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**The Impact of COVID Pandemic on Marketing Strategies**

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Strategy

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** In today's competitive business environment, marketing strategies have become more critical than ever-especially considering the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study purpose is to investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on marketing practices across businesses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, with a focus on shifts in consumer behavior, strategic business adaptation and enduring changes in marketing planning.

**Methodology:** The methodology used in this research is a qualitative research approach, utilizing stratified interviews and surveys with marketing professionals across various sectors in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This method allowed for in-depth insights into the evolving nature of marketing strategy in the region.

**Findings:** The research reveals that the changes brought about by the pandemic are not temporary responses but have evolved into fundamental components of contemporary marketing strategies. Key finding indicates an accelerated embrace of digital transformation, a growing emphasis on localized targeting and agile marketing efforts.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The study underscores the need for businesses to realign their marketing strategies to remain competitive in the post-pandemic landscape. This includes embedding digital tools into core operations, adopting localized and culturally sensitive marketing approaches and proactively meeting the elevated expectations of today's consumers.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Marketing Strategy, Digital Transformation, Consumer Behavior, Post-Pandemic Business, Localized Marketing, Marketing Adaptation

**JLE Classification Codes:** M31, M10

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## INTRODUCTION

Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, its ripple effects have transformed nearly every aspect of human activity, particularly in the realms of business and consumer behavior. The marketing function, central to customer engagement and revenue, mass marketing, and broad-based reach had to quickly adapt to a reality defined by digital interaction, logistical, and broad-based reach had to quickly adapt to a reality defined by digital interaction, logistical challenges, and rapidly evolving consumer needs. This paper investigates the nature and permanence of these changes, with a focus on UAE and Saudi based businesses, offering into how marketing strategies have evolved and how businesses can sustain competitive advantage in a post-pandemic world.

### Problem Statement

Despite extensive global research on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on marketing, there have remained a notable gap in region- specific studies, particularly within the context of gulf cooperation council (GCC) countries. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are the two largest markets in the region. Most existing literature does not account for these factors, leading to a limited understanding of how marketing strategies in these regions have uniquely adapted. This study addresses this gap by examining the long-term marketing transformations within UAE and Saudi Arabia businesses. The outcomes of this research will benefit marketing professionals, business leaders, academics and policymakers seeking to design responsive and regionally relevant marketing strategies in the post-pandemic era.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of Marketing Strategy

Strategic marketing broadly defined. Involves the long-term planning and execution of activities aimed at meeting consumer needs while achieving business goals, Bonnet (1995) defines it as a process encompassing conception, pricing, promotion and distribution aimed at fulfilling organizational objectives. Camara (1995) adds that strategic marketing links directly to broader business goals, encompassing segmentation, positioning communication, and budget allocation. Munuera & Rodriguez (1998) emphasize sustainability and competitive advantage as central outcomes of strategic marketing. Despite nuanced definitions, scholars agrees that strategic marketing focuses on aligning business objectives with customer satisfaction through a coordinated deployment of resources.

### COVID-19's Economic Impact

COVID-19 disrupted the global economy through multiple channels. Carlosson-Szlezak et al. (2020) outlined three transmission mechanisms: first, direct effects from decreased consumption, second is indirect financial shocks, third is reduce household wealth leading to cautious spending. The disaggregated Keynesian models by Baqaee & Emmanuel (2020) and Brodeur et al. (2020) confirm these mechanisms, revealing how supply and demand shocks have differently impacted industries. Maulana (2020) noted that the high interconnectivity of modern economies amplified these effects. Marketing, as both an operational and strategic function, was heavily impacted as firms reassessed their communication, distribution, and targeting strategies.

### Key Elements of Marketing Strategy Affected

Several scholars have analyzed how specific marketing elements were affected during the pandemic. Karta et al. (2020) and Samiee (1987) identify five core components of a marketing

strategy: market selection, product planning, pricing, and communication. Of these the pandemic most significantly impacted:

- Market Section: Businesses shifted their focus from global or unreachable markets to local segments that were more accessible aims mobility restrictions (He & Harris, 2020)
- Distribution: Lockdowns disrupted traditional retail models, accelerating the shift toward e-commerce and direct-to-consumer channels (Pantano et., 2020)
- Communication: Conventional channels such as print and TV advertising saw decreased effectiveness, while digital and social media platforms gained prominence due to their reach and adaptability (Rosario & Raimundo, 2021; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019)

These changes indicate a deeper transformation, not just temporary adjustments.

### Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model guides this study illustrating how pandemic-induced mechanisms influence core marketing strategy elements:

Pandemic Mechanisms → Marketing Strategy Shifts

- Supply Chain Disruption —————→
- Consumer Behavior Shifts → [Marketing Strategy Elements]
- Economic Uncertainty —————→

[Market Section] → Local targeting, reduce global scope.

[Distribution] → Shift to digital/ e-commerce platforms

[Communication] → Digital media dominance, personalized content

[Pricing/ Product] → value-driven offers, agile product development

This model highlights the direct influence of environmental shocks on the evolution of marketing strategy elements and serves as a framework for analyzing responses from firms in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, multi-case approach to explore how marketing strategies evolve post-Covid-19 in the Gulf region, especially in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The qualitative methodology was chosen to elicit nuanced perspectives and real-world insights from marketing professionals operating in different business environments.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and online surveys, while secondary data were sourced from academic journals, government publications and industry reports. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 24 participants from three sectors that experienced significant disruption during the pandemic: food and beverages, retails, and e-commerce. Equal representation was ensured from both the UAE and Saudi Arabia to allow for comparative analysis.



Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone calls, each lasting between 30 – 45 minutes. Online surveys were distributed using Google Forms and used to validate and expand on interviews responses. All qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, using thematic analysis to extract frequent themes, patterns and differences across both national and sectoral contexts. Themes were coded deductively based on the research questions and inductively as new patterns emerged from the data.

To ensure reliability and analytical accuracy, triangulation was applied across data sources and methods. Findings were also subjected to cross-case comparison to draw contrasts between industries and national settings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings confirm the central hypothesis that pandemic-caused changes in marketing strategies have become institutionalized and are unlikely to reverse. However, the extent and nature of these shifts vary across sectors and between the UAE and KSA, revealing deeper structural trends.

### **Digital Transformation as a Strategic Imperative**

Across all sectors and both countries, participants reported a marked acceleration in digital marketing adoption. However, the pace and complexity varied:

- In UAE, firms-particularly in the e-commerce sectors- were more advanced in leaving tools like marketing automation, SEO optimization and predictive analytics.
- In KSA, while adoption was widespread, especially in retail, strategies tended to focus more on basic digital presence such as social media campaigns and mobile optimization.

Food & Beverages businesses in both countries highlighted the role of QR-code menus, delivery app partnerships and influencer promotions in customer engagement. However, UAE-based respondents emphasized data-driven decision-making, while KSA participants highlighted consumer trust and relationship-building via online platforms. This finding aligns with a recent report by McKinsey (2021) which highlights how digital maturity relates with organizational flexibility post-COVID.

### **Localization of Market Focus**

Due to global supply chain disruptions, companies redirected focus toward local and regional markets. This shift manifested differently in UAE and KSA as below:

- In UAE, firms pursued diverse multicultural targeting, aligning promotions with the needs of expatriate populations.
- In KSA, retail and F&B firms emphasized cultural relevance and local identity branding, appealing to national pride and regional traditions.

E-commerce firms in both nations reported enhances last-mile delivery logistics and region-specific pricing strategies to build stronger local competitiveness.

### **Evolution of Consumer Behavior and Expectations**

Participants consistently cited heightened consumer expectation for personalized, transparent and seamless digital experiences. However, the type of expectations diverged:

- UAE consumers were described as expecting technological convenience, including real-time chat support, mobile app functionality and flexible payment options.

- Saudi consumers prioritized brand authenticity, responsiveness, and social proof, such as user-generated content and peer reviews.

Across sectors, businesses in both countries acknowledged that agility in campaign design and execution is no longer the greatest maturity in agile marketing, using A/B testing and real-time analytics to iterate rapidly on messaging and product positioning.

### **Strategic Reconfiguration**

The strategic implications of these shifts are profound. Firms are not just tweaking their marketing strategies—they are redefining core strategic frameworks:

- Digital fluency is no longer a competitive advantage but a basic survival requirement.
- Localized marketing is now a central pillar, rather than an optional sub-strategy.
- Data literacy and consumer analytics capabilities are being surrounded into long-term planning processes.

Firms that failed to adapt struggled to retain customer attention, while those that embraced integrated digital and local strategies reported greater resilience and market share growth during the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a global stress test for marketing strategies, exposing structural weaknesses while accelerating innovation. This study confirms that businesses in the UAE and Saudi Arabia have not only responded to the crisis with tactical adjustments, but have also reconfigured their marketing models into more digital-first, locally attuned and consumer-centric systems. The hypothesis that these changes are not temporary but strategic is supported by the data across sectors and national contexts.

However, this study is not without limitations. The qualitative nature and limited sample size restrict generalizability. Additionally, the study focuses only on two Gulf countries and three sectors, which may not capture the full spectrum of marketing adaptations across the MENA region or globally. Future research should employ quantitative methods and longitudinal designs to test how enduring these changes truly are to explore sectoral or cultural variations in more detail. Including other GCC countries or different industries such as finance or education would provide richer comparative insights.

### **Implications of the Study**

This research offers both practical and academic implications:

- For practitioners, the findings underscore the need for businesses to integrate digital capabilities, consumer analytics and localized branding into their core marketing strategy as a foundational tool for strength.
- For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of supporting digital infrastructure and skills training, particularly for SMEs aiming to compete in post-pandemic markets.
- For scholars, the study contributes to the evolving literature on crisis driven marketing transformation and supports the use of Dynamic Capabilities Theory as a lens to examine strategic agility.

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