

Omani Community in Digital Age: A Study of Omani Women Using Back Channel Media to Empower Themselves for Frontline Entrepreneurship

Sangeeta Tripathi, Muna Al Shahri

Abstract—This research article presents the changing role and status of women in Oman. Transformation of women's status started with the regime of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said in 1970. It is always desired by the Sultan to enable women in all the ways for the balance growth of the country. Forbidding full face veil for women in public offices is one of the best efforts for their empowerment. Women education is also increasing rapidly. They are getting friendly with new information communication technology and using different social media applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook for interaction and economic growth. Though there are some traditional and tribal boundaries, women are infused with courage and enjoying fair treatment and equal opportunities in different career positions. The study will try to explore changing mindset of young Omani women towards these traditional tribal boundaries, cultural heritage, business and career: 'How are young Omani women making balance between work and social prestige?', 'How are they preserving their cultural values, embracing new technologies and approaching social network to enhance their economic power.' This paper will discover their hurdles while using internet for their new entrepreneur. It will also examine the prospects of online business in Oman. The mixed research methodology is applied to find out the result.

Keywords—Advertising, business, entrepreneurship, Social Media, tribal barrier, traditional barriers.

I. INTRODUCTION

SULTANATE of Oman is a beautiful and peaceful country, situated in the Arabian Peninsula. Oman renaissance started under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said who dreamt the Sultanate as a modern state. His efforts brought radical changes in the field of trade, industry, infrastructure, health, education, agriculture, fishing trade and other social aspects. Now, Oman flourished and transformed from isolated nation to a thriving modern country [1], [2]. His Majesty wanted to develop the country in a balance way, that is why to accomplish his dream, he granted voting rights to women in 1996 and right to get elected in Oman Consultative Assembly in 1997. Because of His Majesty vision, Oman became first nation in GCC who gave voting rights to women [5]. Their activities became more vigour and systematic after the establishment of Omani women associations in 1997. There are many private and not for profit organizations that are helping to create unique job training programmes to enhance

the work skills and self-confidence in Omani women. A leading American non-profit organization AMIDEAST is also helping to empower young Omani women. However, women are facing high barriers of society and culture to participate in formal economic activities, but at the same time they are coming up with new and innovative ideas of self-employment. They equipped themselves with basic business skills through different sources of media and new media. It evokes and enables them for better understanding of essential components of successful self-employment [8]-[12].

II. METHODOLOGY

Present study is based on primary and secondary data which includes qualitative as well as a quantitative phase of data collection. Online content is also utilized to enrich the study. The qualitative data is being done in particular Omani woman focus group that uses social media. In-depth Interviews have been scheduled with successful online entrepreneur in key fields. Qualitative data consists of open-ended information which is gathered usually through interviews of focus groups and observations. Its aim is to provide relevant numerical figures to show the expansion of online business of Omani women through social media channels. Quantitative data includes close-ended information from the survey to test hypotheses such as age, behaviours qualification etc. Different social media applications are utilized to collect the data. Mixed research methodology is applied.

III. STATUS OF WOMEN IN OMAN

Oman Renaissance started with focus on various sectors to establish Oman as a modern nation. But it was not possible without gender equality and modern education. So, His Majesty had introduced Standard Universal Education system for the both genders. Female students' attendance, which was 0% in 1970, rose up to 49% in 2007. It was major achievement in road map of vision 2020 Oman. During 1980s, Women were restricted to professional fields like engineering, banking and industrial craftsmanship. Because of religious and cultural boundaries, it was claimed that outdoor nature of above said jobs were not suitable for women. Night shift was also totally restricted. So, they were limited to stay only in traditional role of caregivers and nurturers. During this period, the opportunities were steady and slow.

From 1997, with the implementation of Omanization policy, Omani women started getting more chances to

Sangeeta Tripathi and Muna Al Shahri are with the College of Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman (e-mail: sangeetakapil.234@gmail.com, muna-alshahri.sal@cas.edu.om).

participate in different workforce. Education has played a vital role in changing the scenario. Almost all young people age group between 15-24 are literate. During 2013, Oman had achieved 0.348 in Gender Inequality Index value, ranking with 64 out of 149 countries. According to a census, sponsored by UNICEF, more than 40% of women were economically active [3]. Women are contributing in different professional jobs categories like engineering, teaching, banking, tourism, social development, Oman airports, medical, nursing and airhostess too. The Minister of Higher Education, the Minister of Education and Head of National Authority for Industrial craftsmanship all are women. Hunaina Sultan Al-Mughairy, Ambassador of Oman in Washington (USA) is also a female and she is the first Arabic Female Ambassador in USA [4].

If we explore the data of women status and their development in other GCC countries, we will find that Oman is ranking number one position in all aspects. Ninetieth onwards, Oman had given rights for contesting elections and voting right to women. While in Saudi Arabia (one of the GCC countries), women got rights to vote and contest only in 2015. They had casted their vote for the first time on 12th December 2015. For municipal Council election, more than 900 women were competing with nearly 6000 men for seats [5], [10].

IV. WOMEN AND BARRIERS TO THEIR SUCCESS

Like some Asian and other Arabian countries, Oman is also bearing close society system. Because of this system, Omani culture is sensitive and produces many tacit layers for women security. But, actually these layers proceed to many socio-economic and political barriers to Omani women. Stereotype thinking is a main root cause of social barriers. Omani Society is a combination of different tribes. They have their own cultural values and specialities. Due to this, women have a very traditional role to play in families and society. These communities consider women as pride of family and are carrying prestige of their community or tribe. They are not allowed to stand alone depending on their own and carrying individual identity [6]. Like Indian women, Omani women are also living their life under the shadow of their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons.

Economic barriers are not apart from social barriers. As we know that most of the societies of the world are male dominated societies, so like their women, Omani women are also having second position which led them to lack of financial assets, relevant knowledge and networks. Family obligations and constraints are also not allowing them to take on full time job at faraway place and to engage in career [11]. This minimizes the opportunities for most of them. Instead of good opportunities, sometimes they choose part time lower paid jobs which are available nearby their homes, so that they can take care of their families with their jobs. This traditional thinking does not permit them to create personal wealth. If a woman wants to start a new firm, it requires pre-requisite like capital, infrastructure, information, experience and relevant network. Due to traditional engagement in family and less access to above critical resources, women face lots of

hindrance to start and manage a new firm or work compared to man. Their position in the society also affects the kind of network they can access or participate. Sometimes *ceteris paribus* then the business created by less skilled woman would have lower possibility of survival and growth than man created firm. These obstacles and impediments discourage to highly qualified woman to choose to start self-employment or entrepreneurship [6], [7], [11], [12].

Stereotype thinking creates political barriers to women. Because of their social status, our society has a different perspective to see them as a political candidate. It is common notion regarding women that they are less capable to perform some certain field orientated work. This is the main reason which restricts women to be accepted as political candidate. Another reason is her shorter network than man. Because of all these notions, less number of women is contesting elections and getting selected for Majlis Al Shura. It has been observed that north Omani women are more open and active because they are close to capital city and sharing multicultural in professional and political fields than south region.

V. SOCIAL MEDIA IN OMAN

Oman total population is 4.25 million which includes 2.365 million Omani and 1.900 expat population [13]. Oman is considered as a young country because one-third of the population is of aged 18-35 years or younger. It has been observed that young generation finds more ease with social media. That's why internet and social media users are increasing rapidly in Oman. Smart phones have made things very easy and more assessable. Mobile phones and the use of the internet have impacted Omani lives in many ways. Shopping is also one of those impacts. Due to techno-savvy, young generation is more incline towards online shopping while older people are still stick on to the traditional methods of shopping. Family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, social status and media are some other factors that shape our perception towards goods and shopping habits. These factors affect our attitudes, opinions and interests of purchasing.

According to *Internet World Stats* website, Internet user's number is 2,584,316 which are 78.6% of total population. Facebook is holding first position with a percentage of 86.7. Whats App is at second position with 80%. Instagram in Oman is also very popular and carrying third position with 40%. It is not as popular as Facebook but bigger than Twitter [14].

VI. OMANI WOMEN USING BACK CHANNELS FOR FRONT LINE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Online business is not a new concept for the world. It becomes common as big numbers of web sites are dealing online with millions of virtual customers everyday all around the world. But it becomes flabbergasted if a housewife is using social media to run their business like a skilled business man. Present study is a good example of how Omani women are preserving their cultural values and embracing new technologies to empower themselves and their nation.

Different types of online available markets have given them this idea to approach virtual world customers to earn profit and empower them economically. Now, they are not associated with these channels only for social cause but they have also started using this back channel media to empower themselves for frontline entrepreneurship. A large number of Omani housewives have created Facebook and Instagram accounts with huge followers to sell their products. These accounts are running for local and national customers. If any customer wants to buy product, they can start research on these social media accounts about retail imported and local products. Housewives turned women entrepreneurs do not advertise their products on print and electronic media. But they use their portal or social media accounts to let their followers, users or buyers know about products' appearance and features. They display products' pictures for advertising and provide contact details to their potential customers. Omani society is not an open society like Western countries. Tribal customs do not allow their women to talk over phone with anyone other than their families, relatives and friends. But in business, they need to communicate with their customers to make selling and purchasing easier. So, to preserve their tribal values and run their business smoothly, they have chosen other social media applications like *Whats App* to solve customers' queries or enquiries. They listen out to the customers and give them information promptly over these applications only. These women entrepreneurs understand the value of feedback. They collect feedbacks through their social accounts to improve their products' quality and business.

Such kind of business does not require huge investment at beginning that's why it becomes convenient to these women entrepreneurs. Firstly, they start dealing with a very small network of family, relatives and friends through back channel. They promote their business through social media accounts and convey their key messages through mouth piece publicity. They try to research and collect GSM numbers of community women and send *Whats App* messages in bulk. When they receive enquiry from the potential customers, they save their numbers and create specific group to keep them update with new arrivals. These housewives are preferably choosing social media to interact even with their old customers for daily dealing because of cultural sensitivity. Though these different social media applications have become a stronger platform, for sell and purchase but at the same time they need to preserve their family and community prestige. That is why Omani housewives turned entrepreneurs do not reveal their identity. They cannot upload any personal photo except product photos as it can reveal their personal identity. Most of them cannot own an account on their own name. Due to multi-culture in Muscat, some women entrepreneurs are holding their accounts with their names. But in other places, the situation is different; they are rarely holding their accounts with their real names. To appear different from other social media accounts, housewives cum entrepreneurs keep unique names of their social account. This can be counted as barrier to create their identity.

This unique kind of online social market is getting popular day by day among Omani community. The reason is its wide

range of product variety. The products are related to cosmetics, clothes, house decor, furniture, design, gadgets, pregnancy care, mother- child care, health care, body care, medical bandage for different body parts, design in Abaya, imitation jewellery, imprint on product, designer bag and footwear etc. Another reason of its popularity is its way of delivering products. Potential customers like the way they receive product at their homes. They believe due to this virtual market, their transportation problem got solved. Region like Dhofar, taxi is the only a public transport available and Omani women do not prefer to go alone with these taxis. Due to online social market, they can overbear this problem easily. These online women marketers also deliver required products to their valuable customers with half charge of taxi fare. Suppose, if the conveyance charge is 6 Rials, women marketers use to provide products with half charge of conveyance. So, customers are also not having any objection to pay.

Some social media entrepreneurs' accounts are cited in Table I to describe factual situation of housewives accounts their names, pattern of display and number of followers.

TABLE I
SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF SOME HOUSEWIVES TURNED ENTREPRENEUR WITH THEIR FOLLOWERS

<i>Name of Social Media Entrepreneur Accounts</i>	<i>Posts of the products</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Following</i>
@beautyhousestore	3,222	24k	2870
@labelle_salalah	727	9,536	37
kik:f_design2014	795	12.6k	1362
f_design2014@outlook.com	179	17.5k	138
Accessoriessh	408	63.2k	6
waffa_makeup	286	17.7	88
victoria_abaya	17003	10.1	9
umtariq9909gmailcom	242	2287	0
Lavender_Desigh'z	483	4735	192
eva_salalah	156	4773	1015
Elegantrawas	131	5550	98
pink_lady_shop	3270	43.3k	7498
umjaser11	591	54.5k	390
abayat_sara	234	8234	2212
2nti_2jmal	493	12.4	0
shopping_mix			

VII. DATA ANALYSIS

All the questions in the questionnaires can be seen as variables like age, education qualification, reason to start business, its idea, use of digital and social media as a tool, family role and support, socio-cultural barriers, customers response in their business, financial aspect, selection of products for trading, selection of countries for importing goods, future aspects and potential search to expand their business etc. Each question receives the values which have been discussed during data analysis. Most of them are having correlation with each other. For example, low education qualification has a correlation to the reason for starting home business. Likewise, exposure of digital media to housewives has a correlation to flourish their online market. In the absence of digital media, they can go for any other work or can open a

shop. But this exposure has given them a chance to see their life in different way. Increasing use of social media is also creating metacognition among youth behaviour. Because of Socio-cultural variables and spending attitude of young generation, demand and supply chain have received a drastic change. Now, all can also be counted as a factor to develop online market rapidly in Oman.

Primary data for the study have been collected from different parts of Oman like Muscat, Nizwa, Salalah and Sur through social media and digital networks. Total 76 women traders have participated in this survey. Mixed research methodology is applied. Quantitative data includes closed-ended information from the survey to test hypotheses such as age, behaviours qualification etc. Qualitative data consists of open-ended information which is gathered usually through interviews of focus groups and observations.

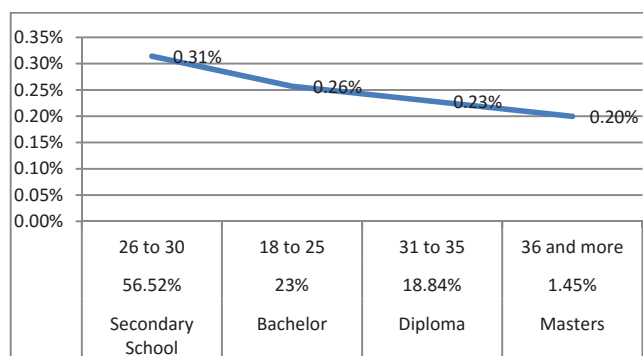


Fig. 1 Age, Education, and Choosing this Option

Fig. 1 shows a clear correlation among age, education and opting online business. Age group 26 to 30 who are having secondary school education seemed more inclined towards this business. It is 56.52% which is the highest point in the graph. It is clear that 31.43% respondents between age group 26 to 30 are agreed that due to some circumstances, they could not complete their education. Their low qualification became a constraint for getting a private or public sector jobs. That is why they find this business comfortable along with their other responsibilities. The age group of 18 to 25 with a percentage of 25.71% respondents said that they are bachelor. The graph with 23.19% shows that respondents with bachelor degree are less attracted towards this. The respondents with diploma, age group 31 to 35 are only 18.84% while other respondents with masters are only 1.45%. It means when qualification becomes higher, they prefer to choose other opportunities from private and government sectors. During survey 70.49% respondents said that they received this idea from their families, friend and society, while 24.59% received this idea through internet. Electronic media played not much role to attract them towards this business; it is only 3 and 1%.

Prominence of back channel in their personal organized venture is apparent as Fig. 2. Though Facebook is the most popular social networking site in Oman and Whats App is holding second position but this pie chart shows that Whats App is the most used application with 69.84%. Instagram is

holding second position with 65.08%. Facebook and twitter both are almost similar with 3.17% and 4.76 while 15.87% respondents said that they are using all social networks to approach to their clients.

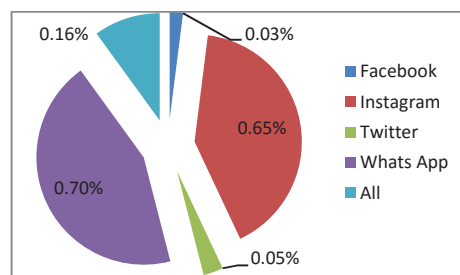


Fig 2 Use of Social Media in Housewives business

A big percentage of 83.33% respondents said that their families have given all support to start up their business. The 11.11% respondents said that they have applied for loans to start their venture. The 9.6% of respondents seek partnership and only 3.70% go for the government aid.

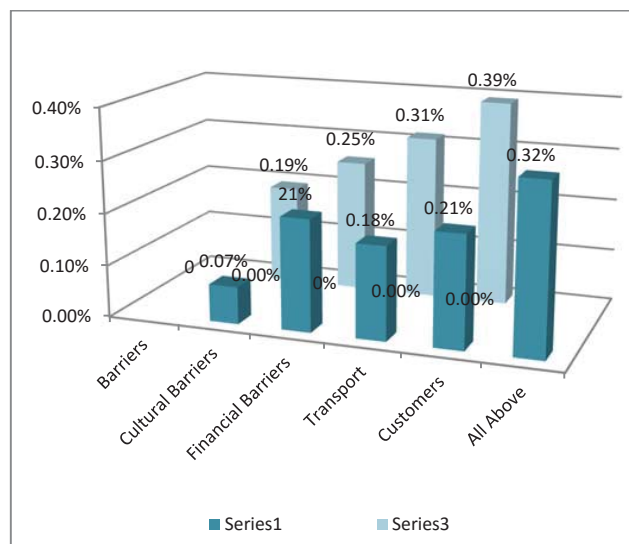


Fig. 3 Correlation between Barrier and Success

Fig. 3 is showing a direct relation between barriers and success. The respondents said that they faced many challenges during setting up their business. Some barriers can be overcome easily but some keep on haunting and creating hindrance in their success. The 32.14% said that challenges are not single. These barriers are related to culture, finance and finding customers in the beginning of the business. Challenges like arranging finance and finding customers are contesting equally with 21.43%. In the survey, we find that 17.86% respondents found transport as a barrier to their business. While 7.14% said that culture is a barrier for them. But we cannot see these two aspects separately because if the culture allows, transportation will not be a barrier. Because of introvert society, women are highly respected and they are not

supposed to drive their own taxis to deliver products to different destinations.

In response to social barriers to their success, 39.22% respondents said that the social freedom is limited, while 31.37% said that no face-to-face communication with their clients creates big hindrance in their trading. Respondents with 25.49% agreed that they find difficulties to make a network. The reason is their religion. According to religious regulations, women should be accompanied with a male member of their families at strange and far-away places. During survey, we visited many accounts of these women entrepreneurs, where we found communication is not allowed for men; they clearly stated in their accounts that men are not allowed. Participants with 19.61% stated that using nicknames is also a social barrier because of nicknames, sometimes, their friends, and their known find difficulty to recognize the identity of a particular person.

Sometimes, one nickname is utilized with a small difference for more than one account. In this kind of situation, it becomes difficult to identify the real person. During the survey, we find that the responses with 71.70% are pretty good. The customers are utilizing these online products again which encouraged these women entrepreneurs. Only 1.89% finds that the responses are received from customers are bad, while 16.98% business women said that responses are slow and 9.43% are not feeling encouraged. On the question of selection of products, 39.22% women said that they go according to the demand but a big percentage with 47.6 is selecting their products according to personal choice. They believe that their own selection of product can create unique identity whether it is medicine, medical tools, cosmetics, clothes, kindergarten, etc. A very small percentage with 5.88% said that they chose according to group choice. Only 7.84% said that they go according to the availability of the product. A big number of online women entrepreneurs with 58.82% are bringing products for sell from Dubai, China and GCC countries. While 21.57% are importing products from different countries all over the world. 19.61% respondents said that they sell only Omani products. After seeing the responses of the customers, 61.54% women entrepreneurs are thinking to expand their family. While 25% said that they may expand in future. 7.69% have no plan to expand. 5.77% said that they did not think about it.

This kind of online women business can be an alternative opportunity, 20% respondents have already given jobs to other people while 32% respondents are planning to offer jobs after expansion of their business. 11.32% respondents said that they offer some particular job responsibility to others during festival season when the demand is high. 35.65% respondents manage themselves. Most of the women entrepreneurs are handling their work single with a percentage of 43.40%, while 13.21% respondents said that 3 or more members are helping in their work.

During quantitative data collection, we found that these kinds of products sold by women entrepreneurs are more popular among students and non-working women. 69.62% customers think that electronic trading has changed the way of

shopping in Oman. Because of these women entrepreneurs and social media, shopping has become easier to them. These products are full of variety. They said that Instagram and Whats App both are the most popular among customers to approach them.

More than 70% customers are relying on these two applications. They find it easy in all aspects like payment and quality. During research, we find that huge numbers of customers are influenced with the way of this business. The 37% customers of this virtual world said that they are themselves planning to start their business, while 32% said that they can think about this kind of business in future.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Present research shows that Omani housewives have explored new dimension of career without going for a job. Though Oman is a patriarchal society and women are traced through their father and husband's title, but it could not constrain them to find out their own sky. Government encouragement and increasing literacy rate has worked as a booster in women empowerment. Now, brimming with confidence and knowledge, they are setting role models for the society. During research, we find that 61.54% housewives can be considered as entrepreneurs because they have potential to take risk and ready to innovate in their self-organized venture. A very little number of these women traders have started up their own shops beyond their homes' boundaries and start facilitating their customers face to face along with online dealing. They believe due to online networking, they could dare to open their own shop and have confidence to take other risk in expanding their work. They are also dealing very wisely with different issues related to finance arrangement, socio-cultural and tribal barriers, families' values and maintaining an excellent balance between family and work. To see their enthusiastic approach towards their career, well-educated Omani families are also encouraging and supporting them. Our findings reveal that Oman as a young country has a tremendous potential to develop such kind of online Omani market. A little and systematic effort can develop a huge network to approach virtual world customers. It can also develop and apocarps e-business. Big investment can enhance its scope and generate many other job opportunities. Investment can be arranged through "Fund for Development of Youth Projects" and The "Al Raffd" Fund programs. These programs are particularly launched by the Omani government to encourage young Omani men and women to start small and medium enterprises. Present self-employed Omani business women can be geared up with systematic publicity, promotions and advertising. In this way, they can reap more rewards of frontline entrepreneurship with less effort in future.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al Riyami, M. (2011) 82 Women to Contest MajlisA'Shura Elections Muscat Daily Available at: <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/82-women-to-contest-Majlis-A-Shura-elections> Accessed 03.03.16
- [2] Badawi, J. (1980) The Status of Woman in Islam. The Message of Islam. Available at: <http://islamicstudies.islammessage.com/Ebook.aspx?bid=181> Accessed 24.02.16

- [3] Ministry of Information - Oman (2012) Basic Information Available at: <http://www.omaninfo.om/english/module.php?module=pages-showpage&CatID=161&ID=519> > Accessed 03.03.16
- [4] Joyce, M. (1995) *The Sultanate of Oman: a twentieth century history* London: Praeger
- [5] Murphy, B. (2015). Women in Saudi Arabia vote for first time. *the Washington Post* Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/saudi-women-vote-for-first-time/2015/12/12/9ad0b898-9ad0-11e5-aca6-1ae3bef06d2_story.html > Accessed 22.01.16
- [6] Al Shaibany, S. (2010) Omani women face professional hurdles *The National* Available at: <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/omani-women-face-professional-hurdles> Accessed 04.03.16
- [7] Chatty, D (2000) Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints, *International Journal of Middle East Studies/Vol. 32 (02)* Available at: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0020743800021103 Accessed 03.03.16
- [8] Goveas, S. & Aslam, N. (2011) A Role and Contributions of Women in the Sultanate of Oman, *International Journal of Business and Management Vol. 6 (3)* Available at: <http://ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ijbm/article/view/9715/6965> Accessed 03.03.16
- [9] Oman Business Road Show. (2013) Her Excellency Hunaina Al-Mughairy Available at: <http://www.omanroadshow.com/embassy-of-the-sultanate-of-oman-in-the-us.html> Accessed 04.03.16
- [10] Oman Observer (2015) Vol. 35 No.29, AFP, and report on page 13
- [11] McElwee, G., Al-Riyami, R. (2003) Women entrepreneurs in Oman: some barriers to success. *Career Development International* 8/7 (2003) 339-346. Available at: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/13620430310505296> Accessed 22.01.16
- [12] Goveas, S. & Aslam, N. (2011) A Role and Contributions of Women in the Sultanate of Oman, *International Journal of Business and Management Vol. 6 (3)* Available at: <http://ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ijbm/article/view/9715/6965> Accessed 03.03.16
- [13] Oman Population exceeds 4 million. (2015) Oman Daily newspaper, edition published on 12th October 2015
- [14] Internet World Stats. (2015) Internet Users in the Middle East Available at: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm> Accessed 25.02.16.