anyone who uses it and I never received an invite to create an account. I do not think I will ever do because I think I am too active on social media anyways”

Abdulla was the only participant who mentioned about YouTube and how much he uses it to watch different types of reviews about health and nutrition’s. He is keen to keep up to date with the new trends of this sector by following different YouTube channels of social media celebrities and health specialists. He also claims that he does not like Facebook because he believes that it is hard to use. It seems that he appreciates social media platforms that are more visual.

Fatima, 25-35 years old age group Qatari female said:

“I prefer Instagram because there are very nice pages I enjoy following. I go to my Instagram account around 5 times a day. I like to order many things on Instagram because it is easy and convenient. I do not like Snapchat because there is no permanent record of the media being shared. Once you see it, it is gone forever. You cannot keep track just like on Instagram.”

As a social media user, Fatima is concerned with the availability of the media content. She appreciates Instagram greatly because the pictures and videos are posted permanently – unless the owner of the page removed it. She compared Instagram to Snapchat, where all media content shared on it is only available for 24 hours. She seem to be the kind of user that likes to take time before deciding on whether or not to purchase a certain product and/or service.

Mariam, 25-35 years old age group Qatari female said:

“I like Snapchat and Instagram. For Snapchat, I only use it with my family and my very close friends. I like to see what happens and it is easy to use. I do not post a lot but I believe that if there is something worth posting for, I do it. I think if you keep posting a lot of pictures and videos you lose the beauty of it. But this is my personal opinion everyone is free to do what they want on social media. For Instagram, I like to follow more artistic things and see what’s new. You always learn new information through these social media platforms.”

Mariam distinguished the way she uses Instagram and Snapchat. She uses Snapchat for personal uses only, therefore she does not use it to seek for products and services. Whereas, Instagram is commonly used by her to check out different products and services. Even though she delegates her family members to take care of the purchasing phase, she chooses her products and services. This is because she is more exposed to different accounts on Instagram and therefore she has the ability to compare and contrasts different product and/or services. Especially the ones that are not available in the market.

As illustrated above, the vast majority of the Qatari participants had higher preferences to social media platforms of snapchat, Instagram and less of other social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These preferential reasons could be personal but in general, within the Qatari community, Qatari people are prevalent on WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat. Hence, there is no incentive on going to other social media platforms such as Facebook etc.

Surprisingly, the non-Qatari nationals who participated in this interview had other preferences on social media. The majority of them claimed that they are active users on Facebook compared to other social media platforms. Mostly to keep in touch with

families and friends overseas. Many of these participants have family members living all around the world. Therefore using Facebook and WhatsApp would be more realistic for them because of the free-call options they both provide contemporarily. Here are some of their responses extracted from the transcriptions of the interview conducted:

Osama, 24 years old Egyptian male said:

“I enjoy using Facebook because my whole family are on it. It is very easy to see their daily posts, who they talk to and what is new with them. This is the same with me, they see where I go, what I do and what I share. We always enjoy sharing funny pictures and videos for entertainment purposes only. If we find some old pictures, we always share it to remember the nice memories. I do not even know how to use some other social media platforms such as Snapchat or Twitter, I am very used to Facebook. Actually I also use WhatsApp and Skype because of the free calls. But now Facebook offers voice calls as well so it is very convenient for me to keep in touch with my family and friends in Egypt and anywhere around the world.”

Osama seems to be very well connected with his family and friends back home. He has the motivation of using Facebook consistently because of the presence of his family and friends. He seems to be not interested with other social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat because he doesn't have many familiar contacts using them. He didn't mention a lot about shopping through Facebook, however, he claims that Facebook is very convenient and helps him to better interconnect with everyone.

Rebecca, 25 years old British female said:

“I like to use Snapchat because it is very interesting and entertaining. I really like the filters they have to enhance the look of the picture and videos. I recently stopped using Facebook because it is becoming old and outdated. I prefer to use Instagram more because you find more active people there. In general, Snapchat is my favorite social media platform.”

Rebecca is a very artistic type of users that appreciates the art delivered by different social media platforms. She kept on using examples from the options available on Snapchat that helped her to elaborate about herself. She didn't specify which social media platform she uses for shopping because she has no previous experience with making a complete transaction on social media. She did not seem to be against it because she explained that she would read customers reviews and ask about the merch

Ahmed, 28 years old Palestinian male said:

“I love using WhatsApp because there are many situations where I am not able to talk because I am in meetings or conferences. Sending texts or voice messages is much easier. You can see whenever your contact is online and know what to send which media. It is more personal and there is more privacy control as opposed to other types of social media platforms. I also like to use Skype because I have many contacts there. When I studied in America, I had many friends there, so now we keep in touch on Skype always by having group video calls. It can be very funny sometimes. I also like to use Facebook because you get to be updated with all the news. I am a big fan of football, you see all the news of the famous football players and leagues easily. There are a lot of nice pictures and videos as well to see and share. I do not like Twitter

because to be honest I do not understand the concept of it. It is very hard to keep up with it. So I just gave up on it.”

Ahmed also discussed about his appreciation to different social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Skype because it helped him to keep in touch better with his friends in America. He also discussed how it is important for him to keep up to date with football news through Facebook. He dislikes Twitter because he does not get its concept therefore it is very unlikely he would do any shopping there.

Shinta, 25-35 years old age group Indonesian female said:

“I only use Facebook and WhatsApp. My whole family in Indonesia uses Facebook, it makes me so happy to see their pictures and the pictures of their young children while I am here in Qatar with my family. WhatsApp is easy to use and now we have free calls. I am always keep in touch with my family and friends all around the world. I do not like to use Instagram because I never found it interesting. There is no information, all you see are photos. I do not get this concept and I do not think I will ever use it in the future.”

After discussing about her immigration service experience, Shinta elaborated that her whole family are available on Facebook. She enjoys keeping in touch with them by looking at their pictures and posts. She does the same as well. She didn't find Instagram interesting probably because her family are not available there.

Sarah, 25 years old Syrian female said:

“I like to use all social media platforms except Twitter because I think it is very hard to use. I do not think I will be able to post on it every day. However, I like to use Facebook because my whole family uses it. My friends from high school are also on it. I love using YouTube because I can see so many videos. I

like many Arabic shows and series they are all available on YouTube as well. What I really like as well is that you can share videos from YouTube on your Facebook page, this means that any friend on your Facebook account can see the videos you are watching on YouTube which is very interesting. I do not like to use Twitter and Snapchat because they are hard to use and I am not used to it. It takes a lot of time to understand it and I just feel that I do not need to use it actually.”

Based on the extractions above, different social media users have different preferences in terms of their platforms preferences. In general, the participants do not have much power as customers on social media, they still cannot influence what the merchandiser offers and sells. Overall, it seems that most purchases are done on Instagram and the correspondence is done through WhatsApp. Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat is used more for networking, socializing, sharing media that are for entertainment uses only.

5- Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized one lives his/her life. We all use social media for different purposes; to better interconnect with one another, communicate and interact, receive new information and updates and use it leisurely for entertainment purposes. This research has aimed to identify the implications of social media to consumers in Qatar focusing on three main dimensions; consumer confidence, consumer correspondence and consumer empowerment. The interviews conducted with the 15 participants has allowed us to assess these three dimensions. Each one had a different perspective because of his/her customized experience.

In general, all participants are aware of social media and its importance in the State of Qatar. They are aware that many businesses in Qatar operate locally through social media platforms. Interestingly, social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp are more favored than Facebook and Twitter. Whereas internationally, Facebook is still considered to be the social media platform leader because of the number of its active users. The majority of the participants enjoy using Instagram and WhatsApp because their contacts and followers are available there. These platforms are available on smartphone application which means they are more easily accessible as well.

In terms of consumer trust, generally, there is a somewhat of trust to merchandisers that operate on social media in Qatar. This is understandable since Qatar is a small country and almost everyone are familiar with one another. Merchandisers are generally affected from the powerful word-of-mouth that could impact them positively or negatively. For example, on Instagram, their pages are easily shared between Instagram users, where they can discuss about their products and services

and how authentic they are with their customers. However, about 30% of the participants do not trust the merchandisers on social media which supports many of the previous articles that discussed about this case in the literature review.

Consumer correspondence is conducted quite differently here in Qatar. The vast majority of the participants claimed that they do not correspond with other social media users about products and services. Instead, they only read the comments written by other social media without explicitly interacting with them. Basically, they look for the average comments or rates about a certain product and/or service and then decide on whether or not they should purchase it. Many of the participants implied that there is no significance to interact with other social media users. They trust most of the user's comments because of their interests about their product and/or service.

In terms of consumer empowerment, the majority of the merchandisers try to become responsive with their customers by keeping close contact and understand their needs and wants. Their competitive advantage is being able to respond back authentically to customers as fast as possible. Since there are many competitors in the market, it is easy for a customer to switch to another brand (or page) to purchase a product and/or service. The only method of advertising is sharing pictures, videos and post on the merchandisers' page along with applicable relevant "hashtags" to reach the target market efficiently and effectively.

Overall, different social media companies should look into their merchandisers users. They should come up with a system where a merchandiser is authenticated in his/her country to assure the customer that they are protected by law. However, this would require many international agreements and interactions in order to settle it. Many of the participants compared these social media merchandisers to online commerce

websites such as Amazon and E-Bay. They implied that they trust these online commerce websites more because they are registered, licensed and a customer can track his/her shipment easily. Social media platforms still have more to catch up in order to gain the full consumer trust and confidence.

Since this topic is fairly new in Qatar – and in the region, it lacks a lot previous studies in order to build a structure about the current situation. However, in the course of this research, it seems that many of the participants are not well experienced with using all the options available with different social media platforms, this limits the study of this research because it is hard to compare different participants who have different levels of competency using social media. Also, not all social media users are necessarily social media customers, they may be exposed to a product and/or service, however, it will never trigger them to consider purchasing it because of this new sort of distribution channel. Moreover, the role of different stakeholders such as the government and the international community with regulating the use of social media within commerce is non-existent. It is hard to evaluate any action taken on social media platforms if there is no law or regulations to use. For example, the customer may complain about a certain merchandiser's poor delivery system, however how poor is it? There is no base to use in order to compare different situations.

For future studies, it is recommended that more quantitative tests to be executed for this case. Future researchers should conduct different types of questionnaires to assess the extent of the usage of social media as consumers in Qatar. It would be interesting to know what are the most famous types of products and/or services and least famous ones and why. Also, observation tests could be used in order to analyze how the usage of different social media platforms are done. This will make it easier to compare and analyze. Future researchers should take into consideration the consumer trust

dimension in particular because it is fundamental compared to the other ones. Once there is consumer trust and confidence, there will be more consumer empowerment and consumer correspondence because they feel more comfortable using it as a method of purchasing products and/or services.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself? (Name, job, hobby etc)
2. Please explain your favorite social media platforms? How often do you use it?
3. Please explain your least favorite social media platforms. Why?
4. How do you access your social media platforms and why?
5. How often do you use social media in your life?
6. How convenient is social media in your view? Explain.
7. Explain your usual activities on social media?
8. Have you purchased any product and/or service from a social media platform? If so, how did you find this experience?
9. Compared to the traditional shopping/buying, how do you describe your experience with buying using social media?
10. Do you trust merchandisers on social media? Why?
11. What do you distrust most about buying from social media? Why?
12. What do you think can make you trust them more?
13. Do you interact with other social media users before deciding on purchasing a certain product and/or service? Why?
14. Do you read consumers comments and/or reviews before making the buying decision? How much do you trust their views?
15. Finally, do you have an interesting experience with buying a product and/or service on social media that you would like to share with us? Explain.

Appendix 2: Description of Interview Sample

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Nationality	Usage of Social Media
Mariam	Female	30's	Senior Legal Officer	Qatari	Moderate
Abdulaziz	Male	20's	Legal Officer	Qatari	Active
Ahmed	Male	20's	Businessman	Palestinian	Moderate
Shinta	Female	40's	MBA Student	Indonesian	Active
Fahad	Male	30's	Engineer	Qatari	Active
Abdulrahman	Male	20's	Accountant	Qatari	Active
Fatma	Female	30's	MBA Student	Qatari	Active
Sarah	Female	30's	Event Organizer	Syrian	Moderate
Rebecca	Female	20's	Business Employee	British	Active
Osama	Male	20's	Public Relations	Egyptian	Active
Abdulla	Male	30's	Engineer	Qatari	Moderate
Soud	Male	20's	Engineer	Qatari	Non-active
Ahmed	Male	30's	Businessman	Qatari	Moderate
Sami	Male	30's	Government employee	Syrian	Non-active
Hamad	Male	30's	Unemployed	Qatari	Very Active