

# Exploring the Relationship between Social Media and Customers' Contingency Buying Behaviour during COVID-19: A Thematic Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

The current global crisis of coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has atrophied the world economy and healthcare system, exploding copious terror, panic, and ambiguity among the human population of the world. As strict curfew and lockdowns being enforced in many countries, contingency buying has occurred as a consistent feature of COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, it is important to examine the contingency buying behaviors of customers during COVID-19 to understand contingency buying and to provide administrative perceptions for the consumers, marketers, and policymakers. In this study, we aimed to expose underlying elements causing contingency buying in Saudi context, where all grocery essential items are available by interviewing the panic shoppers, literature, and using thematic analysis. Our interview and literature findings identified four major themes i.e. i) sociological and psychological factors, which compelled people to engage in contingency buying, ii) social media and electronic word of mouth created a panic situation, iii) people were not entirely satisfied with their behaviors of contingency buying; however, they justified these as being necessary at the time and iv) people admitted that government reduced the panic situation via reassuring messages. In addition, our results also reveal that underestimates regarding COVID-19 pandemic, irrelevant public behavior, social media, friends, and family suggestions identified as underlying factors causing the scarcity and contingency buying situations. Theoretical and managerial implications have been considered significantly.

**Keywords;** COVID-19 pandemic, Contingency buying, Social Media, Scarcity messages, Buying behavior

## 1. Introduction

Contingency buying for fear of, as well as leading to, a shortage of stock is a situation during the pandemic of COVID-19 which is fueled for several reasons. Toal (2020) suggests that people resort to contingency buying behaviors as they prepare to navigate a world that is restricted in many ways and where they feel their fundamental liberties have been curtailed. Contingency buying behavior could be also caused by the sudden shortage and reduction of the products' distribution (Tsao et al., 2019). These unanticipated situations are associated with numerous reasons like strikes, pandemics, environmental disasters, and wars. Nevertheless, contingency buying behaviors create a public crisis, which always harms the social stability, economic system, as well as consumer psychology in affected

areas (Dholakia, 2020). Contingency buying is particularly relevant in a contingency-buying-prone population and includes segments of the population that experience a perceived loss of control, uncertainty, heightened emotions, as well as compliance with group actions (Wang et al., 2019).

Several real-life examples can explain how contingency buying behavior is generated by various unusual situations. In 2014, there was a severe shortage of products in Japan due to the risk of tsunamis. Another example can be seen in Taiwan 2016 when authorities warned their people of the arrival of the typhoon, and this caused a state of contingency buying amongst the Taiwanese citizens to store up goods, which led to empty shelves (Doyle Rice, 2016). Kitching (2016) reported a lack of food and supplies in the USA due to contingency buying as storm Hurricane Matthew was projected to affect Americans. In 2012, with the threat of Hurricane Sandy,

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consumers resorted to contingency buying, rushing to purchase unusually large quantities of essential products. Consumer hoarding in long lines was also observed at gas stations in the event of Hurricane Katrina. Whilst these have been more local contingency buying behaviors, global contingency buying behaviors have also been observed. For example, in 2008, rice production in Australia was reduced due to a long period of drought, leading to fears of rice shortages around the globe, and evidence of contingency buying was that consumers rushed to stores and stockpiled rice products. In 2011, as Japan feared an earthquake and subsequent nuclear crisis, shoppers in Shanghai, Beijing, San Francisco, and other major cities around the world stockpiled salt as they believed that it would protect against radiation poisoning, leading to salt shortage (Shou et al., 2013).

Most recently, at the beginning of December 2019, Chinese authorities reported the first confirmed case of a novel strain of coronavirus, later called SARS-CoV2 causing disease COVID-19. Months later, this virus has become a pandemic and spread across the world, leaving thousands of people dead, and many countries calling for curfews and lockdowns to be put in place. As this situation developed, contingency buying behaviors were seen in supermarkets across the world, with shelves being emptied of essential and non-perishable items as consumers responded to the perceived insecurity of the pandemic and prepared to be isolated. However, an alternative solution is available in current times that can be used as a tool to curtail contingency buying. In many cases, it erodes the need for contingency buying altogether. This is the use of online shops where customers can buy their essential items as and when needed. In theory, this is a potential recourse to contingency buying (Collinson, 2020). Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown evidence where contingency buying extended to online shopping sites as well, and key online shopping sites such as Amazon and eBay went out of stock for essential items alongside physical shops and supermarkets. This situation is particularly new in the case of Saudi Arabia, where contingency buying is something that consumers are not familiar with, as they have not experienced any kind of natural or man-made disasters listed above. This has left consumers confused about whether they should purchase emergency goods before the curfew and lockdown or rely on government officials who have stressed against contingency buying. The consumption market in

Saudi Arabia is a robust market given the fact that Saudi Arabia has the largest population in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regions with 29 million residents. It is also the biggest consumer of dairy products amongst the GCC states. The Kingdom has taken an \$800 million food security initiative, and nearly \$70 million are spent on food consumption in Saudi Arabia. The mass grocery retail sector in the country shows a growth of 66.6% and is expected to have a total value of food imports of around \$35 billion this year (Foodex Saudi, 2020).

This article is structured in sections as follows. The literature review of contingency buying behavior and its underlying elements, a relationship of social media with buying behavior, and satisfaction with customer experience is presented in Section 2, followed by the research objectives and methodology in Section 3. Whereas, Section 4 indicates the qualitative research findings, including thematic analysis. In Section 5, this article discusses the findings and concludes the study with the theoretical, practical implications, and research limitations.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Contingency buying behavior and its underlying elements

Contingency buying can be triggered due to several factors, including an individual's ideology and interests, psychological and sociological factors, attitude changes, as well as the process of information exchange and information processing (Wei et al., 2011). This means that the process of contingency buying is not simple or straightforward. Several tributaries contribute towards the manifestation of such behavior particularly in times of stress and uncertainty. Some studies also suggest that consumers resort to contingency buying when they believe that the authorities asking them not to go for contingency buying are not trustworthy and are unable to either keep them safe or tell them the truth (Kwok, 2020). This, when coupled with the global prevalence and knowledge of contingency buying, leads to contingency buying behavior amongst consumers. Social scientists call it the herd instinct, which comes up as a behavioral reaction to feelings of stress and uncertainty (Haghani et al., 2019). This is a form of retail therapy, where consumers engage in buying utilitarian products that help them cope with an uncertain situation and a potential problem, thereby enhancing their sense of control over the situation. It is essential to remember that this control deprivation does not

necessarily mean being out of control or lacking self-discipline (Chen et al., 2017). It is more related to the inability to take action to address the problem or situation that arises daily and is relevant to the fundamental experience of people in their daily lives (McKeever, 2020).

Strahle and Bonfield (1989) offered a sociological perspective to contingency buying, where individuals are perceived to be operating from three behavioral aspects. These include reward-seeking, punishment avoiding, and operating in social situations that work on the model of an economic market. Consumer behavior and decision-making are based on one of these three aspects. They maintain that a customer cannot resort to contingency buying without the perception of a dangerous stimulus. It is also

necessary that the participant perceives that they are unable to cope with a threatening situation and that the escape routes for the situation are rapidly diminishing. contingency buying occurs when all these three conditions are present together, and customers sense that contingency buying has become necessary as well as enough need. A related behavioral outcome of contingency buying is physical and mental withdrawal from the situation that is perceived as a threat. The structural and environmental factors that contribute towards consumer behavior and decision-making processes lead to the transformation of these perceptions into behavior, which is then manifested in the form of contingency buying.

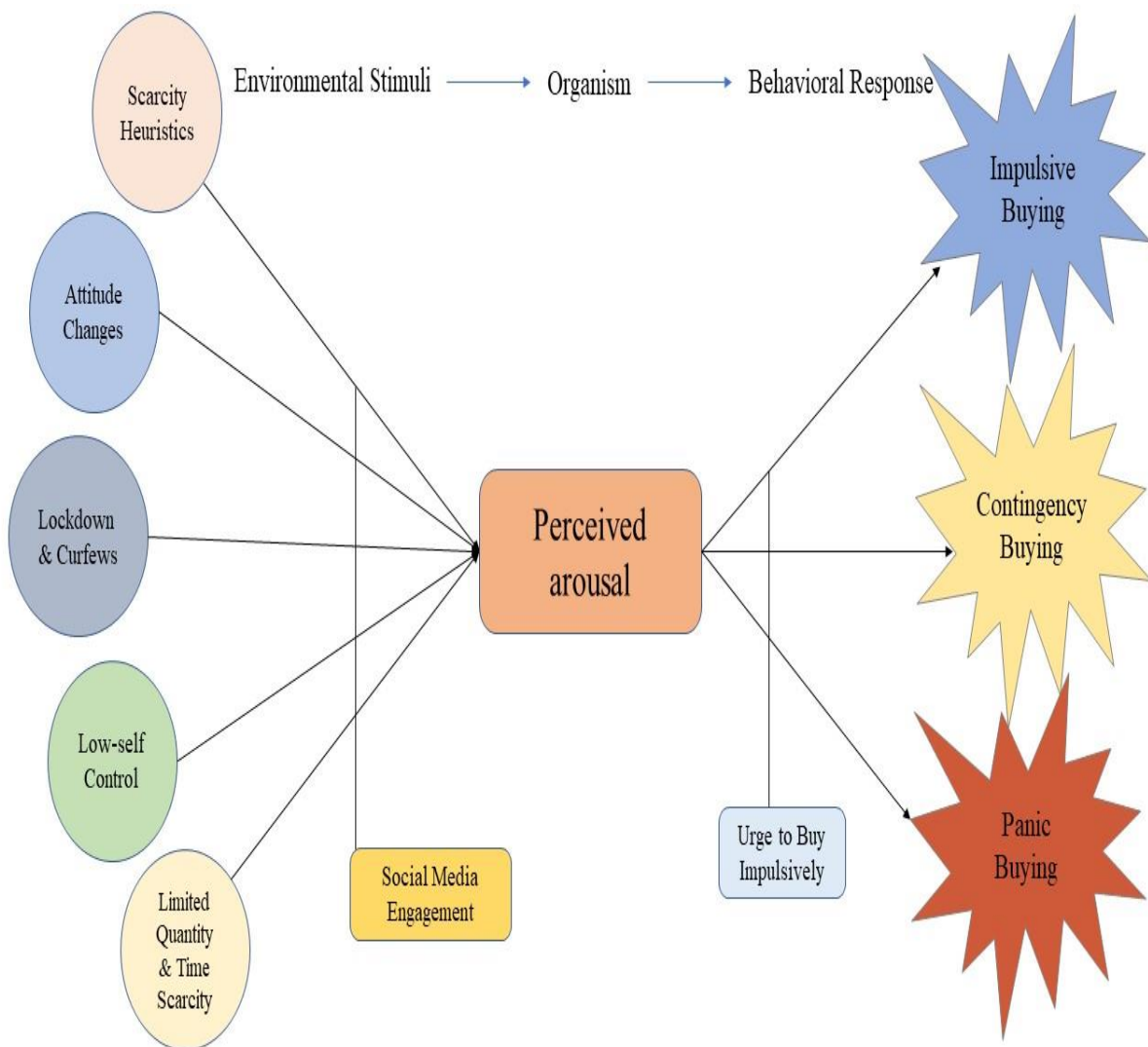


Figure 1. Underlying elements that contribute to contingency buying during COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Another element that contributes to contingency buying is the perceived ability of

individuals to tolerate distress (Campbell 2020). If a consumer has a general nature to avoid distress,

they may resort to contingency buying so that they do not have to face the problems associated with its lack. A related factor is that along with a time of uncertainty, people are also experiencing social isolation and a combination of these factors can psychologically motivate people to buy things that they do not necessarily need in the amount that they have bought them in when consumers feel that they are unable to tolerate uncertainties an extreme hoarding behavior can be seen, and this is directly linked to contingency buying behavior patterns. Scarcity heuristics also contributes to contingency buying as people assume that items would be more are more valuable if they are in reduced supply (Cheung et al., 2015).

## 2.2. Social Media and Its Relation to Contingency Buying Behavior

Social media, although a relatively recent phenomenon that has primarily emerged over the last decade, has contributed to the growth of a global community that is very relevant in terms of consumer behavior. Social media platforms are now increasingly used as forums where consumers connect, produce, and share content and opinions (Smith, 2009). It is also used as a platform for obtaining information on products and services in the market, both by businesses and by consumers alike. Digital spaces and now holding the frontline in terms of consumer opinions on products and services, thereby creating opinions and influences (Powers et al., 2012). Social media now works as the electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which is the primary source of information affecting consumer buying decisions as well as shaping their perceptions and attitudes (Bronner and Hoog, 2010). As a result of the greater connection that people experience on social media platforms, this online or electronic word of mouth concept has become critical in how consumers make decisions regarding their buying behaviors (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). Kotler and Armstrong (2014) also suggested that there is a high involvement of consumers in their purchase decisions due to their interaction with social media platforms.

Given this, social media platforms are also critical in determining contingency buying behaviors. Depoux et al. (2020) maintained that misleading rumors and conspiracy theories regarding the recent coronavirus pandemic can also be traced back to the social media platforms, which they term the "*Infomedia ecosystems*" of the 21st century. They maintain that the information and misinformation regarding the virus outbreak and its accompanying contingency

traveled as rapidly as the virus itself. The contingency created by the social media hype around the spread of COVID-19 was a major factor that led to the deviant behaviors that were seen amongst the public, including contingency buying, distrust of public directives, and the emergence of uncivil behaviors. Cogley (2020) suggested that contingency buying was turbocharged by social media in the UK, where consumers went on to stockpile essential supplies despite government assurances to the contrary. This evidence is now more recently seen as supermarkets continue to operate as normal, thereby proving that there was no need for the contingency buying frenzy that took place, and that could largely be attributed to social media trends.

## 2.3 Satisfaction with Customer Experience

Voss et al., (2008) defined customer experience as a holistic process that takes place during a customer's journey and is determined by the sequence of touchpoints that a customer has with a goods/service provider. Given the various faculties involved in the contingency buying process, it is predicted that a customer would not be satisfied with their experience or their behaviors after a contingency buying episode (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017). Given the fact that social media plays such a critical role in consumer behavior in current times, there is also a need to determine how it can be used to positively influence these behaviors, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty where contingency buying is likely to manifest. McLean and Wilson (2019) suggested that the use of digital platforms can be critical in developing positive customer experiences, particularly in the aftermath of a period of uncertainty and distress that has resulted in contingency buying behaviors by the customers. Not only this, but customers are also able to create positive perceptions of such digital platforms that contribute towards their ease of use, enjoyment, as well as usefulness in distressing times. McLean and Osei-Frimpong (2017) have provided further evidence to this and suggest that the use of online platforms for service-related information to customers is likely to lead to enhanced customer satisfaction. They suggest that service quality and information quality are particularly critical in creating satisfaction. In the context of contingency buying behaviors, the use of these platforms can be essential in assuaging customer concerns and in creating a sense of security as well as normalcy that can then lead to increased customer satisfaction. These can be the

Table 1. Academic research indicating sociological &amp; psychological elements, the role of social &amp; digital media, and satisfaction with the experience of contingency buying

Concept	Author	Definitions/Theories	Dimensionality/Themes
<b>Theme-1 Sociological &amp; Psychological Underlying Elements/Themes involve in Contingency buying behavior by Public</b>			
Emergency Information Management	Wei et al., 2011	Social networks characterize and affect information diffusion during urban emergencies and result in panic buying.	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Social-network analysis 2. Sociological & psychological factors, attitude changes 3. Panic buying
Crowd Dynamic Research	Haghani et al., 2019	The terms including irrationality, herding, and panic are pervasive in the crowd dynamics and show significant effects on the management practices.	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Irrationality 2. Panic 3. Herding 4. Crowd dynamics
Utilitarian Product Acquisitions	Chen et al., 2017	Acquisition of Utilitarian products can be motivated by control deprivation	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Utilitarian consumption 2. Fundamental desire of control 3. Problem-solving Tendency
Consumer Panic	Strable and Bonfield, 1989	Understanding of Consumer Panic via Consumer behavior Theory	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Panic situation 2. Structural factors 3. Decision making
Community Collaboration and COVID-19	Campbell 2020	Community Collaborations decrease family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. COVID-19 pandemic 2. Social distancing & Lockdown 3. Stress/tolerate distress 4. Family violence 5. Community strengthens
Low Self-Control and Scarcity Heuristics	Cheung et al., 2015	Low self-control consumers select <i>more healthy</i> and benefited choice when there is scarcity Heuristics	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Scarcity heuristics 2. Self-control 3. Protective effects 4. Impulsive buying
<b>Theme-2 Role of Social and Electronic Media in Triggering Contingency buying Behavior by Public</b>			
Social Media	Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020	The influence of digital marketing using social media networks consumer behavior	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Advertising 2. Marketing 3. Social media 4. Consumer behavior
Shopping Intentions on Social Media	Mikalef et al., 2013	Critical aspects of social media affect the intention to purchase and pass on information	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Social media 2. Online shopping 3. Purchase motivation 4. Theory of planned motivation
Social media and consumer behavior	Ziyadin et al., 2019	The role of social media marketing in consumer behavior	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Social media 2. Marketing 3. Consumer behavior
Word of mouth and consumers engagement	Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014	Engagement with consumers on social media depends upon the nature of the word of mouth	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Social media 2. Word of mouth 3. Online connected marketing 4. Nature of Conservation 5. Consumer engagement
Digital marketing and purchasing decision	Powers et al., 2012	Purchasing decision process affected by digital and social media	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Digital and social media 2. Consumer empowerment 3. Brand facilitation 4. Consumers emotions 5. Purchasing decision
Social media panic and COVID-19	(Depoux et al., 2020)	The pandemic of social media panic travels faster than the COVID-19 outbreak	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Misleading information 2. Conspiracy theories 3. Social media panic 4. Virology and virality 5. Panic purchasing
<b>Theme-3 Satisfaction of customers with the experience of Contingency buying</b>			
Customer Experience Paradigm	(Voss et al., 2008)	Service operation Strategy and design affected by customer experience paradigm	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Service of operation strategy 2. Destinations 3. Experience 4. Emotional response 5. Case research
Satisfaction with Experience	(McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017)	Service, information, and system quality influence satisfaction with the experience	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Live chat interaction 2. Satisfaction with online chat experience 3. Human interactions 4. Online customer support
Customer brand engagement & augmented reality	McLean and Wilson, 2019	Customer Brand engagement influenced by augmented reality via retailer mobile applications	<b>Multidimensionality</b> 1. Digital shopping 2. Customer brand engagement 3. Augmented reality 4. Retailers mobile apps

precedents of consumer buying behaviors.

### 3. Research Objective & Methodology

#### 3.1 Overview

This study employs a qualitative research

approach that was used to gain in-depth analysis about consumer behavior concerning contingency buying since this behavior is triggered by various social and real-life issues that cannot be analyzed

or explained entirely by quantitative measures (Hammarberg et al., 2016). These are complex behavioral issues that need to be understood through an adequate consideration of multiple factors that affect people and their behaviors. As such, most research on consumer behavior does not aim at making accurate predictions of the choices that people make but mainly aims at providing reasoning or an explanation of the various factors that may affect those choices (Chrysochou, 2017).

The overall objective of the present research study was to determine the various underlying elements that influence consumer behavior and lead to contingency buying behaviors, to assess the influence of such contingency buying behaviors through the role of social media on satisfaction with the experience, and to determine the coping strategies that consumers apply to contingency buying situations in the Saudi Arabia context.

### 3.2. Data collection and procedures

Given the situation with the COVID-19 and the requirements of social distancing, the research had to be undertaken through a semi-structured interview method which was conducted over the telephone. To get access over the telephone, participants were contacted outside the mega supermarkets randomly just after they had finished their shopping, explained the purpose of the research by keeping at least one meter distance to follow the SOP of social distancing under COVID-19. They were then asked for their consent in participation in the research, and once they agreed, the researcher asked them for their telephone numbers as well as an appropriate time to contact them for the interview. The participants were explained that their numbers would be treated under the regulations of data confidentiality and privacy and would only be used by the researcher. They were also given the reasoning behind the use of telephone interviews that is the requirement of social distancing due to COVID-19. The sample population for the interviews specifically included customers ( $n = 100$ ) who had finished their purchase of essential items due to the COVID-19 situation by questioning the reason for their buying intentions.

The interviews that were conducted over the telephone lasted for about 20 to 25 minutes for each participant. Eighty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with research participants. The interview is chosen as a research method as it not only allows for an exploration of the participants'

responses, but it is also beneficial as it allows both the research participant. Moreover, the benefit of interviews also includes the element of time and space, whereby research participants can develop a degree of ease with the researcher, and this could improve the possibility of getting more genuine responses. A semi-structured approach to interviewing was used as it allowed the researcher to formulate questions around the experience of the research participants. Developing questions from their responses allowed for an exploration of the specific details of their circumstances that contributed towards contingency buying.

In inclusion criteria, the customers who started abrupt shopping & panic buying during COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas, in exclusion criteria the regular shopper, who were not showing contingency buying behaviour were excluded from the present study.

### 1.2. Nature of questions

Questions included various categories that were derived from the themes emerging from the literature review. These included the trigger factors, such as the individual ideology, psychological and sociological factors, attitude changes, and information exchange and information processing (Wei et al., 2011). The participants were questioned on the issue of trustworthiness of government response to the COVID-19 situation, as well as the herd instinct (Haghani et al. 2019). Questions also explored the issue of control deprivation regarding COVID-19 (McKeever, 2020). The sociological aspects of reward-seeking, punishment avoiding, and operating in social situations were also included in the questions (Strahle and Bonfield, 1989). The perceived ability of individuals to tolerate stress was also explored through interview questions. Customer involvement on social media platforms in purchase decisions was also explored as a category (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014), and rumors and conspiracy theories were also deliberated upon as being precedents to contingency buying behaviors (Depoux et al. 2020). Finally, social media platforms have been used in two contexts in this study; firstly, they are used to examine if social media influence increases or decreases people's contingency buying behavior, and secondly, it looks at the increase or decrease in the level of customer satisfaction with the experience of buying behavior. In this respect, satisfaction with customer experience is employed in this study because of contingency buying behavior (McLean and Wilson, 2019).

### 1.3. Ethical research validity and bias test

The validity and reliability of research studies is the moral responsibility of the researcher. This includes ethical validity as well as substantive validity (Bryman and Bell, 2018). Ethical validity is the consideration of ethical issues pertinent to a research process in data collection and analysis. This has been ensured by securing the identities of research participants as well as their responses. Researcher bias is always kept under check. In using secondary data, it has been ensured that authentic and validated research is included. The same is aimed at developing the research findings and recommendations for this study. Substantive validity refers to the quality of the research content in a study, both in primary and secondary contexts. This is ensured by including a wide base of primary and secondary research sources. This is reflected in the high research sample size for the study, and the inclusion of recent and updated secondary data (Saunders et al., 2019). The reliability of the study, as well as the data collection method, has been secured through the greater flexibility and freedom that is offered to both the researcher as well as the research participants in using semi-structured interviews. This allows for unbiased and raw data to come through from the participants, thereby increasing the reliability of the research study, which may not be entirely possible in structured or semi-structured interviews (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002).

### 3.3. Data analysis

The method of data analysis used for this study is thematic analysis (Table 1). Thematic analysis is a process used by many qualitative studies and helps in the identification, analysis, and organization of themes that emerge from a data set. The thematic analysis helps produce trustworthy and insightful research findings, particularly when the research topic or phenomenon is relatively new (Nowell et al. 2017). Thematic analysis was seen to be an appropriate method for this study given the fact that COVID-19 is an emergent situation and is still evolving. Thematic analysis a flexible approach that can be modified as per the needs of different studies and allows for the inclusion of new data. It is a more accessible form of research analysis for more unfamiliar research topics. Thematic analysis is a useful method to examine the different perspectives that come from research participants and allows the identification of similarities and differences as well as outliers in the data analysis

process. It offers a well-structured approach, whereby large data sets can be adequately and appropriately analyzed, and themes generated from them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is not to state that thematic analysis does not have any drawbacks. It is a time-consuming effort on the part of the researcher and runs the risk of data getting lost in description. It also requires a certain degree of expertise and skill to establish rigor in the method. Whilst flexibility is a significant benefit of this method, it can also lead to inconsistency and incoherence in the development of themes (Holloway and Todres, 2003). Nevertheless, for this research study, thematic analysis has been deemed to be appropriate given the research topic as well as the data collection method as shown in Table 1.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Interview Findings

The interview findings revealed several elements of the contingency buying process that people had engaged in just before the COVID-19 lockdown (Table 2). One of the most important elements that came through the interview responses was that initially people were not too concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic, and also did not think that it would be something that would make any big difference in their lives and lifestyles. At this point, they went about their lives as normal and did not consider contingency buying as an option. However, as the virus spread throughout the world, and reports started coming in from all over the world, people started becoming more conscious of the virus as well as its potential effects on their lives. Among interviewees comments about this as following;

*"We did not think it would be this serious.*

*We were not so concerned about it .... earlier.*

*I did not think my life would come to a stop like this... it is the first time in my life ..."*

Interview findings also revealed that people were not very concerned about the impact of the virus and even a potential lockdown on their lives. Most of these people had lived in an environment where things were readily available, and therefore, the notion of stockpiling things was something that they had never experienced. For this reason, not only were they not concerned about this behavior, but also saw reports of contingency buying behaviors from other parts of the world with surprise and speculation, and sometimes, even distaste by responding with the following comments.

*"When I saw people making lines in China, or...."*

*the even United States.... from the news reports, I thought these behaviors were crazy.*

*I did not think that stockpiling was an option. We always have the option to go... freedom to go... into a supermarket and buy whatever we want... when we want.*

*We have never experienced something like this in our lives."*

Some people also said that they became a little concerned about the news reports that they saw on panic buying, and thought that they would do it, but then they were talked out of it by their friends using the following comments;

*"We spoke to our family and friends about what they were doing ... and then we realized... that they were all thinking like us.... and so ... we decided not to go for stockpiling."*

However, these people also acknowledged that a few weeks later, it was the opinion of these family and friends that compelled them to stockpile.

*"Initially my friend said that they are not doing it ... and I was also relaxed ... and then one day, my friends and family started calling me ... and they were anxious .... and ... because they had been to the supermarkets and they had not found any of the things that they were looking for.... so .... they started panic buying ..."*

Interview findings with the respondents also revealed that they experienced some degree of dissonance in terms of contingency buying. Respondents maintained that it was something that they had never done, and they had always seen this as uncivil behavior. Therefore, engaging in contingency buying was not their first instinct or even a desirable instinct. They resorted to contingency buying because they genuinely felt that there was going to be a shortage of essential items, and they wanted to secure enough essential items for their needs and the needs of their families. People with younger children also reported that they were more concerned about their children than about themselves. Participants revealed that there was a genuine shortage of items that compelled them to adopt contingency buying with the following comments;

*"I always used to think that people who go for panic buying did not understand how markets worked... I behaved in the same way... I don't like the behavior, but I think it was necessary.*

*It was apocalyptic behavior, I agree....*

*I did not feel-good standing in line and then buying more than was necessary for me... to buy... but everybody else was doing it and .... So, I did the same .... I must secure my family."*

Another element that was a major determinant of people's contingency buying behaviors was what they saw on social media and through electronic word of mouth. People maintain that even when they were not so concerned about the lockdown and its effects on their shopping for essential items, they saw numerous posts on social media where people were rushing to buy things and were fighting with each other for essential items, and these were the factors that created a sense of fear in their minds. This then led to their decision to engage in contingency buying. Similarly, the electronic word of mouth phenomenon was equally effective as well as pervasive. People saw reports as well as other shoppers giving their opinions in video clips that compelled them to think that the panic situation was warranted, and this pushed them towards contingency buying with the following comments.

*We were not very concerned about contingency buying behavior earlier... but then these social media clips started coming ... people were fighting over toilet rolls and milk bottles ... which created a sense of fear... in our minds.*

*Everywhere I looked during the initial weeks of the lockdown the only reports on social media or even in the newspapers. and news clips ...was that people were panic buying and stockpiling... this created fear in my mind... and I thought I should also stock enough in the house*

*Initially, it was fine.... then social media erupted with reports of panic buying and fighting in supermarkets and we decided to stockpile.*

With regards to the use of social media to revert this behavior of contingency buying, people responded that they did receive messages and continued reassurances from their government and Saudi ministries. These messages were backed with data and made sense, and therefore, reassured people. People also indicated that they had a fair degree of confidence in their government, and therefore, when the messages started coming in from the government itself that there is no need for panic buying, people were more open to these messages and were more confident that these messages were true, which were indicated by following comments.

*Yes, the government helped.... reassured us ... and that helped us become more confident that the situation was under control.*

*The government has always shown that it can provide for... its citizens ....so it was ... there was no need for us not to trust the government.*

*Social media had the negative effect .... when we engaged in contingency buying ...and then*



social media also had a positive effect... uh... when the government started using it and sending out

messages of control... and then we were reassured ... and did not panic after that.

Table 2. Underlying factors associated with contingency buying revealed by participants.

Identified underlying elements by interview findings	Percentage of response	Comments by participants
Underestimation and insignificant information	>85%	<p>We did not think it would be this serious.</p> <p>We were not so concerned about it ... earlier.</p> <p>I was just living a normal life and did not think that this is something that would hit the world like this...</p> <p>I did not think my life would come to a stop like this.... it is the first time in my life ... that... I have seen something like this happen</p>
No concern regarding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic	>90%	<p>When I saw people making lines in China, or.... the even United States.... from the news reports, I thought these behaviors were crazy.</p> <p>I did not think that stockpiling was an option. We always have the option to go... freedom to go... into a supermarket and buy whatever we want... when we want.</p> <p>We have never experienced something like this in our lives.</p> <p>I had never thought that I would be... um... buying groceries... are essential items for several months. I always buy them for a week ... and ... that is what I did initially.</p> <p>We thought it was a panic-driven behavior that did not make any sense... and so... we decided we will not do it.</p>
Effects of friends & family's activities	>80%	<p>We spoke to our family and friends about what they were doing ... and then we realized... that they were all thinking like us.... and so ... we decided not to go for stockpiling.</p> <p>Initially, my friend said that they are not doing it ... and I was also relaxed ... and then one day, my friends and family started calling me ... and they were anxious .... and ... because they had been to the supermarkets and they had not found any of the things that they were looking for.... so .... they started panic buying ... and then they called us and told us to stock up because things are going to be out of stock very soon .... it was then that we started getting anxious and decided to buy some amount .... but even then, they were not thinking of buying for months. We went out and bought for two ... or three weeks.</p>
Scarcity of essential items	>90%	<p>I always used to think that people who go for panic buying did not understand how markets worked... but when it came to my own family ... I behaved in the same way. I don't like the behavior, but I think it was necessary.</p> <p>If things are going out of stock ... then if ... and if you have children at home ... all the time ... as lockdown had started, then you want to make sure that you always have enough items of essential need in the house ...</p> <p>It was apocalyptic behavior, I agree.... but it was something that ... um ... we did and I think everybody did it for the same reason ... it was that we had ... uh ... fears that there would be shortage ... to be fair, we did ... did see empty shelves in the supermarkets, so we were not very wrong.</p> <p>I did not feel good standing in line and then buying more than was necessary for me... to buy... but everybody else was doing it and .... so I got apprehensive and anxious and did the same .... I must secure my family</p>
Social media & electronic word of mouth	>90%	<p>We were not very concerned about contingency buying behavior earlier... but then these social media clips started coming ... people were fighting over toilet rolls and milk bottles ... which created a sense of fear... in our minds.</p> <p>Everywhere I looked during the initial weeks of the lockdown the only reports on social media or even in the newspapers... in my newspapers .... and news clips ...was that people were panic buying and stockpiling ... and um.... I saw a video where people were breaking into shops and picking up foodstuff and running away with them ... this created fear in my mind... and I thought I should also stock enough in the house ... and also to make sure that if any ... um... situation of unrest or violence emerged outside .... we would not have to go outside for buying essential items.</p> <p>Initially, it was fine.... then social media erupted with reports of panic buying and fighting in supermarkets .... and we decided to stockpile so that the situation doesn't come there ... we don't have the essential items we need in the house.</p>
Response against government action	>75%	<p>Yes, the government helped.... reassured us ... and that helped us become more confident that the situation was under control.</p> <p>The government has always shown that it can provide for... its citizens ....so it was ... there was no need for us not to trust the government.</p> <p>Social media had the negative effect ... when we engaged in contingency buying ...and then social media also had a positive effect... uh... when the government started using it and sending out messages of control... and then we were reassured .... and did not panic after that.</p>

#### 4.2 Thematic Analysis:

The interview findings have identified four main themes to the contingency buying behaviors of consumers during COVID-19.

##### a) **People engaged in contingency buying behavior because of sociological and psychological factors**

The most dominant theme that emerged during the interviews was the role of sociological and psychological factors that compelled people to engage in contingency buying (Table 2). Most people agreed that they did not have any intention of engaging in contingency buying and would not have done so if they had not seen other people do it. This herd mentality created a state of panic and fear in people, and they decided to stockpile. Several people also suggested that if it had not been for their friends and family who had created an alarming situation, they would not have engaged in contingency buying, or not done it so quickly. However, in hindsight, people did say that they experienced instances where they went to the supermarket to buy something, and it was not available; so the next time they went to buy it and it was available, they bought more than was required. So, this shows that their behavior was compelled by sociological and psychological factors where fear, panic as well as a lack of control, were all significant contributors to their behaviors. This was then perpetuated by the fact that supermarkets were empty, and so people believed that the panic situation was real.

##### b) **People engaged in contingency buying behavior because of what they saw on social media and electronic word of mouth.**

A major role was played by the social media and electronic word of mouth, where people engaged in contingency buying due to what they saw on social media video clips as well as clips of people giving interviews to news channels, citing how they had gone to buy essential items and had found empty shelves (Table 2). All combined to create a panic situation where people resorted to contingency buying because they genuinely believe that there was going to be a shortage of essential items. Some people also maintained that given the fact that most of these essential items are imported into the country, and there was going to be a lockdown on all sorts of travel, they believed that there would be a shortage of items that would not be replenished in time due to suspension of trade cargoes as well. This compelled them to stockpile.

##### c) **People were not entirely satisfied with their behaviors of contingency buying; however, they justified these as being necessary at the time.**

A common theme that ran through most interviews was that people were not entirely satisfied with their behaviors of contingency buying. They maintained that they had usually seen contingency buying as a primitive behavior and did not expect that they would engage in such behaviors, living in a society like Saudi Arabia, where things were readily available and within the buying capacity of people. People also maintained that they usually associated panic buying with the sales and saw this as behavior that people would usually engage in to save money off items, rather than to stockpile them. Hence, their association with the behavior of contingency buying was very different from what they experienced. Some people also said that they saw contingency buying behaviors to occur when a natural disaster struck, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes, and these national disasters virtually destroyed the physical buildings within which essential items were located. That made more sense in their minds that the items would then become unavailable. However, in the case of a lockdown when everything else appeared normal in the physical context, they could not see the relevance or the need for contingency buying. Mentally, they associated contingency buying with the elements that they had not associated as parts of their own lives. However, some people did justify the fact that even though they were not satisfied with their behaviors of contingency buying, they did think that this was necessary at the time to secure themselves and their families.

##### d) **People felt that the reassuring messages that they got from their government helped calm them down as well as reduce intention for contingency buying.**

A final theme that emerged from these interviews was the fact that once the government realized the gravity of the problem and stepped in, people were reassured. Several respondents maintained that they were confident that the government had control of the situation and were, therefore, willing to trust the government directives and advisory on social media and electronic word of mouth forums. People suggested that not only did government reassurances calm them down, but also curbed their intention to engage in contingency buying behaviors subsequently. This came from a degree

of confidence in the government as well as its ability to provide for the people of the country. The Saudi government responded in a timely and adequate manner to the misinformation as well as anxiety spread through social media, and this was done through adequate data as well as evidence of how and why the supermarkets would be well-stocked for essential items. This helped people understand the issue from a more informed perspective, thereby curbing their intention for contingency buying behaviors after the first couple of instances. Social media campaigns launched by the Saudi government in this context, as well as on the websites for the various ministries dealing with the provision of essential items and foodstuff, all combined to create a steady flow of information that was reassuring as well as backed by understandable data. This helped people make sense of the situation in a more concrete manner, thereby reducing their anxiety around the issue, and curbing their intention for contingency buying. Interestingly, the same network of social media and electronic word of mouth through friends and family came into play over here as well, and people were able to share this information amongst their circle, thereby creating a general sense of control in society, and reducing fear around the COVID-19 lockdown.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this research study presented several similarities with the existing literature on the subject. The findings revealed that there was a definite psychological as well as sociological sentiment associated with contingency buying behaviors (Strahle and Bonfield, 1989). People only engaged in contingency buying behaviors if they perceived some sort of a threat to their normal lives or those of their families. Research also suggests that people will engage in contingency buying behavior if they see a lot of other people doing the same (Haghani et al., 2019), and this was also something that was found as a part of this research study. In this context, the element of word of mouth, as well as the herd mentality, was further strengthened in terms of how people behave in panic situations, and how they base their buying behaviors based on what others around them are doing. The process of information exchange was also something that emerged as a significant contributor to the contingency buying behaviors (Wei et al., 2011). People tend to behave the way they receive and process information from others around them. This is relevant not only to the contingency buying

behaviour which could be realized as a negative element but was also relevant to the positive effect that the government messages had on people's sentiments. These trends show the importance of confidence in what people hear from others in crises (Bronner and Hoog, 2010).

Another important element that emerged from this study and that aligned with existing literature was the fact that people did not entirely feel satisfied with their contingency buying behaviors and their general behaviors of panic during a crisis (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017). However, while people experienced this dissonance in terms of how they viewed themselves as individuals and how they ultimately acted in a crisis, they did justify it in terms of the fact that they were responsible for their families, and therefore they did what they thought was necessary to secure their families. This sentiment was more dominant in people with younger children, whom they thought were protected from any unforeseen circumstance where their essential needs may not be met. This is an element of human psychology where an individual would resort to the fight or flight syndrome when facing a crisis. Furthermore resorting to such behaviors also gave people a certain degree of control over their lives and an element of attitude adjustment (Cheung et al., 2015). People who were initially not in the mindset of resorting to contingency buying behaviors got caught up in the social media and electronic word of mouth campaigns, and this instilled a certain degree of fear in their minds, causing them to resort to contingency mind behavior (Cogley, 2020). These people admitted that in normal circumstances, they would have probably never considered such a behavior. This shows that there are more underlying elements to the contingency buying behaviors exhibited during the COVID-19 lockdown than just superficial ones surrounding consumer behavior. This research study lends a strong psychological paradigm to the phenomenon of contingency buying, and how people would not only act differently from their perceptions of themselves in crises but would also justify it in various ways once they realize that they have acted in ways that do not align with their values.

### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings generated from the study identified significant theoretical implications for the field of marketing. It mainly outlines the emerging and overpowering role of social media and electronic word of mouth in creating a sentiment/panic situation amongst the public. The

results of the present study reveal that underestimates regarding COVID-19 pandemic, irrelevant public behaviour, social media, friends, and family suggestions identified as underlying factors causing the scarcity and contingency buying situations. Theoretically, this means that the existing models of marketing management and consumer behaviors need to be revisited and looked at from a perspective of the increasingly strong trend of reliance on electronic sources for consumer decision making. This is likely to affect the future of marketing as well as consumer behavior, given the fact that COVID-19 has created a situation where people were predominantly reliant on social media and electronic sources of information for the information as well as consumption requirements. There may be a space for these considerations to be appropriated within estimates driven for consumer behavior and marketing management. How the consumer of the future would determine his or her behavior in similar or even different circumstances as they get acclimatized to a new way of life, all need to be considered. Questions that may need to be asked could include the future of physical shopping locations, the future of physical marketing materials such as flyers, leaflets, and magazines, and how these could be used alongside the more rapid and immediate electronic platforms to create information and estimate buyer behavior. Furthermore, the present study provides a catalyst for future endeavours, which is required to verify or quantify the contingency buying behaviour in emergency situations.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

As far as the practical implications of this research are concerned, it shows how effective social media is in terms of dispersing information. It is then up to the marketers on how they can use this to engage their consumers more effectively. At present, with the general sentiment of the public being that they were driven towards the contingency buying behavior because of the social media campaigns launched, and their resultant dissatisfaction with their behavior, there may be a sentiment of mistrust and skepticism when it comes to social media marketing campaigns. Simultaneously, the government has been able to use the same social media to constructively engage the public and relieved their anxieties and fears around the pandemic and its resultant lockdown. There is a lesson for the marketing functions of companies here that they could learn in terms of positive consumer engagement. This

means that any models of consumer behavior, as well as marketing campaigns, need to be mindful of the positive and negative effects that they may have on the consumers, and any reflection that the consumer would undertake of these effects, that invariably affect their consumer behavior and buying decisions. There is an opportunity for all businesses to positively use social media to create an engagement forum for the consumers. This is even more important as time progresses, and uncertainty revolves around the future of the COVID-19 lockdown. People may start to rely more on electronic sites for their consumption and buying needs. Also, in the absence of, or limited presence of, the opportunity for physical contact, the emotional and psychological gap left could be adequately plugged through effective social media engagement.

### 5.3 Limitations of Research:

Like other research studies, this research has certain limitations in terms of their applicability as well as replicability. The key issue with this research was its narrow focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting lockdown. These are unprecedented times, and most people have never experienced such times in their lives. While this research study offers valuable insight into contingency buying behaviors and the underlying elements that contribute towards these behaviors, how closely this could be replicated in other circumstances is still questionable. Furthermore, the study relied on interviews with the intent that interviews provide a better methodological approach to identify the various factors that can contribute towards understanding phenomenon as unique as this pandemic. However, because of this pandemic, the interviews had to be conducted over the telephone, thereby losing some of the advantages that face-to-face interviews provide. Also, the qualitative nature of the study does help in the identification of outliers, although reducing the generalizability of the study.

Future studies in the area could address these limitations by adopting a quantitative or a mixed-method approach, where numerical data from social media usage can be plotted against the qualitative interview findings to develop better inferences on how people might behave in future similar scenarios. That would help to create research that would be more replicable and transferable to other situations that may not be identical, but somewhat similar, to the COVID-19 lockdown.

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