

Does Content Marketing Have a Different Impact on the Stages of Consumer Behavior? An Applied Study on the Saudi Women Consumer During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the impact of content marketing on consumer behaviour and whether the effect of content marketing changed at each stage during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. The scales were prepared based on the theoretical study and the literature to test the hypotheses. An electronic questionnaire was disseminated among 384 Saudi females. The results showed that there was a varying effect of content marketing on each stage of the purchasing behaviour of Saudi female consumers during the pandemic. The results show the existence of an effective relationship between content marketing and the stages of feeling the need, the product stage, awareness, and information search. In addition, the results show that there is a relationship between content marketing and the stages of attention and interest, the evaluation stage, and the purchase stage.

Keywords: content marketing, consumer behaviour, Covid-19

1. Introduction

The adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy of Saudi Arabia is evident from this study's analysis, which indicates that the performance of enterprises in the kingdom has been significantly undermined. This is manifested through a notable decline in both the overall investment and income of these enterprises. Thus, it can be concluded that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy have been profound. Certain industries, such as tourism, transportation, retail, catering, and entertainment, were particularly hard hit by this pandemic. Considering these circumstances, there have been suggestions that the government extend support to those industries or firms that have been severely affected by the pandemic. This can be achieved through the implementation of policies that are specifically tailored to assist the most vulnerable firms. By doing so, these firms will be better equipped to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Furthermore, the firms must devise innovative strategies that will enable them to adapt and thrive in the post-COVID era. A study such as this one is important because the restoration of business operations in the post-pandemic era is of utmost importance and demands concerted efforts from all stakeholders (Makni, 2022).

The government of the kingdom has put in place support for these facilities to assist affected businesses get back on their feet (Oladapo et al., 2023). Thus, the support programs and policies implemented by the Saudi Arabian government during the COVID-19 pandemic have provided considerable assistance to numerous Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Saudi Arabia. Without this support, the business operations within this sector would have experienced significant adverse effects. Conversely, many MSMEs have taken the initiative to reassess their business strategies to ensure continued operation. They have sought alternative sources of funding and support, such as private assistance and cost reduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic was far more than a health crisis: it unpredictably changed human life in general. As suggested by the analysis of economic data on sales, this dramatic scenario has also heavily impacted individuals' spending levels. To better understand these changes, the present study focused on consumer behaviour and its psychological antecedents. Previous studies found that crises have a different effect on people's willingness to buy necessity products (i.e., utilitarian shopping) and non-necessity products (i.e., hedonic shopping). Consequently, in scrutinising whether changes in levels of spending were linked to the changes in consumer behaviour, the present

study embraces a fine-grained approach, untangling the difference between necessities and non-necessities. Data was collected from an online survey involving 3,833 participants between the ages of 18 and 64 in Italy during the first peak of the pandemic. Towards necessity goods, consumer behaviour was predicted by Covid-linked anxiety and fear, while depression predicted consumer behaviour towards non-necessity goods. Self-justifications for purchasing, perceived economic stability, and personality traits are all factors that also predict consumer behaviour toward necessity and non-necessity goods (Di Crosta et al., 2021). Data from Accenture (2020) also showed that during the earlier waves of the virus, 73% of consumers preferred socialising in their homes or in the homes of friends and family, and people began to develop a preference for social media and other online entertainment platforms. According to the New York Times (2020), Facebook experienced a 27% increase in user traffic, while Netflix and YouTube saw a 16% and 15% increase, respectively. Furthermore, apps for social interaction like House Party and Next-door saw 79% and 73% increases, respectively. The New York Times (2020) also reported an increased preference for video games and a reduced preference for sports. For example, while ESPN saw a 40% drop in viewership, apps like TikTok and Twitch saw increases in users. These happened during the earlier waves of the virus, reports Olumekor and Polbitsyn (2021).

2. Research Background

The use of content as a marketing strategy has recently undergone a deep evolution thanks to the spread of digital communications and social networks. The digital dimension, in particular, has led to the birth of terms such as digital content marketing (CM) (Rakic et al., 2014). The main focus of the idea is technological changes brought about by innovation in relation to creation, delivery, and content management. As a result, there has been a proliferation of studies focusing on CM (Rahimia & Hassanzadeh, 2013; Jefferson & Tanton, 2013; Nelli, 2012; Lieb, 2011; Gunelius, 2011; Handley & Chapman, 2010, 2012; Halvorson, 2010; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009; Keyes, 2006). Notwithstanding the increase in research, scholars have not yet reached a universally accepted definition of the concept of metrics that can be applied when measuring it. This is why an attempt to synthesise the literature review on this topic is especially called for.

Specifically, a review by Newbet (2007) focused on double peer-reviewed journal articles without paying attention to their impact factor. A computer-based study was conducted in August 2015 using academic journals found in the Ebsco-Host database. The reviewed articles were selected based on the keywords primarily obtained from reading seminal books and articles on CM. The authors did a five-phase study. The study starts with the authors selecting research papers based on keyword content marketing, where they got 382 articles. This is followed by checking the relevance of the articles by ensuring that the articles chosen in the first phase also had at least one of the keywords, concept definition theory, or framework in their abstract. The asterisk at the end of a keyword is permitted for different suffixes (e.g., theory or theoretical). Following this phase, 110 papers were obtained. The third step scrutinised the 110 papers for relevance by requiring that the abstracts of the articles had the keywords *literature reviews* or *background* or *synthesis*. This scrutiny left only 26 papers, which were further scanned by reading the abstracts and texts to determine the level to which they were relevant for the study. From this phase, three articles were obtained. In the last phase, the snowballing technique of Iacobacci and Churchill (2010) was employed to incorporate the results from all the previous phases' books, book chapters, and papers relevant to the present study's topic but not available in the EBSCO-Host database.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Content Marketing Concept

Because the idea of content marketing (CM) changes based on context, it can be challenging to come up with a specific definition. CM is increasingly being adopted by marketers as a replacement for interruptive advertising (Zahay, 2014; Du Plessis, 2015). Content marketing is ideal as it uses unobtrusive pulling and not pushing techniques to attract consumers to brand content (Liu & Huang, 2015). The process is based on theories of relationship marketing, integrated marketing communication, and marketing communications (Cronin, 2016). Nonetheless, content marketing differs from methods that promote services and products in that it is a branding technique based on creating and distributing valuable and relevant brand content to lure and get the public to participate. Marketing professionals develop and distribute brand stories online with the aim of getting the target audience more familiar with the brand (Brieger, 2013). Often, CM is perceived as being like storytelling, inbound marketing, native advertising, and publishing (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Du Plessis, 2015).

There have been several attempts at defining content marketing. One of the most popular definitions is provided by the CMI, which defines CM as the marketing and business process for developing and disseminating valuable and relevant content with the aim of attracting, acquiring, and engaging a precisely defined and understood target audience—with the primary aim of triggering customers to take the actions desired by the marketer (Pulizzi, 2012).

Notwithstanding the usefulness of this definition, CM has progressively grown beyond it. Scholars, including Pazeraitė and Repoviene (2016) and Du Plessis (2015), have acknowledged that there are intricacies of the content management process that need to be managed with care.

One of the elements of CM that has been confirmed by several researchers is the quality of the content, indicating the numerous features that CM marketers should focus on if their content is to have a desirable effect on the consumer (Schuinanii et al., 2014; Creamer, 2012; Abel, 2014; Gagnon, 2014; Wolfe, 2010; Guseva, 2006). Such features can be considered a separate element of content marketing. The scholars agree that a high-quality content piece should have the following seven elements described in greater detail below.

3.1.1 Relevance

In literature, content relevance denotes the usefulness of the information as a piece of content to the target reader (Abel, 2014; Wolfe, 2010; Lin et al., 2014). To ensure brand management in virtual space, there is a constant need to provide new, relevant information, maintain regular contact with the customer and encourage this customer to become a part of a community trademark (Jucaitytė, 2012). Added to this, applicable information gained through advertising can assist in creating communication between the internet user and the brand.

3.2.2 Informative

Studies focusing on marketing have concluded that non-interpretible advertising content has a negative effect on demand, and entities employ random experiments when optimising their content strategies (Bertrand et al., 2010). Researchers have concluded that when a marketer creates informative content, they have a chance to engage and encourage consumers to take certain actions. Content has the potential to inform potential customers about the processes, skills, and knowledge employed when making products and providing services (Boisvert & Caron, 2006; Gagnon, 2014). This is a view acknowledged by Ludwig et al. (2012), who say that the content and linguistics applied can influence the consumer when making decisions. It is vital that the informative content is spread in a way that the target reader can conveniently access it.

3.2.3 Reliability

Readers of content need to feel that the content presented by a marketer can be relied on. Reliability results from a careful analysis of data to ensure that it is accurate and complete (Wolfe, 2010). This view is supported by Linet et al. (2014), who adds that content reliability is a significant factor in determining the value of communication. When content is perceived by the consumer as being reliable, it can easily influence their interests and attitudes.

3.2.3 Value

Content creation should be implemented through functional and emotional values. By implementing and succeeding in this goal, companies can achieve high conversion into sales rates (Jurkutė, 2013). Gagnon (2014) notes that the quality of content is determined by its ability to address the needs of potential customers and indicate to them the way the product suggested by a specific company can assist them in solving the challenges they face. Guseva (2006) believes that valuable content complies with the interests, goals, and aspirations of the consumer. Thus, this element mainly depends on the needs of the user and their interests, which change constantly.

3.2.4 Uniqueness

When a company can create content that no other company is able to create, it wins the race to attract the attention of the consumer within a very competitive marketplace. Gagnon (2014) proposes that the Uniqueness of content is a positioning implement, which makes any entity a desirable market participant when compared to its competitors. Apart from drawing the attention of consumers, unique content also spreads word-of-mouth information about the company (Gagnon, 2014). According to Berkley (2010), a company has only ten seconds to attract consumer attention with the offered content. Therefore, every possible way should be used to tell the client why they need the company.

3.2.5 Emotions

For an entity to successfully implement content-based marketing programs, it needs to have a broader comprehension of content and be able to balance entertainment and emotional elements to get customers excited. This view is acknowledged by a study commissioned by Beger and Milkman (2012), who concluded that positive content has better viral effects than negative ones. However, there is still a need for a broader analysis of the specific emotions that attract consumers to a piece of content. Lin et al. (2014) present a model showing that mobile and digital advertising content is positive if it is able to deliver entertainment and information simultaneously.

3.2.6 Intelligence

For Abel (2014), smart content should be embraced by organisations seeking to benefit from content-based marketing programs. The same author advises that smart content should not be limited to a single technology and output. It should be readable by humans and processed by technology and machines. When intelligence is appropriately amalgamated into content-based marketing programs, it can assist professionals in presenting content to potential customers and attracting their attention to a company's services or products. Several scholars have indicated that for content to have influence, it must have accountability. The influence of content can be measured by conversions. Even though the features of quality have been recognised by several scholars, there is no agreement regarding a specific formula for creating quality content. Others have argued that the elements of content-based marketing are impacted by the perspectives of users and the development of technology. This implies that these elements are subject to change over time, and it may become easier to assess their impact.

3.2.7 Consumer Behaviour

Past behavioural economics and consumer psychology studies have brought to the fore numerous psychological elements impacting consumer behaviour (Durante & Laran, 2016; Foxall, 2004). The concept of consumer behaviour denotes the examination of individuals or groups that are involved in evaluating, using, searching, purchasing, and disposing of products and services to satisfy their needs (Rajagopal, 2020). It also involves a study of the behavioural, mental, and emotional responses of consumers preceding or following such processes (Kardes et al., 2011). There are various factors that can lead to changes in the behaviour of consumers, including social, contextual, psychological, economic, and personal factors. Nonetheless, in dramatic settings such as a natural disaster or the outbreak of a pandemic, the influence of some factors is more pronounced than others. Undoubtedly, situations with the potential to disrupt social lives or threaten the well-being of people have been shown to trigger strong changes (Leach, 1994). One example of these changes is panic buying, which happens when fear and panic influence behaviour, resulting in people buying more goods than they would usually do (Lins & Aquino, 2020). Panic buying has been specifically defined as herd behaviour occurring when consumers purchase large quantities of products before or after a disaster (Steven et al., 2014).

A review of the psychological causes of panic buying revealed that the same changes in consumer behaviour could happen in instances of impaired purchase decisions in the face of negative emotions like anxiety and fear (Yuen et al., 2020). Referring to the COVID-19 context, Lins and Aquino (2020) revealed that there was a positive correlation between panic buying and impulse buying, which can be defined as a complicated buying behaviour where the quickness of the decision process impeded careful and thoughtful consideration of choice and alternative information (Yuen et al., 2020). Analysing the diverse psychological elements involved in consumer behaviour and changes in purchase decisions is an area that has not been explored much.

Debatably, when people are faced with a threatening situation like a pandemic or health crisis, the primitive part of the human brain often takes over, making people do things considered necessary to survive (Dodgson, 2020; Di Domenico, 2016). Significantly, such primitive instructional behaviours take over the processes by which people make decisions, immensely impacting the way individuals usually behave. Thus, it is posited that the primitive responses of humans represent the central element relating to the changes in the behaviour of consumers (Arafat et al., 2020). Precisely, anxiety and fear result from supposed feelings of instability and insecurity (Hendrix & Brinkman, 2013). In keeping with the terror management theory of Greenberg et al. (1997), previous researchers have revealed that outside events threatening individual safety trigger compensatory behaviour processes to relieve anxiety and fear (Arndt et al., 2004; Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004). Such response processes can lead an individual to buy something with the aim of gaining a sense of momentary escape, comfort, and security. However, it can be noted that the motivation to buy reflects an attempt to control the negative emotions felt by an individual, whether they need the product they are buying or not.

The study of consumer behaviour seeks to understand the manner in which people purchase, the services and goods they purchase, where, and why they purchase. This area is a category within the broad field of marketing and brings together numerous elements from economics, anthropology, socio-psychology, and psychology (Pandey, 2021). Consumer behaviour is the sub-field of marketing concerned with studying the decision-making process of consumers, including the factors influencing the decision to buy, use and dispose of goods and services. Consumer behaviour doesn't just study what a consumer buys but the reason behind the purchase and the frequency of purchase (Schiffman et al., 2007).

Consumer behaviour has always been an area of major interest for social science researchers and has witnessed an explosion over the past 50 years (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). Consequently, literature related to this topic has attracted the focus of several studies (Solomon, 2013; Robertson & Kassajian, 1991; Howard & Sheth, 1968;

Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2009; Hameed, 2014; Belk et al., 2012; Battalio et al., 1974; Arndt, 1986). Because of these studies, diverse literature on consumer behaviour has been developed. Reviewing such literature shows the changes in technology, economics, and society and how they impact the manner in which consumers behave. Unsurprisingly, such changes have altered the manner in which studies on consumer behaviour are done. In the same manner as other disciplines, a systematic analysis of the status of knowledge development in the field of consumer behaviour is crucial in ensuring growth going forward (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). One way through which this systematic analysis can be conducted is via the study of academic literature, illustrating the intellectual history of a discipline (Pasadeos, 1998). From this perspective, when assessing a discipline's collective knowledge, it is vital to access in-depth reviews of research published in peer-reviewed journals (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Üsdiken & Pasadeos, 1995). A study by Lins and Aquino (2020) attempts to gain a comprehension of the behaviour of the e-consumer. It concludes that many consumers are turning to online shopping, especially the younger generation because they are more comfortable with its convenience and believe it serves time. The study reports that the online buying trend is most popular among the age group 18 to 33. Most of the individuals shopping online have a job, and their motivation for buying online is that it is easy. When shopping online, it is easier to compare prices from different brands compared to a brick-and-mortar store. However, the same author notes that security has been noted as the biggest barrier to shopping online.

3.4 The Relationship Between CM and CB

As a field of research, consumer behaviour is crucial. This view is acknowledged by MacInnis and Folkes (2010), who note the growing number of articles and topics examined. Through the study of academic literature, it is possible to come to an understanding of the discipline's intellectual history, which could be useful when doing systematic analysis (Pasadeos et al., 1998). Concerning this, the evaluation of accrued knowledge within a discipline can benefit from an analysis of research published in peer-reviewed journals (Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Üsdiken & Pasadeos, 1995). Encouraging consumers to make purchases online relies on CM as an important concept. The presence of interesting, pertinent, and useful content can trigger buyers to examine online products and lead to profitable consumer behaviour. This is a view acknowledged by Anand (2014), who says CM is one of the strategies in marketing that provides content aligned with the needs and wants of consumers. Therefore, businesses that want to successfully sell products will first need to identify the consumer and their needs. To determine these needs, they should comprehend the process followed by the consumer when buying, which can be considered the best way of determining the manner in which the consumer spends their money. Successfully used, content marketing can trigger an urge in the consumer to buy a specific product or service and keep coming back. On the basis of this understanding, the first hypothesis is presented as follows:

H1: There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and consumer behaviour.

3.3 Stages of the Buying Process

Consumer behaviour has always been an area of major interest for social science researchers, witnessing an explosion over the past 50 years (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). Accordingly, literature on this topic has been the centre of attention in a number of previous studies (Arndt, 1986; Battalio et al., 1974; Belk et al., 2012; Hameed et al., 2014; Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2009; Howard & Sheth, 1968; Robertson & Kassarijian, 1991; Solomon, 2013). Literature on consumer behaviour is diverse and extensive as changes in society, economics, and technology affect the way consumers behave. Inevitably, these changes lead to changed consumer behaviour studies by which, when, how, and why the topics are studied. The stages of purchasing behaviour represent a general model for understanding how customers make purchasing decisions. Therefore, the second hypothesis is presented:

H2: There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and consumer behaviour stages.

i) Need Recognition

The process begins with the potential customer realising that they need a product or service. The need can also be promoted by stimuli, both internal and external. At the most basic level, a man needs to attain a specific level influenced by their previous experience. This relates to internal stimulus. An example of an external stimulus is when they see a new product while doing regular shopping (Rathi & Pandey, 2021).

H.2.1. There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and need Recognition as consumer behaviour stage.

ii) Product Awareness/Information Search

At this stage, the consumer is actively searching for information to know the product better. In this search, the consumer attempts to cater for all the information relating to the product, its main features, and the qualities of

different brands, together with the places where such shops can be found. Some of the most common sources for consumer information, as identified by Rathi and Pandey (2021), include:

- Experimental sources: involves examining, handling, and using the service or product.
- Commercial sources: dealers, salespeople, and advertisements.
- Personal sources: neighbours, friends, and family.
- Public sources: consumer rating organisations and mass media.

Based on the insights above, the third hypothesis reads:

H.2.2. There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and Product Awareness/Information Search as consumer behaviour stage.

iii) Interest

Consumer interest relates to how much the consumer is willing to gain more details about the product. This is the stage at which the consumer is actively involved in the process of buying while also paying attention to the product (Rathi & Pandey, 2021).

H.2.3 There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and Interest as consumer behaviour stage.

iv) Evaluation and Intention

The evaluation and intention process represents a stage of trying the product mentally. At this stage, the consumer assigns real-time value-weights to the various brands/products based on the knowledge of the product they have accumulated. The stage also involves concluding about the relative satisfaction with the possible value of the product. This is the process that leads the consumer to determine whether they will buy or reject the product/brand. However, the ultimate purchase depends on positive intentions and strength (Rathi & Pandey, 2021).

H.2.4. There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and Evaluation as Consumer behaviour stage.

v) Output (Purchase stage)

The output denotes the results of the inputs of the buying behaviour. This stage is the product of the consumer duly processing the inputs. The purchase and post-purchase behaviours form part of the output (Rathi & Pandey, 2021).

H.2.5. There is no statistical relationship between content marketing and Output (purchase) as consumer behaviour stage.

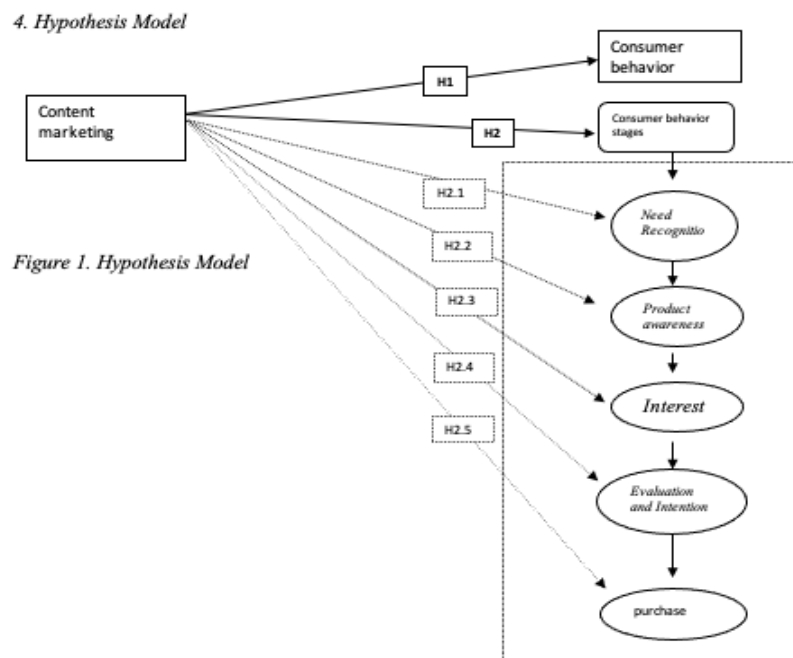


Figure 1. Hypothesis Model

5. Methodology

5.1 Measurement

The scales were prepared based on the theoretical study and the literature (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Regarding the content marketing variable, the scale used was suggested by several scholars (Pozeraitė & Repoviene, 2016; Pulizzi & Handley, 2016; Beets & Sangster, 2018). As for the purchasing behaviour variable, the present study relied on Vahdati et al. (2015) and Teng et al. (2007). Then, a questionnaire was prepared, and the five-point Likert scale was used. The value of 5 was given to the answer “very agree”, and the value of 1 was given to the answer “not agree at all”. Descriptive statistics were also calculated for the answers using the median and standard deviation. Data analysis was done using the SPSS program.

5.2 Construct Validity and Reliability

Reliability and stability analysis were used to ensure that the phrases used were closely related to the intended measurement and to make sure that the research tool included all the variables of the theoretical framework. Meanwhile, the stability analysis indicates that if the alpha coefficients are more than .80, they become consistent. The results of the credibility and reliability test are shown in Table 1 below, where the Cronbach alpha coefficient for content marketing reached .85, and the alpha coefficient for consumer behaviour was .87.

Table 1. Reliability and stability of variables

Variable	Dimension	Alfa Cronbach
CM	Relevant	.851
	Informative	.918
	Reliability	.832
	Value	.870
	Uniqueness	.852
	Emotion	.877
	Intelligence	.791
Total CM		.85
Purchase B		.87

5.3 Sample Characteristic

A sample of 384 Saudi female consumers of consumer goods was selected, according to the statistical tables. An analysis of the reports of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry found that the size of the study population exceeds 100,000 individuals, considering a confidence coefficient of .95% and an error coefficient of .5%. The data collected through the structured questionnaire for the study was tested by the Cronbach alpha test to indicate the reliability and validity of scales. To ensure the collection of the minimum specified sample based on the expected response rate, the questionnaire was published on social networking sites through links. The sample was a convenience sample among those who frequented social media and purchasing sites. The response rate was 93%.

6. Results and Hypothesis Test

The results shown in Table 2 indicate a significant relationship between the variables, as there is a strong correlation between CB and CM. As shown in the same table, the results of the logistic regression analysis determine the amount of change caused by CM on CB, where it takes the value one if the change is positive and the value 0 if the change is negative. The coefficient of determination is $R^2 = .728$.

Table 2. Relationship between the variables

<i>Multiple Correlation Coefficient R=0.821</i>					
<i>R²=0.728</i>					
CM	T.sig	T-tub.	T-calculated	SE	B
<i>Relevance</i>	0.000	6.211	1.621	0.27	0.182
<i>Informative</i>	0.000	7.181	1.621	0.31	0.375
<i>Reliability</i>	0.000	20.123	1.621	0.22	0.524
<i>Value</i>	0.000	7.365	1.621	0.28	0.174
<i>Uniqueness</i>	0.000	11.361	1.261	0.33	0.247
<i>Emotions</i>	0.000	21.125	1.261	0.25	0.622
<i>Intelligence</i>	0.000	9.124	1.261	0.27	0.511

Based on the results shown in Table 2, the first hypothesis has been proven: There is no statistically significant relationship between content marketing and consumer behaviour.

Table 3. Regression model

Dependant variable CB	Independent variable CM			
	Simple correlation coefficient	Simple regression coefficient	T-test	Ranking
<i>Need Recognition</i>	0.81	0.55	3.21	2
<i>Product awareness/ Info. Search</i>	0.89	0.62	4.08	1
<i>Interest</i>	0.77	0.51	1.97	3
<i>Evaluation and Intention</i>	0.67	0.49	1.07	4
<i>purchase</i>	.065	0.41	0.22	5

Based on measurement model diagnostics, the results indicate a significant relationship between the variables. Table 2 shows that there is a strong, significant correlation between content marketing and consumer behaviour, as the regression coefficient was $0.728 = R^2$, and the correlation coefficient was 0.82. Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported.

The results also showed the existence of an effect relationship of content marketing on the stage of feeling the need as one of the stages of consumer behaviour, where the regression coefficient $R^2 = 0.55$. This indicates the significance of the relationship, as the correlation coefficient reached $R = 0.81$, showing a strong and positive relationship. This supports the sub-hypothesis H.2.1. The hypothesis test results shown in Table 2 indicate that there is a relationship between content marketing and the product stage, awareness and information search, where the regression coefficient $R^2 = 0.62$. This stage ranked first as the consumer behaviour stage most affected by content marketing and swallowing, which supports the sub-hypothesis H.2.2. In addition the sub-hypothesis H.2.3 was supported regarding a relationship between content marketing and the stage of attention and interest, where the regression coefficient reached 0.51, indicating a strong effect relationship and the correlation coefficient reached 0.77, which is a strong positive correlation. The finding also indicates the relationship between content marketing and the evaluation stage as one of the stages of consumer behaviour, as it reached the regression coefficient $R^2=0.49$ and $R=0.67$, which proves the significance of the relationship and supports hypothesis H.2.4. Finally, the results showed that there is a positive significant relationship between content marketing and the purchase stage as one of the stages of consumer behaviour, as the regression coefficient was 0.41 and the correlation coefficient was 0.65, which indicates that the relationship is positive and significant. It also illustrates that content marketing affects the purchase stage and supports hypothesis H.2.5. The second hypothesis, H2, was fully proven, as it became clear that there was a significant relationship between content marketing and all stages of consumer purchasing behaviour. The results also showed that content marketing has a varying effect on each stage of the purchasing behaviour of Saudi female consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

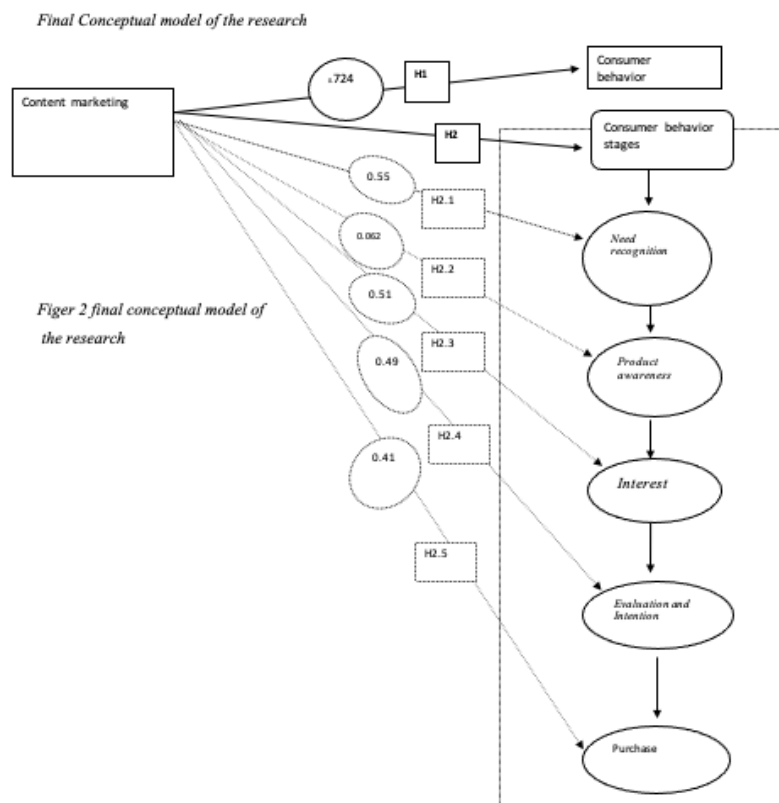


Figure 2. Final conceptual model of the research

7. Discussion

The current study focused on how content marketing affects consumer behaviour and whether the impact of content marketing differs at each stage during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dual role clarified the results of the study that proved the significant relationship between content marketing and the stages of purchase behaviour. The study's finding also points to the variance of each stage of consumer behaviour stages, where it turned out that the stage most affected by content marketing is the stage of collecting information about the products the customer wants from different sources. According to Pulizzi (2013), the importance of content marketing emerged during the pandemic, especially with the spread of rumours during that period, the tendency of many to e-market and the increasing importance of content marketing. Saudi female consumers are looking for the correct information that supports purchasing decisions, which has provided them with credibility in content marketing. Even though traditional forms of communication are still and will be used in the future, Lieb (2011) states that content marketing is not one of the many possible options in the current market conditions. She argues that today if companies want to grow their business, attract new customers and build long-term relationships with their current customers, they must have a content marketing strategy. According to Giesen's (2015) description, content marketing is disseminated through text, images, videos, podcasts, or graphics. This view indicates that there is a relationship between content marketing and the stage of feeling the need. The focus of DCM has evolved from addressing relevant characteristics Koiso-Kanttila (2004) and the value of digital (information) products Rowley (2008) to exploring DCM's potential in marketing communication (Malthouse et al., 2013). Content marketing must be attractive, creative, and innovative content that is unique in its kind to attract customers, and the attractiveness of the content means that it is influential and unique (Abel, 2014).

Finally, this study confirmed the relationship between content marketing and the purchase stage as one of the stages of consumer behaviour. This study revealed that the purchase stage is affected by content marketing because there is a relationship between the purchase stage and the value that customers get, which is derived from the functions of the product that the customer gets when using it. Where the value of the content reflects the desires and interests of customers, so the content must be useful and enable the customer to interact with it (Pazeraite & Repoviene, 2016).

8. Future Research Scope

Content marketing is considered a fertile topic for future studies, and it is one of the current topics that still needs more research. Other scholars who want to pursue the same topic can focus on a comparative study of the impact of content marketing on consumer behaviour before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Another angle is to introduce other variables in the research and analyse the relationship between the variables and the elements of content marketing by studying the effect of each element of content marketing on each stage of consumer behaviour. A third approach could involve using an SEM-PLS structural equation model for statistical analysis to obtain more results. Finally, the research can be applied to the services sector instead of the consumer goods sector, for example, banks or hotels.

9. Limitations and Future Studies

This research work has a few limitations. First, the study has a small sample size. Second, the sample largely employed females, which may not represent the consumer population in Saudi Arabia. In addition, future research should broaden the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample with more male respondents to obtain a more inclusive understanding.

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