I. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, the internet and related online marketing strategies have reduced the distance between markets significantly. Hence marketplaces are becoming extremely competitive. E-marketing is the application of the internet and related digital technologies in conjunction with traditional communications to achieve marketing objectives (Chaffey et al., 2006) When internet marketing has made internationalization a more viable and cost-effective option (Knight and Cavusgil, 2008), along with the outbound marketing, inbound marketing is too used as channels by marketers to reach global markets. Measuring Facebook's impact on marketing, LaPointe (2012), comments that webs and emails are the contemporary channels that boost direct sales enhancing better customer interactions. Therefore, it is essential for marketers to recognize the preferences of consumers and able to meet their preferences better than their rivalries (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967)

Some researchers comment on the market possibilities that has brought by technology in consumers daily life and that has also affected their shopping behaviour (Shima and Varfan, 2008; Menon, 2013). The new channel e-marketing, too has brought new opportunities for global marketers to penetrate niche markets. Reports on the widespread emergence of online marketing indicate that internet has become the great equalizer, making marketers possible to reach across local, national and international markets (Sequera, 2012).

With more than 85 % of people now online, UAE market, too is welcoming digital revolutions in shopping. Obviously ranked as 17th at global level for individuals with internet access, ahead of the US (24th) and Germany (19th) (Synclair, 2013), with this large amount of possible customers, the UAE is a potential market for global traders, especially for soft goods. In addition, the latest revolution in retailing, which has become of increasing importance in marketing of soft goods (Williams, et al, 1972) is growing in the Gulf regions due to the high purchasing power of the consumers.

The technical development of the global markets has implications for consumer shopping patterns too (Williams, et al., 1972). However, besides the aforementioned technological advancement, the fast adoption of e-marketing by many firms in the UAE markets is likely driven by two key trends. The first is the globalization of the UAE markets which facilitated entry of many firms into e-marketing in UAE market. Secondly the increasing trend of homogeneity in choice of global products by the UAE consumers. But many manufacturing industries in the Emirate admit that, e-marketing would work only in conjunction with traditional modes of advertisements using media like radio, newspapers, and television.

But pointing to the initiatives the UAE is putting on e-Government and Smart-Government (Shima and Varfan, 2008), studies opine that the greater technological expansion witnessing in the beginning of 21st century in the UAE (Neff, 2004, Menon 2010) made it easier for consumers to locate products, services, places, and marketing institutions (Zhang, et al., 2011) within the shortest time possible. Hence, the increasing investment by leading firms in digital
advertisements (Go-Gulf, 2012) is a positive sign for growth of e-marketing in the Emirates.

The emerging demand for internet search has attracted more consumers to e-marketing in Arab countries (Algethami, 2013). Past review of literature reveal almost 30 per cent increase in online business transactions in GCC markets, since 2011, especially targeting government utilities and airlines (Algethami, 2003 and Mid Easter News, 2013). A report by AME info (2013) shows 25 percent rise in the internet users in the UAE, which is recorded as the highest market among the Arab countries with currently 125 million internet users (AME info, 2013).

The growth in the number of online searcher has attracted more niche businesses, travel agencies and government organizations to enter into online marketing (Go-Gulf, 2012). Many service industries see two advantages in adopting online marketing (1) the easiness to track the performance of online advertising campaign and (2) the ability to provide customized market targeting to specific audience groups. Several studies in the context of competitive advantages of digital communication have identified various benefits of online advertisements over the conventional promotions and recommended adoption of this technology to challenge competition (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989, Alwitt and Prabhakar, 1992, Jobber, 2007; Gonca, 2009 and Zhang, et al., 2011).

Convinced by the changes that online marketing could make in a short time over traditional promotion media (Clark, 1987; Zahra et al., 2000; Knight and Cavusgil, 2008 and Leinonen (2009), many countries have initiated to invest more on online/ direct advertisements including gulf countries from 0.5 % in 2011 to 0.9 % in 2013 (Go-Gulf, 2012).

Although the wide range benefits of internet yearn young generation for the presence of online marketing (Algthami, 2013), reports from Gulf region show that despite the high rate of acceptance for text messages (Menon, 2010) and increasing number of consumers browsing mobile messages, there are slow opening for e-marketing for soft goods in the gulf region (The Gulf News, 2008 and Scott, 2013).

The self-service discount store, the latest revolution in retailing, has become of increasing importance in the area of soft goods marketing in the UAE. Majority of the Arab consumers, especially female consumers, enjoy spending their leisure to shopping. However, the aforementioned group, due to the relatively low degree of freedom to move in public gives more preference in their choice of channels for shopping. More research undoubtedly needs to be done concerning the degree of customer patronage for a particular channel for shopping and reasons for such patronage.

Conceptualizing the emerging significance of e-shopping from a marketing perspective, so far, little research were done to explore the competitive strength of e-marketing in the gulf markets (Marzouqi, 2009; Menon, 2010; AME info.com, 2013; Band-Evous, 2013 and Amin, 2013). Against the backdrop of shortage in academic accomplishments on this subject, this paper is a first step to evaluate the competitive strength of e-marketing in the UAE markets, selecting Abu Dhabi a case example.

Survey based studies by Yahya (2013 and Robin et al, (2014) support this paper to understand the emergence of two opposing trends of consumers toward e-marketing in the UAE. While one group moves fast from passive consumerism to online comfort shopping, the other group of consumers have became increasingly suspicious, cautious and sometime reluctant too, to use e-shopping due to the fear of risk and financial loss. Study by Menon et, al (2013) comments that those consumers who possess negative views on e-marketing is due to the fear that websites often ask for personal information, while paying online. These types of consumers’ apprehensions are common in markets and Abu Dhabi market is not an exception too.

The aforementioned concept was also supported by Mohammed et. al (2004) who confirmed that traditional marketing methods are still highly relevant in the networked economy, due to consumers perceptions about e-marketing. No doubt, consumers’ concerns about conducting electronic business transactions and the risks involved would have profound impact on the transition of business from traditional to electronic (Martins et al, 2001). Therefore, with the mission to globalize business and thereby to capture wide range of consumers, it is essential for all marketers to make consumers feel comfortable in the process of their online search and e-shopping (LaPointe 2012).

This compels marketers to learn the consumers’ perceptions on e-marketing in culturally diversified markets. In addition since reports reveal that today’s smart consumers buying process start from search engines, social media networks and blogs marketers need to be present on all those mediums so that their prospective consumers could find them when they are looking for products and services (Band-Evous, 2013). Obliviously, a substantial investigation on the prospects of e-marketing in UAE is overdue.

With an aim to address the aforesaid objective, this research paper examines Abu Dhabi consumers’ perception on e-marketing. Conceptualizing the fact that consumer’s perception is a consumer’s reality...
and their involvement is vital for the success of online marketing, this paper looks into the strengths and weaknesses of e-marketing from consumers’ perspective and provides an opportunity to marketers to revitalize their marketing strategies accordingly to develop trust in the minds of UAE consumers. This signifies the scope of this paper.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the advent and mass acceptance of telephone, radio, television, and cable the electronic media have become the dominant force to push marketing. According to Hoge (1993), online marketing is the transfer of goods or services from seller to buyer that involves one or more electronic methods or media. From a marketing perspective Smith and Chaffey (2005) define internet as a media to reach market through digital communication. It involves the process of creating, and delivering value to customers. Hence, it is not only to sell products or provide services through IT but a lot more than that to ensure customer relationship (Strauss and Ansary, 2006 and Mohammed et al, 200 ; Molenaar, 2002 ).

Past studies recommend internet as a good way to open business entities without worrying about store opening hours or overtime payments to the employees (Fred and Paul, 1998 and Zhang et al, 2011). Another advantage highlighted for internet marketing is its role in promoting products and services with the concept of personalization (Zhang et al, 2011).

Few studies also comment that it is a vital way of marketing since it maximizes market coverage with minimum market cost (Beard, 1996; Hutton, 1996; Hartley & Pickton, 1999; Owen and Humphrey, 2009 and LaPointe 2012). Besides Sequera (2013) comments that internet marketing has emerged as a $54.9 billion industry in global market. This rapid rate of Internet adoption has resulted in an extraordinary pace of change in the marketing landscape and has opened up a variety of opportunities for marketers (Pollack 1999).

According to Paul and Brian (1997) due to the increased use of personal computers and the decrease in prices, the online services are attracting more people. A recent Kaspersky Lab survey on the daily Internet activities in UAE (AME info.com, 2012) has revealed that the UAE users are more likely to use a variety of online services to communicate and amuse themselves. Email, social networks, and online video were the most popular, with almost 85%, 83% and 82% of users dealing with them correspondently every day. However, a study by Green (2013) identifies that in the Middle East participation in multichannel retailing is still in its infancy with consumers immersed in an established mall culture.

The above notion means more to marketers, when they operate in a multi-cultural market. So understanding the type of consumer segment who are more depending internet shopping as well their perceptions on internet marketing is essential to learn to customize their internet marketing strategies (Gautam, 2012).

Previous studies identify that the perceptual process every consumer goes through comprised of three stages, such as consumers awareness, exposure and usage of internet marketing (Connors, 2012). Estimating the adoption rates could be a daunting process (Cartier) for internet marketing.

By adopting the ATAR model (Crawford and Benedetto, 2008), this paper designs a framework for the study to estimate the consumers’ adoption rate to internet marketing over a period of time, selecting a period from 2011 to 2013 with an interval of 11 months between each year. According to Crawford and Benedetto (2008), the ATAR model (Awareness, Trial, Availability, Repeat), is based on concept to analyze whether consumers are regular users of a product or media, they must first become ‘aware’ of the existence of it. Once they have become aware of it they must make the decision to ‘try’ it out. In order to be able to try it out, it must be ‘Available’ for them. If they are happy with the trial, then they may decide to ‘repeat’ this purchasing behaviour. Adopting this model in this study, this paper aims to estimate the percent of penetration of internet marketing in Abu Dhabi based on the selected sample size.

III. HYPOTHESES

H1: Awareness of Abu Dhabi consumers on e-marketing for soft goods is high
H2: Abu Dhabi consumers’ exposure to online search for soft goods and e-shopping of soft goods is high.
H3: Soft goods marketed through online has gained prospects now in Abu Dhabi market

IV. METHODOLOGY

How would we propose to advance in this research? This research is progressing under two phases, extended for a period of 8 month, starting from 15th January to 15th August, 2014.

Phase 1: Sample designing. The sampling framework for the study was developed as per the suggestions given by the focus group selected by us for this research. The focus group includes three professors and five employed MBA students from the SOM, NYIT, Abu Dhabi with whom we keep constant interactions at each stage of the survey.
A sample comprised 300 respondents belonging to different nationalities residing in Abu Dhabi, the capital of UAE, were included in the study. The first sector included 100 students randomly selected from three leading business schools selected from the website of Ministry of Higher Education. Remaining 200 respondents were included from the middle level management of three business enterprises, randomly selected from the enterprisers’ website of the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce. The average age of the respondents was 32 years. Fast moving five branded soft goods (products) available in the Abu Dhabi retail showrooms were selected for the study.

Data collection: The primary survey, administered with a pretested questionnaire, was decided to carry out at 3 stages with an interval of 2 months between each survey period.

Stage 1 (Survey completed). The first stage of data collection was done from 15-30 January, 2014 to test hypothesis H1. This survey focused mainly to collect information on respondents’ level of awareness on and their perception on e-shopping for selected branded soft goods. At this stage we too, encouraged the respondents to explore e-shopping to maximize their participation in the second round of our survey.

Stage 2: (Survey Completed). Focusing on the same respondents, 2nd stage of survey was done from 15 to 30 April 2014 to understand respondents’ level of exposure and their buying experience through e-marketing for soft products. 23 per cent of the respondents, who were non-exposed to e-shopping, were dropped at this stage from the list. This data supported to test hypothesis H2.

Phase 2: Feedback on working paper: The two-third of the completed research will be presented as a working paper in the forthcoming international conference in July 2014. 3rd stage of the survey will be completed by accommodating the recommendations and suggestion, if any, given by the conference participants. We expect to publish the research in a peer-reviewed high level journal by the end of September, 2014. Appropriate statistical tools like standard deviations, factor analysis and A-T-A-R Model would be applied to analyze the hypotheses.

\[ MP = AW \times T \times AV \times R \]

Where,
MP = Market Prospects
AW = percentage of respondents who have awareness of internet browsing
AV = percent of availability of the sample product / service in internet channels
T = percentage of the respondents who ultimately try internet marketing at least once
R = share of purchase of product though internet among those who tried internet marketing

Due to the limitations in collecting data, the repeat purchase ‘R’ was calculated using Switching Model (Urban (1975: 858-871)) (see equation 2).

\[ R = R_t(1+ R_s - R_e) \]

Where,
R_t is defined as the proportion of the respondents who expressed their willingness to switch to internet marketing in future and R_s is the proportion of the respondents who had already experiences the product / service through internet marketing. The data without demographic differentiation was used to analyze the above equations with a bench mark of if the A-T-A-R equation results more than 10 % study would accept hypothesis H3.

V. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In the 1st round of survey, out of the 300 consumers selected for survey only 87 respondents replied to all the questions. The demographic description of the those respondents were 18% local UAE nationals, 37% Asian expats, 32% Arab expats and 13% Western expats. Among the above sample size male respondents were majority who replied to the questionnaire with 75% while females were 25%. Majority of the respondents were within the age group of between 30 to 45 years old with (58%) with 30% in between 23 and 30 years old, 9% in between 45 and 50 years old and only 3% above 50 years old.

6.1. Awareness level on internet marketing Gautam (2012) claims that the awareness level of consumers about the usage of internet for e-marketing are significant to promote internet marketing. The socio-demographic exploration of the data suggests gender variation in terms of the respondents’ awareness about the internet marketing. While 12% of the women said that they did not know what are the soft products available for e-shopping but only 9% of men had low level of awareness about the variety of marketing done through internet. While 85% of respondents almost never had trouble in surfing internet among them 35% of male and 5% of female respondents surf internet frequently for e-shopping.

Respondents agreed that the internet provides bigger choice for e-marketing, but 74% of female and 23% male respondents think that e-marketing is suitable for durable products of reputed global brands with high price than soft products. While exploring respondents’ awareness on the fidelity of internet marketing information 23% of female and 12% of male respondents opined that products through internet marketing were fakes and they never trusted the information. This indicated the different levels of perception of respondents due to the increased awareness on the functioning of internet marketing.

For 55% of UAE citizens, browsing internet for e-marketing for soft goods gave too many confusions,
In brief 87% of respondents agreed that how to browse and compare pricing of the products is important to do e-marketing. Hence, the analysis claimed that the respondents (including male and female and all types of nationalities) were highly conscious about the process of internet browsing and were aware of the process of internet browsing. In support of this statement a survey by AME info.com (2013) predicts a growth on the awareness of security and advance payment which would bring in an incredibly exciting time for the e-commerce market in the UAE. The aforesaid findings back the hypothesis H1.

(Thi working paper is open for discussions)

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