

Examining the effect of social media interaction, E-WOM, and public relations: Assessing the mediating role of brand awareness

Ahmad Ibrahim Aljumah^{a*}, Mohammed. T. Nuseir^b and Ghaleb A. El Refae^c

^aCollege of Communication and Media, Al Ain University, Abu Dhabi Campus, P.O. Box 112612, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

^bDepartment of Business Administration, College of Business, Al Ain University, Abu Dhabi Campus, P.O. Box 112612, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

^cDepartment of Business Administration, College of Business, Al Ain University, Al Ain Campus P.O. Box: 64141, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

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The development of trust among the customers of the organization is a key objective and critical to obtaining a competitive advantage. Therefore, this study was examined to assess the effect of social media interaction, public relations, and electronic word of mouth on brand awareness and trust. This study also examined the mediating role of brand awareness as well. For this purpose, the data was collected from the customers of the retail sector in UAE. This study adopted a quantitative research approach and cross-sectional design. The data was collected in the form of a research questionnaire by adopting simple random sampling. The questionnaire was distributed among 512 respondents. The usable response rate was 69.72%. For the analysis of data, the SEM technique was adopted and the tool used for this purpose was Smart PLS. The findings of the study revealed that all proposed hypotheses are accepted. The findings of the study are helpful for the academicians for further research and development of policies.

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1. Introduction

Trust is one of the key elements to develop a sustainable and long-term relationship and connections among organizations, persons and with any stakeholder. Therefore, in individual relationships, there is great importance of brand trust (Devine, Gaskell, Jennings, & Stoker, 2021). It plays a very important role to develop connections between the purchaser and the brand. Several scholars pointed that trust is one of the factors to develop purchase intention. Trust is considered as the confidence of the customer regarding the quality of the product which must be provided by the organization that is selling the product. Many studies reported that trust plays a very important role to achieve desired goals (DAM, 2020).

In different aspects of marketing, brand awareness plays a very critical role. At the stage of brand equity, marketing mix, market performance and decision making of the consumer decision making. Scholars have pointed out that brand awareness is referred to as the recall of the recognized product or service by the consumer. Therefore, brand awareness plays a very important role in recognizing and reminding the service or the product (ILYAS, RAHMI, TAMSAH, MUNIR, & PUTRA, 2020).

In the present era of technology, there is the rapid and wide application of social media. It is not possible to overlook some of the challenges of social media. Among these challenges, the interaction design of social media is key and needs to be addressed in the research. To reveal the way consumers are connected to any service or product, social media plays a very important role (Ali, Raja Yaacob, Al-Amin Endut, & Sulam, 2018). It is key to examine and assess the interactive artefact and design

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ahmad.aljumah@aau.ac.ae (A. I. Aljumah)

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on the perception of users of social media Hall (2018), In terms of communication, social media plays a key role to create exposure and interaction of the brand.

Because of the rapidly increasing and evolution of technology and wide usage of the internet, a new communication type is evolved in the traditional word of mouth. This new communication is known as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) (Gunawan, Najib, & Setiawati, 2020). It includes websites of commerce such as amazon, social network sites such as Twitter, Instagram or Facebook including the platforms like Expedia or TripAdvisor. Similarly, w-WOM is defined as all kinds of informal communication generated from internet-based technology. This communication is related to the characteristics or usage of certain services and goods. Thus, the electronic word of mouth should be considered an important form of communication due to which power is shifted to consumers from companies (Reyes-Menendez, Saura, & Martinez-Navalon, 2019).

In the present century, there is a lot of difference in the communication style of the people. In the present environment, organizations are adopting new ways to develop PR with customers. They are developing innovative approaches to reach customers (Kusuma, 2018). Public relations are referred to as the activity of public relations that are designed to achieve objectives of the marketing. These objectives include motivating acceptance of the consumers, developing the intention to buy, developing trust and educating the target market (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012).

This study examines the effect of e-WOM and social media interaction on trust. Current study investigates the new mechanism of the relationship between social media interaction, e-WOM and trust by examining the mediating role of brand awareness. Current study tends to be helpful for the organizations to understand the significance of social media. At the same time, it also helps the academicians by contributing to the immense knowledge of marketing discipline. In order to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon, this study also helps the researchers to explore more determinants and mechanisms of trust.

2. Literature review

Stimulus organism response model known as SOR model was proposed by two researchers (Russell & Mehrabian, 1974). This model proposes that external stimuli that are present in the environment affects the emotions or cognition of an individual which in turn affects the behavior (Russell & Mehrabian, 1974). The external stimuli are the external factors known as Stimuli (S) which affect the organism (O) in the form of cognition or emotion. Thus, emotion behaves as the mediator in the SOR model. The mediator later affects the outcome in the form of approach or avoidance (Perumal, Ali, & Shaarih, 2021). In this study social media interaction, e-WOM, and PR are the external stimuli which creates awareness (Organism: O). This brand awareness creates trust among respondents as an approach.

Trust is a very important concept that has been given a lot of attention in the field of management sciences. Trust shows the willingness of customers in which there exists confidence to exchange or rely on with others. The concept of trust is mostly used interchangeably with many other concepts like faith and confidence. It is key to note that the process of trust is very risk-taking. Researchers have defined it as the selection of the product or services despite the chance of having a disaster (Irshad, Ahmad, & Malik, 2020).

According to scholars, faith is the person's belief which a person has regarding any thought or information beyond reasons. Moreover, it is very difficult to change the faith of a person. On the other hand, it is possible to alter or break the trust. Scholars showed that uncertainty of the social factor exists everywhere. To solve it, one of the most important mechanisms is trust. Trust is defined by scholars as the promise or belief of one party that are reliable. Moreover, the obligations are fulfilled by the party that is committed. The transaction cost is reduced by the trust. On the other hand, the desire to encourage is triggered among the parties (Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2021).

Social media is described as the system of applications, websites and other social-technical aspects that is built on the technology of web 2.0 to provide space for community formation, collaboration, communication and social interaction (Saroj & Pal, 2020). The interaction of social media is the process of interactive design which is needed by the designers to communicate with its users. Moreover, it is also used to take different considerations of their feedback and demands (Dennhardt, Füller, Hautz, & Hutter, 2013).

Organizations need to increase activity on social media. Permanent interactions and activities are encouraged for the marketing of the product and services. Social media is a very important and useful tool to understand the way customers can get connected to different services and products in which they have an interest. These associations are created to satisfy different customers' needs and to engage these customers for future brands. Thus the relationship of the brands with its customers is strengthened because of participation and interaction due to which customers can identify, advocate and engage with the certain brand (Yan, 2011). It is revealed by the customers that customers spend a lot of time getting connected with many social media apps like YouTube, Instagram and Facebook due to which the decision making capability of the customers is affected (Zhao, Liu, Tang, & Zhu, 2013).

In the context of consumer behavior, WOM is a phenomenon that occurs naturally. It refers to all kinds of negative and positive communication that took place interpersonally regarding a product, brand, service or any organization. This

communication takes place between a communicator and receiver and is perceived as noncommercial. Generally, WOM is one of the important information sources regarding the process of purchase decision making by the consumers because the information is provided by it regarding the performance of any service or product that helps in the decision-making process (Nuseir, 2019). As customers know different sources of WOM, therefore they feel the information of WOM to be reliable, trustworthy and credible. Therefore, the same is the effect of word of mouth that is spread through any electronic source of information. These sources include networking websites like Facebook, Twitter and other internet sources (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013).

The term public relations (PR) was introduced by the researchers in 1980 to focus on different techniques in order to achieve organizational objectives regarding the relationship with the stakeholders. It is the term that is used to integrate different terms regarding research, advertising, marketing and public relations. Scholars stipulated that PR professionals play a very integral role in the growth and success of PR. In the fast-growing industries, the marketing of PR is one of the keys and fastest-growing concepts (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). Researchers have defined the concept of PR as public awareness, specialized audiences, a campaign that is directed to the mass information program, that is developed to affect the sales of the services or products. Later Kotler (2003) pointed out that the marketing of PR plays a very important role to launch a new service or product. It has an important role to play to reposition any service or product. It has a very important role to play to improve the image of the organization (Papasolomou, Thrassou, Vrontis, & Sabova, 2014).

Organizations use different sites of social networking as a tool of marketing to the marketing managers of the organizations to improve the relationship of the brand. In the process of consumer decision making, brand awareness plays a very important role. This role is played through three advantages namely choice advantages, consideration advantages and learning advantages. Moreover, brand awareness is one of the key concepts for any organization. The exposure of the customers to the brand has resulted in brand awareness. Brand awareness creates the strength of any product or service in the mind of the customers. One of the oldest definitions of brand awareness was provided by Achrol and Kotler (1999) who described it as the ability of the customers to identify the brand in different conditions. Whereas scholars pointed that brand awareness is based on recall and recognition of the product or service (Lesmana, Widodo, & Sunardi, 2020).

In the context of brand equity, brand awareness is one of the key components. To build brand equity, organizations must focus on the creation of brand awareness. Scholars pointed out that one of the key sources to create brand equity is brand awareness (Foroudi, 2019). One of the important things to note is that there are several ways by which brand awareness creates brand equity in the memory of the customer. It familiarizes the brand in the mind of the customer and develops trust. One of the important advantages of having social media communication is that people get aware of the product on a large scale and a favorable image of the brand is created in the mind of the customer (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2014).

3. Hypotheses development

3.1 Brand awareness and Trust

Marketing communication plays a very important role to create brand awareness regarding the product. In this way, customers recognize the product and services of the company on a regular basis. The reduction of error in the process of purchasing is reduced because of brand awareness (Pramudya, Sudiro, & Sunaryo, 2018). It is done by guaranteeing the quality of the product being offered by the brand. In the process of purchasing customers do not need to think a lot regarding the attributes and quality of the product. They already have the information regarding the brand. Thus, it is easy to say that trust in the brand is developed because of brand awareness (Mudzakkir & Nurfarida, 2015). Scholars suggested that website trust is significantly affected by the awareness of the product or service. Same as defined trust as the psychological state of positivity and confidence of the customers which they expect from the brand. Scholars also indicate that trust is easy to develop trust in the virtual environment (Hou & Wonglorsaichon, 2014). When the customer is aware of the brand, his/her trust with the brand increases. Moreover, this awareness enhances the likelihood of purchase because of the positive effect on brand familiarity, brand credibility. Therefore, organizations get benefits from the awareness of their products and services among customers. Moreover, brand awareness affects the trust and image of the brand positively. Moreover, organizations also earn profits because of brand awareness. Moreover, the trust of the organization is positively affected by the brand image (Seo & Park, 2018b).

3.2 Social media interaction and Brand awareness

Recently scholars have discussed that organizations are using social media to create brand awareness among the customers. Social media is proved to be a very effective way to create awareness and communicate with customers. To expose customers to the products and services, social media plays a very important role (Jamali & Khan, 2018). The findings of the past study revealed that consumer awareness is positively affected among the fans of Facebook pages. Scholars have also noted that interactive strategies of marketing through social media like Twitter and Facebook have a positive effect on the awareness of the brand. It is also revealed by the scholars that in the case of social media interaction, brand awareness is one of the key outputs (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Additionally, scholars have also found that brand awareness is positively affected in the airline industry because of social media activities (Seo & Park, 2018b).

Activities of different social media contribute to the awareness of the brand and image of the brand as well by facilitating the interaction among the customers and converting potential customers to the current customers (Jamali & Khan, 2018). It is also important to mention that brand awareness is directly affected by advertising messages. Thus, the presence of social media networks has a positive effect on the awareness of the brand (Bilgin, 2018).

3.3 E-WOM and Brand awareness

Scholars have recognized that E-WOM has a positive effect on the behavior of the consumer. Therefore, it has a positive link with consumer behavior. The development of online communication and internet Platforms has contributed to the development of the innovative way of WOM communication (Pebrianti, Arweni, & Awal, 2020). To get credible information WOM communication is one of the fundamental sources. It builds basic communication at the interpersonal level and has a substantial effect on the purchase decision and behavior of the customer (López & Sicilia, 2014).

Scholars suggested that the usefulness and vividness of e-WOM has a significant effect on the brand awareness of the products being offered by the organization. Similarly, scholars also argued that e-WOM communication has a positive effect on brand image and brand awareness. Scholars showed that brand awareness is positively affected by e-WOM Yim (2009) whereas the same results were also confirmed among brand awareness and WOM by Raharja and Dewakanya (2020). Researchers also showed that blogs play a very important role in terms of creating a positive opinion of the customer regarding the services being offered by the website. This blog is one of the important types of e-WOM having a positive effect on the awareness of a certain brand. Additionally, it is also pointed out by the researcher that the past availability of information affects the evaluation of any certain brand. Furthermore, the information spread through WOM also develops trust among the receiver and send affecting the credibility of the brand (Seo & Park, 2018a).

3.4 Public Relations and Brand awareness

Public Relations are considered as one of the key ways to reach the goals of communication. Moreover, it is important to note that public relations sometimes play a More important role to develop awareness regarding products or services. Past studies have revealed that public relations campaigns have a positive effect on the behavior of the customer and the development of loyalty through brand awareness (Sari, Irawan, Mone, & Aras, 2021). It was revealed by the scholars that brand awareness of the McAfee products was positively affected by the PR activities of the firm in Indonesia. It shows that the emphasis of the firms must not be on the selling of the products. They should expect that there will be a very strong effect on the awareness of the consumers (Wang, Ghalih, & Porter, 2017). Past studies have suggested that organizations must focus on the marketing of the products through the development of PR as it has a very important role to play in the decision-making process of the consumer. Researchers believe that consumers decide to buy the product when they are aware of the attributes of the product (Anugrah, 2014).

3.5 Brand awareness as the mediator

Several past studies have examined the mediating role of brand awareness in the context of marketing. These researchers have reported that brand awareness is one of the important mediators between loyalty and advertising (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015; Shabbir, Kaufmann, Ahmad, & Qureshi, 2010). It is key to note that when the customer gets aware of the services or product through social media activities, public relation campaigns or e-WOM, it has a positive effect on the confidence of the customer and trust is developed which leads to the purchase of the product or usage of service.

H₁: *Brand Awareness has a positive effect on Trust.*

H₂: *E-WOM has a positive effect on brand awareness.*

H₃: *Public relations have a positive effect on brand awareness.*

H₄: *Social Media Interaction has a positive effect on Brand Awareness.*

H₅: *Brand awareness mediates the relationship between public relations and trust.*

H₆: *Brand awareness mediates the relationship between social media interaction and trust.*

H₇: *Brand awareness mediates the relationship between E-WOM interaction and trust.*

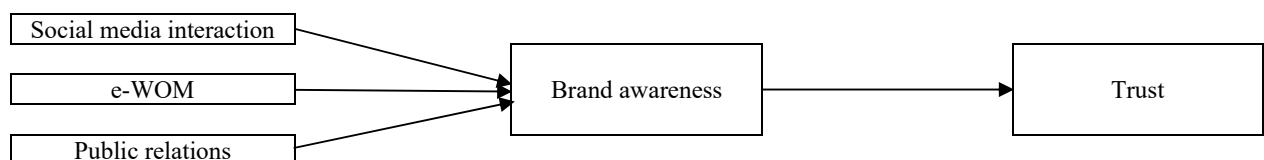


Fig. 1. Research Framework

4. Methodology

For the present research, the questionnaire was the instrument that was developed by the researcher based on past literature. To fit with the research topics, the questionnaire was adapted from the literature. The items of brand awareness, as well as e-WOM, were adopted from Seo and Park (2018b), items of trust were adopted from Hou and Wonglorsaichon (2014), the items of social media interaction were adopted from Mieczkowski, Lee, and Hancock (2020) and the items of public relations were adopted from Tong and Chan (2020).

In the present study, composite reliability and Cronbach alpha were used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire and to examine the consistency of the items. All of the data was collected through a survey in the form of a questionnaire developed in the form of the Likert 7 scale. The questionnaire was distributed among 512 customers of the retail sector of the UAE. The valid questionnaire received back was 357. Thus, the valid response rate of the study was 69.72%. The data of the present study was collected using simple random sampling. For the analysis of the collected data structural equation model technique was adopted by the researcher. This technique is key to assessing the relationships among the variables of the study. Moreover, this research used descriptive statistics of SPSS 25 to examine the demographic factors of respondents like age, gender and education level. For further analysis of the study, the researcher used PLS 3.3.2. Smart PLS is more appropriate when the sample size is too small or large (Hair et al., 2010). In the present study the sample size is large for which Smart PLS is appropriate.

5. Results

The structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was employed in this study for the analysis of the data collected. PLS was used to carry out SEM. Past studies have recommended the usage of PLS-SEM Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics (2009) because it is one of the most reliable and prominent techniques for the analysis of primary data. Generally, the technique of analysis through PLS-SEM is based on two stages namely structural model and measurement model. The measurement model is the first step and is applied before the structural model. Fig. 1 of the present study shows the measurement model.

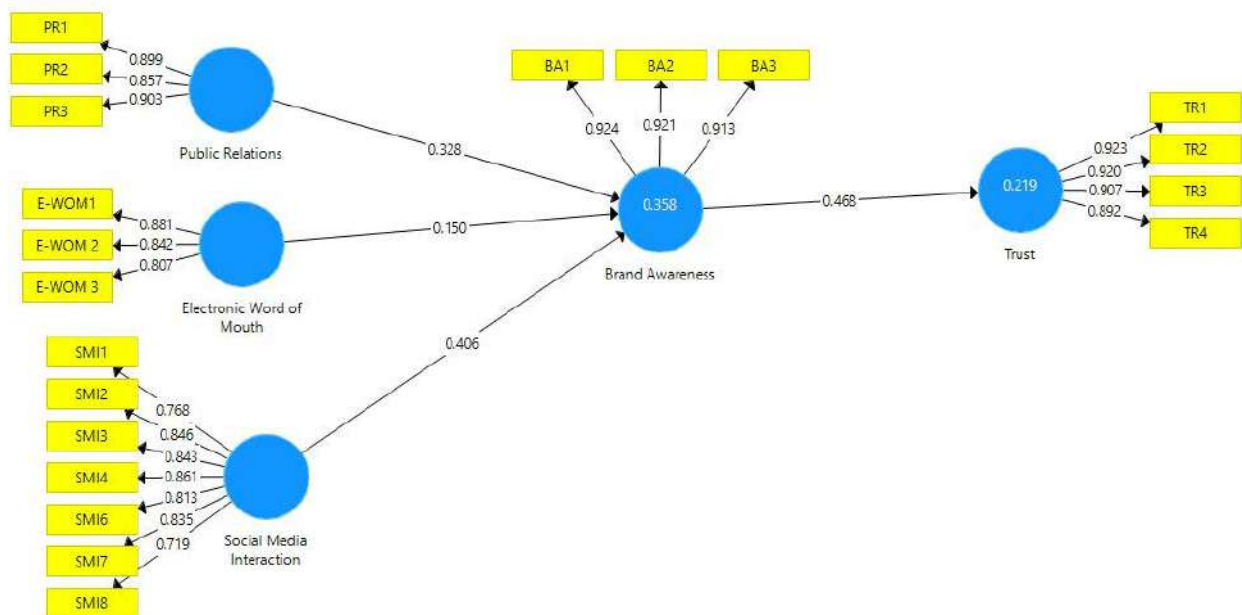


Fig. 2. Measurement Model

At the first stage of analysis using PLS, validity along with the reliability of the data is examined through the usage of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The outcomes of CFA are illustrated in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

It is revealed from the values of factor loading mentioned in Table 1 and values of composite reliability and Cronbach alpha is more than 0.70 as recommended by Hair Jr, Matthews, Matthews, and Sarstedt (2017). Moreover, AVE was assessed as well as mentioned by Fornell and Larcker (1981) for which the value must exceed 0.50 to establish convergent validity. Thus, convergent validity is established as values of AVE in Table 2 are more than 0.50.

Table 1
Factor Loading

	BA	E-WOM	PR	SMI	WOM
BA1	0.924				
BA2	0.921				
BA3	0.913				
E-WOM 2		0.842			
E-WOM 3		0.807			
E-WOM1		0.881			
PR1			0.899		
PR2			0.857		
PR3			0.903		
SMI1				0.768	
SMI2				0.846	
SMI3				0.843	
SMI4				0.861	
SMI6				0.813	
SMI7				0.835	
SMI8				0.719	
TR1					0.923
TR2					0.920
TR3					0.907
TR4					0.892

Table 2
Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
BA	0.908	0.908	0.942	0.845
E-WOM	0.797	0.800	0.881	0.712
PR	0.864	0.869	0.917	0.786
SMI	0.916	0.944	0.932	0.662
TR	0.931	0.938	0.951	0.829

Later this research assessed discriminant validity using the Heterotrait Monotrait ratio method (HTMT) for which the values must not exceed 0.90. As mentioned in Table 3 all values of the matrix are less than 0.90. Thus, the discriminant validity of the data is established.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity

	BA	E-WOM	PR	SMI	TR
BA					
E-WOM	0.312				
PR	0.453	0.259			
SMI	0.476	0.146	0.125		
TR	0.505	0.277	0.259	0.535	

Later, this study moved toward the second stage of analysis that is the structural model. In this study, seven hypotheses were proposed. Results of these proposed hypotheses are mentioned in Table 4 and Table 5 as direct and indirect results. It is evident from the values of table 4 and table 5 that the value of P is less than 0.05. Thus, all proposed hypotheses are accepted (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6 and H7).

Table 4
Direct Results

		Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	SD (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
H1	BA → TR	0.468	0.473	0.060	7.769	0.000
H2	E-WOM → BA	0.150	0.150	0.068	2.213	0.014
H3	PR → BA	0.328	0.327	0.068	4.810	0.000
H4	SMI → BA	0.406	0.407	0.065	6.246	0.000

Table 5
Indirect Results

		Original Sample (O)	SD (STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
H5	PR → BA → TR	0.153	0.037	4.181	0.000
H6	SMI → BA → TR	0.190	0.044	4.272	0.000
H7	E-WOM → BA → TR	0.070	0.035	1.987	0.024

In the end, the values of R-Square were tested to examine the effect of independent variables on the dependent variables. According to Cohen (1988), the value of R-Square is considered weak and it is less than 0.02, the value of 0.15 is considered

as medium and that of 0.23 is considered as substantial. The value of R-Square values mentioned in Table 6 are above the Cohen (1988) threshold values

Table 6
R Square

	Original Sample (O)
BA	0.358
WOM	0.219

6. Discussion

This research was designed to assess the role of PR, Social media interaction and e-WOM for the awareness of the brand and development of trust. The results have revealed that brand awareness is one of the important factors for the development of trust. If customers know the features of the organizations, they will have trust as well. These results are in line with the findings of Hou and Wonglorsaichon (2014). The results have also reported that social media interaction of the organizations is very important for the awareness of the brands.

On the other hand, this is the age of digital transformation of the globe, therefore social media interaction through social media tools is important for the awareness of brands. These results are in line with the results reported by (Bilgin, 2018). Additionally, the results demonstrate that the word of mouth spread through electronic sources is also important for the development of brand awareness. These results are similar to the findings of Seo and Park (2018b). In the end, results also support the argument that PR is also very important to remain in the mind of the customers as it increases awareness regarding brand in the mind of consumers. The results are also similar to the findings of Wang et al. (2017).

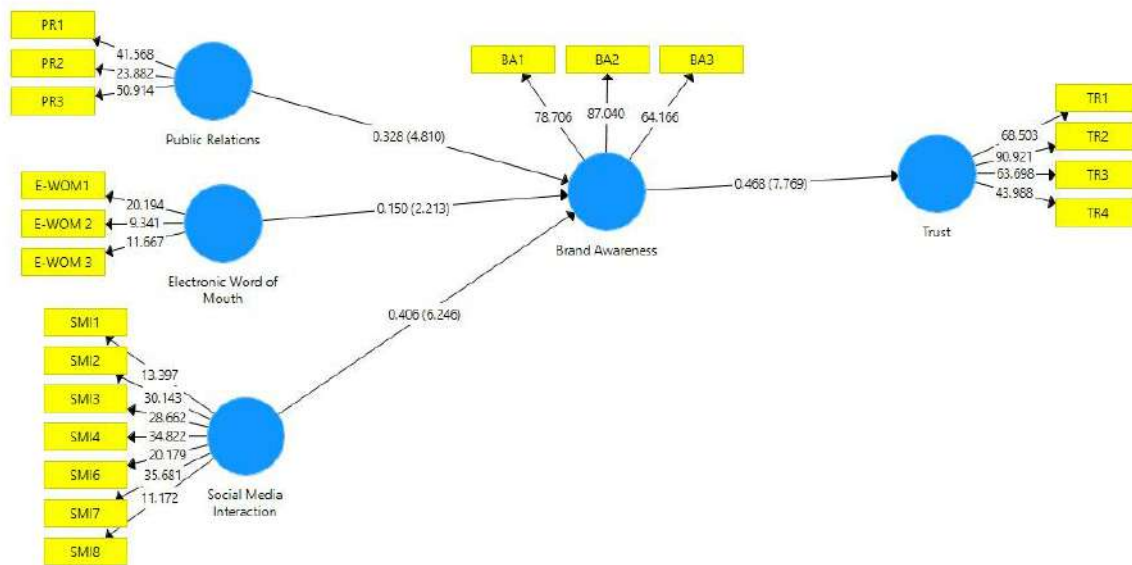


Fig. 3. Structural Model

7. Conclusion

One of the biggest factors in the purchase of any product or service is the factor of trust. If the customers have trust in the product or service, they will remain loyal to the organization. The same is the case with retailers. In the current competitive environment, trust must be developed by the retailers among the customers. Such customers can be retained by the organization which will reduce the cost to acquire new customers. One of the ways to create customer trust is by creating awareness regarding products and services. If customers are aware about the services or products, they will have trust in the retailers. Additionally, the awareness can be created through electronic word of mouth and other social media applications.

This study has a few limitations as well similarities with the other empirical studies. The effect of the antecedents mentioned in the framework has a limited effect on trust and awareness. Thus, future studies must look for other factors as well that can help in the enhancement of customer trust. Moreover, this model should be applied in other industries as well like the tourism industry. This study provides different managerial and theoretical implications. This research provides implications regarding effectiveness of WOM and social media in retail settings of UAE. Additionally, this research has provided understanding trust

through brand awareness. One major theoretical contribution in this study is that this research has discussed brand awareness as the predecessor of customer trust. The findings of the study are helpful for the policymakers and academicians of marketing for their future studies.

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