INTENT TO PURCHASE PRODUCTS ONLINE: IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM USE AND FRIENDS' RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract- This study investigates the relationship between social media platform usage to obtain product purchase information by prospective product purchasers and their intention to purchase products online. This study also examines the relative impact of friends' product purchase recommendations and social media platform usage by prospective product purchasers to obtain product information on their intentions to purchase products online. This research contributes to the marketing and purchase intention literature and practice by documenting the relationships that the extent to which the sampled individuals use various social media platforms to obtain product purchase information and the impact that friends' product recommendations have on the respondents' intentions to purchase products online.

Keywords- New Product Purchase Intention; Social Media Platform Usage; Subjective Norms

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been known for many years that consumers' intentions play a major role in the eventual executions of product purchases (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). The model Belief-Attitude-Intention-Behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) has been studied and evaluated by scholars for a number of decades. The major concepts that are involved in the research of these authors include beliefs, attitudes, intentions, subjective norms, and behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined belief as a person's "…location on a probability dimension that links an object and an attribute." (p. 53) These authors define attitude as "…a person's location on a dimension of affect or evaluation." They also defined intention as "…a dimension of probability, but the link here involves the person and some action with respect to the object." And, finally, they depict behavior as "…a person's observable response when studied in its own right." These authors also discussed strategies for behavior change which involve communications that have the potential to change beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

Moreover, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) identified the concepts of subjective norms, normative beliefs, and motivations to comply which involve the impact of the social environment on a person's behavioral intention and, therefore, the person's eventual behavior. Specifically, they define a subjective norm as a "…person's perception that most people who are important to him think that he should or should not perform the behavior in question." (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, p. 302). Cho (2011) and others recently continued the investigation of subjective norms and confirmed that there is a significant connection between subjective norms and behavioral intentions in most situations.

Over the past decade, the use of social media platforms has received some attention in academic literature and more so in the popular press. However, the academic community has focused to a greater extent on extending research regarding attitudes, beliefs, intentions and behaviors in a variety of settings in addition to the adoption of new technologies. Therefore, there is an increasing number of studies that focus on the impact of the use of various social media platforms on purchase intention and investigate the potential differential influence of the use of various social media platforms as antecedents of prospective buyers' intentions to purchase products online. Therefore, this study attempts to bring product purchasers' use of social media platforms together with purchase intentions. Thus, this research focuses on the following important questions. First, to what degree do the three selected Internet social media platform types (Personal Networks, Content Sharing Networks, Shared Interest Communities, plus separate Company Websites) impact prospective buyers' intentions to purchase products online (Ullagaddi 2014)? Second, this study examines the degree to which product purchase recommendations of friends relate to the influence of social media platforms including Company Website usage on individuals' intentions to purchase products online. Since there exist such a vast number of Social Media sites, one major Social Media site was selected to represent each of three major Social Media types such as Personal Networks (such as Facebook), Content Sharing Networks (such as Microblogs/Twitter), and Shared Interest Communities (such as LinkedIn) in addition to separate company web sites.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Recently, researchers have applied concepts, relationships, and empirical results comprising beliefs, attitudes, intentions, subjective norms, and behavior associated with current products, market conditions to a variety of contexts and other human

activities. As noted earlier, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1991) are pioneers in this area of inquiry. In another research example in this area, Ja-Chul Gu, et al. (2009) found that perceived usefulness, trust, and perceived ease-of-use had a significant influence on behavioral intention to use mobile banking. Additionally, the research of Ladhari, et al. (2008) determined that satisfaction has a significant impact on restaurant patrons' recommendations, customers' loyalty, and customers' willingness to pay more for restaurant products. Wen, et al (2009) investigated product purchase intention in a study that aimed to examine how three major factors (strength between a consumer and an endorser, consumer's perception of an endorser, and a particular product type) interact with each other. This research also studied the combination of these three factors that could yield an optimum balance and provide an effective product endorsement on Social Network Sites. Primary findings of this study include evidence that consumers' intentions to purchase utilitarian products are strong when high-expert endorsers promote products on Social Network Sites and intentions to purchase hedonic products are strong when friends or people with whom potential purchasers have strong connections/ties endorse products on Social Network Sites. Kim and Ko (2012) asked the question, do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? Purchase intention, which is important to the current study, had a significant positive influence on customer equity which was defined by these researchers as the discounted sum of customer lifetime values. Additionally, these researchers defined brand equity as a customer's subjective and intangible assessment of a brand over and above its value in this study and brand equity was found to have a positive relationship with purchase intentions and a negative relationship with customer equity. Finally, the relationship between value equity, as defined by these researchers as a customer's objective assessment of the utility of a brand based on perceptions of what is given up for what is received, and brand equity was found to be positive.

There have been several recent articles published that investigate how social media has been used to assist consumers in making product purchase decisions by providing such information as what product to buy, when to buy those products, and where to buy those products (Pate 2013). An article by Bannister, et al. (2013) studied tech-savvy young adults, such as the sample of respondents for this current study, to assess their attitudes towards social media advertisements. These researchers found that Facebook users are active site participants but unlikely to click-through advertisements to make product purchases. Another published study focuses on how much commercial value in terms of the purchase of goods and services is created by active and silent consumers through careful evaluations of social media product information on social media web sites. This study concluded that for cosmetic products web site product evaluations by consumers had a greater impact than word-of-mouth communications. Moreover, it was found that on an individual level active cosmetic web site members contributed to the spread of product information and product purchases to a greater extent than silent cosmetic web site members. Friendship/tie strength, trust, normative and informational influence were found to be positively associated with users' overall eWOM (e-word-of-mouth) behavior in a study by Chu and Kim (2011) whereas homophily was found to be negatively related to engagement in eWOM behaviors in Social Network Sites. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) developed a conceptual model and article that incorporates the impact of cultural influence on consumers' usage of social networks as well as its influence on online product purchase intentions. These researchers also noted that social networking has become a more mainstream medium. This model will be even more important when it is examined further. Akar and Topçu (2011) examined factors that influence attitudes toward social media marketing. This research is somewhat different from studying social media users' attitudes toward the use of social network sites for social connectivity. The variables that these researchers found to positively influence consumers' attitudes toward marketing with social media include (1) social media knowledge, (2) use of social media, and (3) being affected by Internet and social media. Whereas the variable, fear about marketing with social media, negatively influenced consumers' attitudes toward marketing with social media.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) suggests that perceived usefulness (PU) and ease of use (EOU) are the two core predictors of whether individuals or organizations adopt or intend to adopt new technologies (Davis 1989; Davis et al. 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw 1992). Cha (2011) notes that consumers' resistance and competition exists among various consumer shopping channels. Cha's study employed regression analysis to develop managerial insights into how online merchants can create an Internet-based system that reinforces and maximizes unique and differentiated values in executing shopping services. Cha (2011) employed a sample of college students noting that college students are active users of the Internet, form a demographic segment that spends a considerable amount of money on online purchases, and uses social networking on a regular basis. This research process and type of sample were employed in the current study. Additionally, Chen and Sharma in a 2013 article presented research that extends the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV) to explain individuals' use of social networking sites. TCV includes the following values (functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and conditional

value). Chen and Sharma extended this research by creating a structural equation model to evaluate major sources of influence (functional, social, epistemic, emotional, and conditional values) on individuals' attitudes and individuals' use of networking services. Furthermore, Cho (2011) studied 214 individuals aged 15 and above in Singapore households to understand the intention to adopt the technology of 3G mobile telephone services. Singapore was selected because it was one of the first countries to roll out 3G mobile phone services. These researchers assumed that both perceived usefulness (PU), defined as the prospective user's "subjective probability that using a specific application system will increase his or her job performance within an organizational context" (Cho, 2011, p. 285), and perceived critical mass (PCM), defined as "the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation so that the innovation's further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining", mediate the relationship between subjective norms and behavioral intention. Cho (2011) founds that both relationships are significant in the context investigated.

A study by Chi, et al. (2012) used regression analysis to explore the influence of end users' perceived risk on cloud computing service usage intention, and the interactive impact of perceived risk and subjective norms on usage intention. Their research pointed out that perceived risk and subjective norms are significantly associated with usage intention, and subjective norms had a moderating affect on the relationship between perceived risk and usage intention. This study demonstrates that subjective norms can have a direct as well as a moderating impact on product purchase intention. Additionally, a study performed by Naylor, et al. (2012) posits that, "surveys suggest that consumers are increasingly relying on social media to learn about unfamiliar brands. However, best practices regarding the use of social media to bolster brand evaluations in such situations remain undefined." These researchers focused on the question of whether to hide or reveal the demographic characteristics of a brand's online supporters. Their findings suggest a model that managers might employ when deciding whether to reveal the characteristics of their online supporters by considering the composition of existing supporters relative to targeted, new supporters. When employing such a strategy, managers need to consider how their products might be evaluated alone or in combination with competing products.

Robinson, et al. (2010) developed and tested a conceptual model regarding traditional and online political communications, and investigated Gen Y's intentions and behaviors regarding their engagement within such political marketing contexts. In this study, the authors posit that Gen Yers may discuss their political views online more frequently than face-to-face. These researchers point out that it will be important to designers of political communications in the future to employ more online media tactics in order to reach these Gen Yers.

Huda, et al. (2012) studied muzakki's (people who are obliged to paid zakah [special obligation for Muslims to give some of their possessions to charity]) intention to pay zakah because they have wealth or properties that are subject to zakah. The first research question of this study involved the influence of attitude, subjective norms, and behavioral control on muzakki's intention to pay zakah. The study showed that attitudes and perceived behavioral control had significant influence on muzakki's intention to pay zakah, while subjective norms did not have significant influence on their intention to pay zakah.

The studies discussed here are clearly building a significant body of research related to social networks and social media marketing. However, it is also clear that there continues to be much more research that is needed to determine the major antecedents of consumers' intentions to behave in particular ways in particular situations including intentions to purchase products across various product categories. This might be especially true for products that are currently offered for sale online, and have been developed and commercialized a significant amount of time after the original studies regarding beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior were performed (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

Based on this review of relevant literature regarding consumer purchase intention, use of social media platforms, and purchase recommendations of friends (subjective norms), the following exploratory hypotheses are offered.

Hypothesis 1 (H_1) – The degree of use of social media platforms to obtain product purchase information has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2) – The recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases have a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than the individuals' degree of use of social media platforms to obtain product purchase information.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Survey and Sampling Processes

The data gathered for this study was obtained using a survey process. A convenience sample was employed in this survey process and involved undergraduate students attending a small public university in the Western region of the United States. This sampling and data gathering process was employed since the respondents who form this study's sample are interested in and are familiar with the products and processes being investigated in this research project. These undergraduate students were surveyed in face-to-face classes. These survey processes were performed in an anonymous manner. The face-to-face, undergraduate survey instruments

were passed out by a majority of the College of Business faculty in their classrooms. The faculty then provided completed, unidentified survey instruments to the researcher. These survey data were analyzed using SPSS software by the researcher. The sample derived from the undergraduate survey process produced 599 useable responses. The College of Business from which these responses were gathered has approximately 750 students. Overall, this survey process produced responses from approximately 79.9% of the potential respondents.

3.2. Variable Measurement

The major variables employed in this research include the Intent to Purchase Products Online, the Use of Social Media Platforms and Company Websites, and the Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends. These constructs were measured using single element scales as portrayed in Appendix 1.

3.3. Analysis of Study Data

Regression and Independent t Tests were employed to analyze the data and test the hypotheses in this study. Testing hypothesis #1 (The degree of use of social media platforms has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals.) entailed the use of regression with Intent to Purchase Products Online regressed on Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK, Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER, Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES, and Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN. The following regression model was used to analyze the associations among these five variables.

The regression model depicted in Figure 1 is used to study the relationship between Intent to Purchase Products Online and the four independent variables (Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK, Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER, Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES, and Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN).

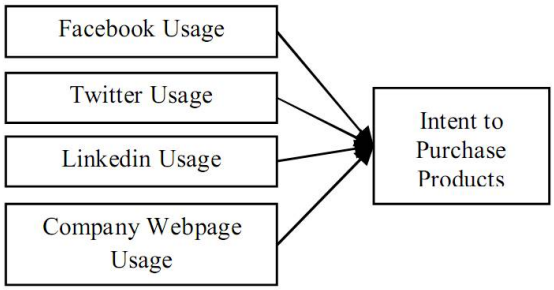


Figure 1 Use of Social Media Platforms Impact on Intent to Purchase Products Online

$y_1 = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + e_1$

where y_1 = Intent to Purchase Products Online; α_1 = regression constant; β_1 = coefficient of X_1 = Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK; β_2 = coefficient of X_2 = Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER; β_3 = coefficient of X_3 = Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES; β_4 = coefficient of X_4 = Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN; and e_1 = error term.

Regression and Independent t Tests were employed to analyze the data and test the hypotheses. Testing hypothesis #2 (The recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases have a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than the individuals' degree of use of social media platforms.) entailed the use of regression with Intent to Purchase Products Online regressed on Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK, Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER, Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES, Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN, and Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends. The following regression model was used to analyze the associations among these six variables.

The regression model depicted in Figure 2 is used to study the relationship between Intent to Purchase Products Online and the five independent variables (Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK, Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER, Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES, Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN, and Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends).

$y_2 = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + e_2$

where y_2 = Intent to Purchase Products Online; α_1 = regression constant; β_1 = coefficient of X_1 = Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK; β_2 = coefficient of X_2 = Use of Social Media Platform-TWITTER; β_3 = coefficient of X_3 = Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES; β_4 = coefficient of X_4 = Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN; β_5 = coefficient of X_5 = Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends; and e_2 = error term.

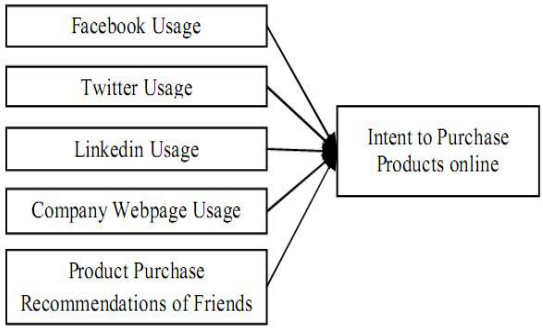


Figure 2 Use of Social Media Platforms Impact and Product Purchase Recommendations of Friends on Intent to Purchase Products Online

3.4 Findings

The descriptive statistics regarding the six major variables (Intent to Purchase Products Online, Use of Social Media Platform-FACEBOOK, Use of Social

Media Platform-TWITTER, Use of Social Media Platform-COMPANY WEBSITES, Use of Social Media Platform-LINKEDIN, and Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends) associated with this study are depicted in Table 1.

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See Appendix for Table 1

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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

The test of the first hypothesis (H_1 - The degree of use of social media platforms to obtain product purchase information has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals.) was supported by the study data. The statistics generated by the first regression model and analyses are depicted in Table 2. It can be seen that COMPANY WEBSITES, TWITTER, and LINKEDIN were found to be statistically significantly associated with potential customers' intent to purchase products online. However, while it appears that students' use of COMPANY WEBSITES can increase potential customers' intentions to purchase products online, students' use of TWITTER and LINKEDIN appear to significantly decrease potential customers' intent to purchase products online. Another interesting finding was that that the students' use of FACEBOOK was not significantly related to increasing or decreasing the respondents' intentions to purchase products online.

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See Appendix for Table 2

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Table 2 The degree of use of social media platforms has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals. (H_1)

The test of the second hypothesis (H_2 - The recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases have a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than the individuals' degree of use of social media platforms to obtain product purchase information.) suggests that the study data also supports this hypothesis. The data suggests that Company Websites have an equivalent influence on an individual's intention to purchase products online as does recommendations of friends. The data related to the test of this hypothesis also indicates that students' use of FACEBOOK, LINKEDIN, AND TWITTER have a negative impact on their intent to purchase products online. The t statistics associated with these independent t tests are depicted in Table 3.

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See Appendix for Table 3

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Table 3 The recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases have a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than the individuals' degree of use of social media platforms. (H_2)

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

This study tested two hypotheses. As noted, the first hypothesis, the degree of use of social media platforms has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals, was supported by this study's data. The major implication of this hypothesis being supported, and its contribution to the marketing literature and practice, is that it appears that the users of LINKEDIN, TWITTER, and COMPANY WEBSITES have a significant impact on individuals' intent to purchase products online whereas and surprisingly FACEBOOK does not have a significant influence on individuals' intentions to purchase products online. Additionally, this study's data suggests that the use of COMPANY WEBSITES increase individuals' intentions to purchase products online whereas the use of LINKEDIN and TWITTER decrease individuals' intentions to purchase products online.

The second hypothesis, the construct of recommendations of friends relative to online product purchase intent has a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than individuals' degree of use of social media platforms, was also supported by this study's data. The support of this hypothesis also contributes to the marketing literature and practice in that it suggests that with recommendations of friends in the model Social Media platforms, Company Websites, and recommendations of friends significantly impact individuals' intentions to purchase products online. However, with recommendations of friends in the model, use of LINKEDIN and TWITTER are significantly related to individuals' intentions to purchase products online and decrease the intentions of those individuals' to purchase products online. Additionally, with the construct of recommendations of friends in the model, the use of FACEBOOK to obtain product purchase information now significantly impacts individuals' intentions to purchase products online. But, like the impact of the use of LINKEDIN and TWITTER to obtain product purchase information on individuals' intentions to purchase products online, the use of FACEBOOK to obtain product purchase information also has a negative influence on individuals' intentions to purchase products online. This study suggests that the use of FACEBOOK, TWITTER, and LINKEDIN to market products to college students, for example, does not appear to be especially effective. However, providing excellent marketing material and information on COMPANY WEBSITES is a good way to communicate especially with college students. Therefore, this study's results may also recommend that sellers of products online direct potential customers to their respective companies' websites where it appears customers are interested in obtaining and studying product purchase information.

The results of this study imply that college students do not specifically access FACEBOOK, TWITTER, and LINKEDIN to obtain product purchase information. However, providing WORD-OF-MOUTH communications involving recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases may be a good way to communicate with college students. Therefore, it appears that recommendations of friends and the use of WORD-OF-MOUTH can be successfully employed using FACEBOOK, TWITTER, and LINKEDIN by encouraging open discussions of product purchases with college students. In this way, college students can view recommendations of other college students and friends relative to their intent to purchase products online.

V. LIMITATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research project, this study has its limitations. Potentially the most important limitation of this research is associated with the sample that was used which was a convenience sample as opposed to a simple random sample. Even though the sample employed was comprised of a significant percentage of the entire undergraduate students in the College of Business, external validity cannot be assured. And, even if generalizability was suggested, it would be only to the College of Business students in the sample and, perhaps, to students in the Western region of the U.S. as opposed to potential customers of all products purchased online through these social media channels and all college students. Additionally, the sample respondents were anonymous so there was no way to encourage non-respondents to participate after the initial data gathering process was performed.

This study also employed a single element scale to measure consumers' intention to purchase products online. Additionally, it might be appropriate to use a multi-element intention scale that might provide greater insight into the relationships tested here. The results of this study might also vary if specific products (goods) or services were considered rather than products that can be purchased online in general.

A final issue that can be viewed as a limitation of this study is that only college students were used in the sample. Therefore, individuals who are older and who already have college educations, or other individuals who do not have college educations might provide different perspectives of online platform usage to obtain product purchase information and, therefore, change the results of this study.

The limitations of this study provide directions for further research. First, random samples should be taken from various groups of people other than undergraduate college students to perform the same tests which would offer greater external validity to the results. Second, future studies might investigate whether a multi-element intent to purchase products online scale would provide results that are different and have increased internal validity. Moreover, the inclusion of additional types of Social Media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, etc. in the regression model might provide a more comprehensive picture of online product purchasing. Additionally, although recommendations of friends relative to online product purchase intent probes the influence of subjective norms, it would also be interesting to study specific normative beliefs of various groups of individuals who might be interested in purchasing products online.

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Appendix

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
Intent to Purchase Products Online	6.16	1.223	1	7	599
Use of FACEBOOK	1.96	1.347	1	7	590
Use of TWITTER	1.50	1.131	1	7	592
Use of COMPANY WEBSITES	5.01	1.709	1	7	592
Use of LINKEDIN	1.55	1.163	1	7	591
Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends	4.19	1.674	1	7	597

Table 2 The degree of use of social media platforms has a significant influence on the online purchase intentions of individuals. (H_1)

Variables	*F Statistic*	*p-Value*	*t Statistic*	*p-Value*	*Standardized Beta*
Intent to Purchase Products Online	22.817	0.000**			
Use of FACEBOOK			-0.1618	0.106	-0.074
Use of TWITTER			-2.716	0.007**	0.136
Use of COMPANY WEBSITES			5.751	0.000**	0.222
Use of LINKEDIN			-3.326	0.001**	0.152

†p < 0.1
*p < 0.05
**p < 0.01

Table 3 The recommendations of friends relative to online product purchases have a greater impact on individuals' intentions to purchase products online than the individuals' degree of use of social media platforms. (H_2)

Variables	*F* Statistic	*p*-Value	*t* Statistic	*p*-Value	Standardized Beta
Intent to Purchase Products Online	26.023	0.000**			
Use of FACEBOOK			-2.564	0.011*	-0.116
Use of TWITTER			-2.495	0.013*	-0.122
Use of COMPANY WEBSITES			5.378	0.000**	0.203
Use of LINKEDIN			-3.517	0.000**	-0.162
Product Purchase Recommendation of Friends			5.819	0.000**	0.223

†p < 0.1
*p < 0.05
**p < 0.01

★★★