Research Article

User-Generated Content and Firm Generated Content: A Comparative Empirical Study of the Consumer Buying Process

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Abstract

This research determines the impact of content marketing (user-generated content (UGC) and firm-generated content (FGC)) on the consumer buying process for telecommunication products and services in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The study attempts to compare the impact of UGC and FGC on the consumer buying process. To achieve this aim, the study utilized a descriptive quantitative methodology. The population of interest for this research is all consumers of telecommunication products in the KRI. Primary data was collected from 402 online questionnaires from a convenience, snowball, sample from the main provinces of Kurdistan. The results indicate that all FGC marketing dimensions have a statistically significant positive direct effect on the consumer buying process, while only content valence and information richness of UGC dimensions have a statistically significant positive direct effect. FGC valence has the greatest impact on the consumer buying process, closely followed by FGC trustworthiness, and then FGC information richness. Between the two examined types of content, FGC has a greater impact than UGC on the consumer buying process for telecommunication products and services. Telecommunications marketers and management should thus prioritize the identified FGC dimensions in their marketing strategies for optimum resource allocation efficiency. Further discussion is provided.

Keywords: Content Marketing, Content Information Richness, Content Valence, Content Trustworthiness, Purchase Decision, Telecommunication, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

1. Introduction

Numerous external and internal elements play a role in firm profitability, and a significant internal contributor to company success is the capability to maintain and attract new customers via marketing techniques (Gupta et al., 2013). Firms must be aware of the relevance of employing digital marketing as a strategy and also comprehend the contributing aspects of a successful content marketing (CM) plan, and the potential ramifications of implementing this approach (Alabdallah, 2013b). Over 4.88 billion people regularly use the internet, comprising over 63% of the world's total population. The ever-increasing need for information and services provided through the Internet has resulted in a rapid surge in consumer need for marketing and informational resources (Al Qeisi and Alabdallah, 2013a).

Consumers have moved from print media to platforms of social media, including Instagram and Facebook, among others. For marketers, the Internet is considered attractive because of its great cost and practical effectiveness in reaching customers. As a medium, the Internet typically provides faster feedback about competition, trends, customer satisfaction, and marketing cost values (Belch and Belch, 2015; Al-Abdallah, 2019; Al-Abdallah et al., 2021a; Barghouth et al., 2021).

The world of social media has emerged during recent decades as a whole new online communication venue where individuals can express themselves, bookmark, share, and form social connections rapidly (Asur and Huberman, 2010; Alabdallah et al., 2014). Customers often regard social media as a reliable source of information, which organizations can utilize using conventional marketing and communications tools (Karakaya and Barnes, 2010). There are almost 5 billion regular users of social media worldwide (Dean, 2021), with a notable increase in the practice of user-generated content (UGC), as well as in the usage of firm-generated content (FGC), relating to the products and services of firms operating in diverse industries (Demba et al., 2019).

The telecommunications sector was traditionally dominated by large national providers, but liberalization in most markets worldwide from the late 20th century onwards led to the proliferation of many local, regional, and global private carriers (Bataineh et al., 2016; Beers, 2019). Former state corporations have lost their monopolies, resulting in a spate of innovation and a plethora of new and recent rivals. Conventional markets have been further perturbed by the rapid growth of mobile services and a decline in landline usage and expansion, and the internet increasingly supplants voice as the primary source of telecommunications revenue. In addition, the structure of the sector has shifted from a highly centralized to a decentralized system, with fewer regulatory challenges and barriers to the market entrance (Al-Abdallah and Chew, 2020). Smaller firms can maintain and sell equipment to enable connections, including infrastructure, routers, and switches, whereas larger public firms continue to function mainly as service providers (Beers, 2019; Al-Abdallah, 2021).

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the telecommunications industry is one of the fastest-growing businesses and one of the most strategic and vital sections of the Region's continuing growth (Investingroup, 2013). In 2020 the major operators in Sulaimania City (Asiacell) and Erbil (Korek) in the KRI had about USD 824 million and USD 710 million, compared to only USD 215 million for the Baghdad-based Zain Iraq (Lee, 2020). With increased competition among the three operators, more investment in marketing activities has been noticed in recent years, including digital marketing activities. This paper aims at investigating the impacts of CM, UGC and FGC, on the consumer buying process in the telecommunications sector of the KRI, and at identifying which type of CM (UGC or FGC) has the greatest impact on the buying process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Consumer Buying Process

The current research adopts the behavioural approach of the consumer buying framework to conceptualize the consumer buying process (CBP), which is commonly used to model and assess consumer purchasing decision-making (Mothersbaugh et al., 2016; Sava and Rakes, 2016). The decision-making in this approach is broken down into five stages: problem recognition or need identification, information search, alternatives evaluation, purchase, and after-purchase evaluation (Ghattas and Al-Abdallah, 2020). Not all customers undergo all these steps or undertake them in the same order, but as a general paradigm, this approach remains one of the most widely adopted in consumer behaviour research. The steps of CBP are summarized below.

2.1.1. Problem Recognition

There has to be a cause for the consumer to feel that they can be somewhere else than where they are and that their current location and how they see themselves in the scenario are not the same. Customers purchase something which they perceive to be distinct from what they have now (Al-Abdallah et al., 2021a).

2.1.2. Search for Information

After recognizing the presence of a problem/need, the process of consumer research starts. The companies are aware of this stage and actively promoting solutions, seeking to advertise their brands as industry leaders or present themselves as experts in a given subject through CM (Aboumoghli and Alabdallah, 2012).

2.1.3. Alternatives Evaluation

After identifying the main options available to them, consumers try to compare and assess each option (Alabdallah, 2015). Moreover, research is more important today than ever since shoppers want to be confident, they have done their research before making a purchase, and they want to examine other possibilities, to guarantee that their selection meets their needs.

2.1.4. Decision to Purchase

At this stage, the customer has looked at several purchasing possibilities and now understands the price and payment details. The next step is determining how to proceed with purchases, but as long as they have alternative options, they may ultimately elect not to acquire the considered goods or services (Jones, 2014).

2.1.5. Post-Purchase Evaluation

After purchasing, consumers can determine the extent to which they are happy with their choice. They explore their purchasing choice at the end of the purchasing process, and this stage is considered essential for future behaviour (e.g., repeat purchase), as if consumers are satisfied with their decision the probability of repeating the purchase will be higher, and vice versa. In addition, during this stage consumers normally share their experiences with others, which is an essential part of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing (Jones, 2014).

2.2. Social Media and Content Marketing

According to Hudson (2020), social media encompasses a wide range of apps and websites, and the functions of these technologies vary as well. Many social networking platforms, on the other hand, begin with users establishing profiles, which generally entail supplying their names and email addresses. A user may generate and share material after creating a profile (Al-Abdallah et al., 2018). A social media user may identify other users whose material they wish to remark on or follow, in addition to providing materials for their own profiles. According to the type of social media, one user may "follow" another, "subscribe" to their pages, or add them as a "friend". In general, social media have three common main dimensions: social, media, and discussion networks.

Social networks are designed to connect and exchange thoughts, ideas, and material with others, frequently with individuals who have similar interests and preferences (Al-Abdallah and Bataineh, 2018). Although in practice it has widespread usage, CM is a relatively recent concept in scientific study, particularly about how it is applied in social networks. Few works have considered CM in depth. According to the Institute of Content Marketing (2015), CM is defined as an approach to strategic marketing that concentrates on distributing and creating consistent, relevant, and valuable content for attracting and retaining a well-defined audience – and, finally, for driving profitable action of the customer.

The development of CM is a complex and dynamic process. The establishment of content-based marketing campaigns is more effective for most firms than constructing virtual promotional advertising (Chaser et al., 2010; Alabdallah, 2013a; Gagnon, 2014). This is because consumers are more attentive to content-based commercials, and the CM experience also encourages them to avoid conventional advertising (Chasser et al., 2010). Schuinanii et al. (2014) stress the significance of the quality of content, citing several required quality characteristics to promote customer attention and positive behaviours. These elements may be thought of as a different kind of CM. Intelligence, emotions, informativeness, dependability, value, originality, and relevance are criteria that must be present in high-quality digital material. CM can be generated by consumers or by firms. Accordingly, the following main hypothesis is posited:

H_a: There is a significant positive direct effect of CM on the CBP at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

2.2.1. User-Generated Content

UGC for marketing has grown significantly in recent years because of social and messaging platforms, whereby people have become voluntary content creators, especially on their mobile devices. Marketers and social agencies have taken notice of this significant trend in innovative ways (Borst, 2019). UGC is defined as material that is publicly accessible, produced with a degree of creativity, and supplied within a professional setting without the expectation of remuneration (Vickery et al., 2007). In a variety of ways, consumers are increasingly seen as co-creators and collaborators in firms' production initiatives. Such a feature of user engagement, in both formation of opinion and the production of content, is a welcome change for firms (Parameswaran et al., 2007). Recent studies have extensively examined the importance of opinion distribution among online consumers, including social identity disclosure of UGC (Forman et al., 2008), consumer-generated media (Dewan et al., 2008), and online/ electronic WOM (e-WOM) (Chevalier et al., 2006), highlighting diverse elements, uses, and operators, as well as articulating a variety of ambitions for individuals, communities, and businesses (Dahlberg, 2011).

UGC is developed "out of a vocation scope and its procedures" (OECD, 2007, p.8). According to Naab et al. (2017), a consistent interpretation of UGC is a vital prerequisite for comprehending shifts in the phenomenon's investigation throughout time and across various study domains, and methodological and theoretical traditions. This wide description enables the study of several distinct elements of UGC across numerous industries, such as hotels (Ghose et al., 2012), restaurants (Luca, 2011), book sales (Chevalier et al., 2006), and electronic products (Al-Rawabdeha et al., 2021). An

abundance of data currently supports a causal relationship between product demand/ CBP and user-generated ratings (Al-Abdallah, 2021).

The number of reviews and quality of reviews can causally determine the influence of UGC on demand and sales for items (Luca, 2011). Huang et al. (2006) found that peer evaluations had a larger effect on product selections than expert evaluations.

Accordingly, the following sub hypothesis can be drafted:

Ha.1 There is a significant positive direct effect of UGC on the CBP (by CBP dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

2.2.2. Firm Enerated Content

Marketers generate their material on formal brand sites and social media platforms (Stephen et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2016). Companies prepare information on product offerings and integrate them into comprehensive brand promotions as part of FGC (Alabdallah and Abou-Moghli, 2012). Postings related to sales, bargains, and recent product releases are common examples of FGC on Facebook. FGC mostly appears in conventional media in advertising, whereby a business engages directly with the target audience (Keller, 2016). Social media FGC has changed the nature or process of communication between the firm and consumer due to the interactive nature of associated technologies. Firms' marketing units can directly and responsively tailor or deliver marketing content and messages via social media messages within the same social media playing field as other users (i.e., target consumers).

The amount of cross-buying of the customer represents the breadth of connecting customers with a company, while customer spending is the most fundamental business performance statistic (e.g., the "basket size of customer"), comprising a key performance indicator (KPI) (Kumar et al., 2013; Aboumoghli and Al-Abdallah, 2018). As with traditional forms of advertising and product promotion, companies must know how consumers react to their FGC, and how categories of consumers may benefit from the company's social engagement activities, to achieve successful social media marketing (Bataine et al., 2015). Although brief public remarks about social media may stimulate the activity of transactions, comprehensive postings which elicit a greater degree of customer interaction may have major influences on buying behaviour of consumers. FGC positively and substantially influences consumer cross-buying and spending behaviour, controlling the primary impacts of e-mail marketing and TV advertising, and excluding the problem of consumer self-selection (Kumar et al., 2016).

Unlike traditional media, companies' interactions on social media might be a cornerstone in equity-building initiatives through brand management and fostering consumer connections (Gensler et al., 2013; Mustafa and Al-Abdallah, 2020, Al-Abdallah et al., 2022). Through the messages that businesses post on formal accounts of social media, social media interactivity elements can assist businesses to create one-to-one connections with their consumers (Lea, 2012). Accordingly, the following sub hypothesis is proposed:

Ha.2 There is a significant positive direct effect of FGC on CBP (by its dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

2.3. Content Effectiveness

In social media contexts, consumers look for knowledge in evaluative online content that can persuade them (Chevalier et al., 2006; Goh et al., 2011). Three key textual characteristics are used to assess the effectiveness of content:

1) *Content Trustworthiness:* which relates to the believability of the content information and the people behind it, including the credibility of the content creators and the people being quoted and cited (Petty and Wegener, 1998).
2) *Content Valence*: which captures the persuasive impact of content. It pertains to the inherent favourable or negative sentiment, emotion, attitude, or appraisal toward a brand or product that may be illustrated via the negative or positive use of terms (Goh et al., 2013).
3) *Content Information Richness:* which is essentially a general measurement of communication effectiveness. It indicates the quantity and quality of data (applying features of the brand, product, or experiences) incorporated in the content (Daft and Langel, 1986).

2.4. Present Research Contributions

Although marketers and consumers are extensively using social media, empirical studies of the economic impact of social media and the strategies used in this field by the telecommunication sector are still rare, especially in the KRI. The economic impact of different forms and characteristics of UGC have only tentatively been explored, including readability and subjectivity of review (Ghose et al., 2011; Al-Abdallah et al., 2021b); the volume of review (Liu, 2006; Duan et al., 2008; Chevalier et al., 2006); and on-time purchase of products and items, such as books (Chevalier et al., 2006; Clemons et al., 2006; Liu, 2006; Duan et al., 2008) and movies (Chevalier et al., 2006; Liu, 2006; Duan et al., 2008). Only a limited number of researchers looked at both FGC and UGC within the field of a brand community of social media, including Luca (2011), who investigated UGC and the repeat purchase. Existing research lacks exact

quantification of the recurrent engagement value from marketers and consumers in these communities, notably utilizing measures including elasticities of FGC and UGC in demanding items of recurrent purchase.

Second, past research has shed light on the tension that exists between customers' complicated tasks (UGC) and marketers' complicated obligations (FGC). Few studies have offered experimental data on whether UGC is more effective than FGC on consumers and CBP (Trusov, 2009; Albuquerque et al., 2012). Time, needs, motivations, and levels of scepticism around FGC may be seen as potential conflicts by consumers (Obermiller et al., 1998; Escalas, 2007). On the other hand, because of the possibility of two-sidedness (generally negative and positive aspects) in the UGC and e-WOM, it might not be that easy for consumers to rely on UGC (Godes et al., 2009). It is unclear from previous studies what is considered more effective marketing, UGC or FGC, on the purchasing decisions of consumers. This study compares the possible effects of both in the telecommunications sector in the KRI.

3. Research Methodology

This research is descriptive, aiming to describe and explain what already exists. Its goal is to explain the current situation related to existing situations or connections, prevalent behaviours, held ideas, viewpoints, or perceptions, and ongoing or evolving processes. This research used quantitative survey questionnaires to collect the data and test the hypotheses over a representative sample drafted from a large population, which is one of the best data collection methods in social sciences research (Gabriel, 2013).

3.1. Research Population and Sample

The population of interest for this research is the consumers of telecommunication sector companies (Korek, Asiacell, and Zain-Iraq) in the KRI. The total population of the KRI is around 5.2 million (KRG, 2021), with well over complete market penetration in terms of the number of telecommunication mobile line subscribers (9.75 million) (Jumaa, 2021). The regional firms Asiacell and Korek Telecom have the major shares of the KRI market, with about 4.5 million and 4.25 million subscribers (respectively), followed by the national provider Zain-Iraq, with about 1 million subscribers. The total saturation of the market indicates that most subscribers have multiple mobile lines, either for making calls or for internet bands. The very high number of telecommunication mobile line subscribers could be attributed to cost factors and customers shopping around for preferable tariffs.

When Asiacell was first launched in 1999 people from Sulaimania used to buy Asiacell Mobile lines; subsequently, when Korek was launched in 2000, people from Erbil and Dohuk used to buy Korek Mobile lines. Subsequently, to communicate with each other easier with lower costs, people from Sulaimania started buying additional Korek Mobile lines to easily communicate with their families and friends in Erbil and Dohuk, while the latter reciprocally started buying Asiacell mobile lines, to easily communicate with their friends and friends in Sulaimania. (Ahmed, 2018; Ahmed, 2021). Due to the prohibitively high costs of communicating with users on different networks in the KRI, most users found it cheaper to have subscriptions with both major local providers. Zain-Iraq is used on the same basis by people in Kurdistan who wish to communicate with people living in other areas in Iraq, outside the KRI (Al-Salami et al., 2015).

Data were collected from a non-probability, convenience, snowball sample of all mobile telecommunications subscribers in the KRI because no records about the total number of users along with their contact information could be obtained directly from the local telecommunications firms. The researchers uploaded the questionnaire on Google Forms and shared the link on all social media platforms, the sample started with family, friends, and acquaintances who also shared the link with their social groups and so on. The targeted respondents must have a social media account, follow official telecommunication pages and feeds, and have recently bought any telecommunication products. After 2 weeks, 402 valid and usable questionnaires from the different areas in the KRI were collected and were statistically analysed. A summary of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Variable	Category	Count	Per cent
Telecommunication operator	Korek Telecom	236	58.7
	Asiacell	108	26.9
	Zain Iraq	58	14.4
	Total	402	100
Gender	Males	226	56.2
	Females	176	43.8
	Total	402	100

Age	<18	32	8
	18- <24	68	16.9
	24- <30	110	27.4
	30- <40	94	23.4
	40- <50	66	16.4
	50+	32	8
	Total	402	100
Education level	High school or less	32	8
	2-year diploma	72	17.9
	Bachelor's degree	190	47.3
	Postgraduate	108	26.9
	Total	402	100
Marital status	Single	188	46.8
	Engaged	20	5
	Married	184	45.8
	Other	10	2.5
	Total	402	100
No. of household members	≤2	56	13.9
	3-5	180	44.8
	6-8	134	33.3
	9+	32	8
	Total	402	100
The income per month (USD)	≤500	108	26.9
	501-1500	130	32.3
	1501-2500	88	21.9
	2501-3500	48	11.9
	3501-4500	20	5
	4501+	8	2
	Total	402	100
Preferences	User-generated content	316	78.6
	Firm-generated content	86	21.4
	Total	402	100
Time spent daily on social media sites (hours)	<1	18	4.5
	1- <2	104	25.9
	2- <4	138	34.3
	4- <6	76	18.9
	6+	66	16.4
	Total	402	100

3.2. Research Instrument

The questionnaire consists of three main parts, which were developed based on the literature review and previous studies (Appendix I) and the cover letter with a consent form. The questionnaire has two control questions (on having an active social media account and purchasing telecommunication products); the first part, collecting data about the independent variables "UGC (X1) and FGC (X2)"; the second part, collecting data on the dependent variable "CBP(Y)"; and the third part, collecting demographic data. Before distributing the questionnaire, a full-scale pilot study was conducted, and the final questionnaire was amended based on the pilot study results. In addition, the validity of the data was established through Face Validity, Construct Validity, and Discriminant Validity. While the reliability of the data was checked through the Cronbach Alpha test.

4. Testing the Hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested through multiple linear regression analysis, using SPSS version 23. Before testing the hypotheses, two basic assumptions for linear regression must be checked: the normality of the data distribution, and the

level of multicollinearity among the independent variable dimensions, using skewness and kurtosis for normality of distribution and the variance inflation factor (VIF) for multicollinearity. Table 2 presents the VIF, skewness, and kurtosis values. The data is considered normally distributed if the skewness values and the kurtosis values lie between (-3) and (+3) (George and Mallery, 2013). The obtained values in Table 2 are within the above-mentioned range, which proves that the data is normally distributed. According to Maddala (1992), a VIF value that is more than 10 indicates a serious multicollinearity problem that prevents the application of regression analyses; a value between 5 - 10 reflects a moderate problem, and a value less than 5 reflects a low multicollinearity problem. All obtained values were less than 3, which means that there is no significant multicollinearity between the independent variables' dimensions (i.e., there is a very low correlation among the independent variables). Based on these results, regression analyses can be safely applied.

Table 2. Normality Indictor and VIF Test for Multicollinearity.

	Skewness	Kurtosis	VIF
Independent Variables			
Content Information Richness (UGC)	0.514	-0.087	1.084
Content Valence (UGC)	0.241	0.117	1.108
Content Trustworthiness (UGC)	-0.937	-0.204	1.204
Content Information Richness (FGC)	-0.497	-0.466	1.585
Content Valence (FGC)	-0.687	1.671	1.303
Content Trustworthiness (FGC)	-0.583	-0.018	1.676
Dependent Variable: Consumer Buying Process			
Problem Recognition (UGC)	-0.729	2.634	-
Problem Recognition (FGC)	-1.168	1.466	-
Information Search (UGC)	-0.587	2.960	-
Information Search (FGC)	-1.157	1.335	-
Evaluation of Alternatives (UGC)	0.191	0.859	-
Evaluation of Alternatives (FGC)	-0.506	-0.061	-
Purchase Decision (UGC)	0.161	0.884	-
Purchase Decision (FGC)	-0.528	-0.249	-
Post-Purchase Evaluation (UGC)	-0.324	2.165	-
Post-Purchase Evaluation (FGC)	-0.519	0.303	-

4.1. Testing the First Sub Hypothesis

Ha1.1 There is a significant positive direct effect of UGC on the CBP (by its dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

To test this first sub hypothesis directly, multiple linear regressions were performed. The results are presented in Table 3, showing that the value of adjusted R^2 equals (0.306), which represents the amount of variation observed in the CBP explained by the UGC. Higher values of determination coefficient (R^2) indicate a superior model, with a stronger explanation of the dependent variable. The obtained value for this model shows that UGC can explain 30.6% of the change in the CBP, which is a relatively moderate percentage. Table 3 also shows that the F-value (60.065) is significant, as the related Sig. (F) value (0.000) is less than (0.05); accordingly, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, stating that there is a statistically significant positive direct effect of UGC on the CBP (by its dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

As for the final model of UGC, only UGC *Information Richness* and UGC *Valence* have statistically significant positive direct effects on CBP, since Sig. (t) for these dimensions equal to (0.000); both are less than (0.05) and therefore are considered significant. UGC *Trustworthiness* has no statistically significant direct effect on CBP among the other dimensions, as the Sig. (t) value for this dimension equals (0.139), which is greater than (0.05), and is therefore considered insignificant.

The UGC *Valence* dimension has the greatest impact on CBP, as the Beta value equals (0.385), followed by UGC *Information Richness,* with a Beta value equal to (0.127).

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression for Testing the Effect of UGC on the Consumer Buying Process.

Model	B	t	Sig. (t)
UGC Information Richness	0.127	3.629	0.000
UGC Valence	0.385	11.298	0.000
UGC Trustworthiness	0.021	1.484	0.139
F = 60.065	Sig. (F) = 0.000		
Adjusted R^2=0.306			

4.2. Testing the Second Sub Hypothesis

Ha1.2 There is a significant positive direct effect of FGC on CBP (by its dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

To test the second sub hypothesis directly, multiple linear regressions were performed. Table 4 shows that the value of adjusted R^2 equals (0.529), which represents the amount of variation observed in the CBP and explained by the FGC. The obtained value for this model shows that FGC can explain 52.9% of the change in the CBP, which is a relatively high percentage. Table 4 also shows that the F-value (150.890) is significant, as the related Sig. (F) value (0.000) is less than (0.05); accordingly, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, stating that there is a statistically significant positive direct effect of FGC on CBP (by its dimensions) at $\alpha \leq 0.05$. As for the final model of FGC, all the dimensions have a statistically significant positive direct effect on CBP, as all Sig. (t) values for these dimensions are (0.000), less than (0.05), and they are therefore considered significant. The FGC *Valence* dimension has the greatest impact on CBP, as the Beta value equals (0.276), closely followed by FGC *Trustworthiness*, with a Beta value of (0.273), and then FGC *Information Richness*, with a Beta value of (0.174).

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression for Testing the Effect of FGC on the Consumer Buying Process.

Model	B	t	Sig. (t)
FGC Information Richness	0.174	4.957	0.000
FGC Valence	0.276	7.831	0.000
FGC Trustworthiness	0.273	9.046	0.000
F = 150.890	Sig. (F) = 0.000		
Adjusted R^2=0.529			

4.3. Testing the Main Hypothesis

H_{a1}: There is a significant positive direct effect of CM on the CBP at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

To test this main hypothesis directly, multiple linear regressions were performed. Table 5 shows the value of adjusted R^2 (0.379), which represents the amount of variation observed in CBP and explained by the CM. The obtained R^2 value for this model shows that CM can explain 37.9% of the change in CBP, which is a relatively moderate percentage. In addition, the (F) value for this model (123.31) is significant, since the Sig. (F) (0.000) is less than (0.05); accordingly, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, stating that there is a statistically significant positive direct effect of CM on the CBP at $\alpha \leq 0.05$. Table 5 also shows that both UGC and FGC have statistically significant positive direct effects on the CBP, since Sig. (t) for both variables equal to (0.000), less than (0.05), indicating significance. The FGC has the highest effect on CBP followed by UGC, with Beta values of (0.347) and (0.172), respectively.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression for Testing the Effect of Content Marketing on the Consumer Buying Process.

Model	β	t	Sig. (t)
User-Generated Content	0.172	4.855	0.000
Firm-Generated Content	0.347	11.858	0.000
F = 123.31	Sig. (F) = 0.000		
Adjusted R^2=0.379			

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, there is an important effect of CM (UGC and FGC) on the CBP in the KRI. CM clearly does affect the consumer buying decision process; as CM is convenient in time and form for consumers, it is likely to have a great impact on their decisions, consistent with the findings of previous studies (Al Qeisi and Alabdallah, 2014; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Prasath and Yoganathen, 2018; Xiao et al, 2019; Junejo, 2020). Both UGC and FGC have statistically significant positive direct effects on the CBP. The identification of both the mechanisms included in

social media communication indicates a substantial positive correlation between FGC and UGC (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008; Poulis et al., 2019.

The results also show that only the Valence and Information Richness dimensions of UGC have a statistically significant positive direct effect on the CBP. UGC Valence has the greatest impact on the CBP, followed by UGC Information Richness. This is consistent with previous research outcomes (Bickart et al., 2001; Russo and Chaxel, 2010; Balakrishnan et al., 2014; Severi et al., 2014; Al-Rawabdeha et al., 2021) but contradict the fact that those studies also found Content Trustworthiness to be effective as well. The results indicate that UGC Valence has the greatest effect, this could be because customers like to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Algesheimer et al., 2005), and feel more comfortable interacting with other consumers, trusting their overall impression about a certain product or brand. This could be the reason why UGC Trustworthiness has no significant effect on the CBP; moreover, aside from the opinion leaders and celebrities, it is more difficult to investigate the message source in UGC, making the evaluation of Trustworthiness difficult. On the other hand, CGC Information Richness is also important, as such content seems to explain a product according to real-life situations from the actual consumers' experiences and points of view.

As for the final model of FGC, all the dimensions have a statistically significant positive direct effect on the CBP, consistent with previous studies (Russo and Chaxel, 2010; Lea, 2012; Naylor et al., 2012; Balakrishnan et al., 2014; Kumar et al., 2016). Adopting FGC as a marketing communication method can help increase brand recognition and loyalty, and directly affects consumer buying behaviour (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Christodoulides et al., 2011; Hutter et al., 2013; Barreda et al., 2015; Schivinski and Dabrowski's, 2016; Al-Abdallah and Ahmed, 2018). The FGC Valence dimension has the greatest impact on the CBP, closely followed by FGC Trustworthiness, and then FGC Information Richness. This is perhaps because marketing content includes messaging which emphasizes items' positive aspects to improve product evaluation and build a positive emotion in customers. To entice customers to make a purchase, marketers inculcate positive words in FGC to create a good image and reputation of the product. Unlike the case of UGC, FGC Trustworthiness has a significant effect on the CBP, mainly because the message source here can be easily evaluated, coming from an official organization, and consumers are expecting firms to highlight the good aspects of their products and perhaps hide the bad ones. In consumers' minds, firms could manipulate the information provided to them to make it more persuasive (Goh et al., 2013), therefore trusting the source and the content is really important when considering the FGC.

Of the two types of content, FGC has the highest effect on the CBP, which actually contradicts the majority of previous studies in this field. Many researchers found that FGC has a less persuasive impact compared to UGC and that users' recommendations had a greater influence (Gilly et al., 1998; Escalas, 2007; Trusov et al., 2009; Arazy et al., 2010; Goh et al., 2013). Their conclusion was explained in terms of consumers evolving an overall inclination to doubt or be critical of marketing messaging (i.e., FGC) over time. To convince people to buy products, marketers archetypically resort to tactics and gimmicks (e.g., inflating product advantages while downplaying flaws), while consumers are merely passive observers in this process. The common knowledge found in this regard centres around the fact that consumers trust each other more than they trust firms, simply because of the lack of conflict of interest, a consumer will be most likely honest about his opinion as he stands to gain or lose nothing, while firms try to protect their interest in their CM. However, the results of this study show clearly that when it comes to telecommunication products and services, consumers are acutely more affected by FGC than UGC. This could be because of the nature of the products in this sector, whereby the sophisticated technical details are better presented by firms rather than other consumers. Moreover, the lack of a strong model of the UGC in the region may also drive consumers to place more value on FGC than on UGC.

In conclusion, CM impacts the consumer buying process of telecommunication products in KRI, both UGC and FGC have a positive significant impact on this buying process. All FGC dimensions (content Information Richness, Content Valence, Content Trustworthiness) have a positive significant effect on the consumer buying process. While only Content Information Richness and Content Valence have a positive significant effect on the consumer buying process. When comparing the effect of both types of CM, FGC has a higher impact on the buying process than UGC. Which is the main theoretical contribution of this study as discussed above.

5.1. Managerial Implications

Telecommunications firms need to pay attention to their content posted on social media because it directly affects consumers. Since FGC, in general, has a greater impact on the CBP in the telecommunications sector of the KRI, telecommunication operators must pay attention to all the dimensions of FGC (i.e., *Information Richness*, *Valence*, and *Trustworthiness*), especially *Valence*, especially by providing information about their products that prove positive reactions in their generated content. There is also a significant effect of UGC on the CBP in the KRI; while telecommunications firms cannot control UGC directly, they need to work on the negative comments on their posts on social media and try

to produce better content and encourage satisfied users to share and talk about their positive experiences by providing them with incentives. In addition, marketers should reconsider their attitude to UGC; through creative responses, marketers can encourage customers to reply and interact, resulting in a new cycle of communication and increased UGC. Marketers can also consider encouraging UGC based on FGC, whereby consumers might be encouraged to re-share previous firm postings, or they might be encouraged to make fresh comments on older firm posts (e.g., as part of competitions to win prizes).

5.2. Limitations

The researchers faced difficulties in gaining the necessary information and statistics from the telecommunication operators in the KRI, such as basic facts, figures, and numbers. Apparently, local companies consider such information to be confidential, and they declared that it could not be shared with the researchers. It was possible to partially overcome this issue by getting the necessary secondary data by interviewing officials at the Ministry of Transportation and Telecommunication and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). However, this required face to face interviews, as such information is not available in recent official publications or sites. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed online, as the study took place during COIVD-19. Moreover, due to time and cost constraints, the study was limited to a sample of 402 respondents.

5.3. Future Research Recommendations

Any research that can overcome this research limitation will help better understand the relationship between UGC and FGC and buying process. The researchers propose conducting a similar study that explores other digital marketing and social activities that might affect the process of customer purchase, such as the effect of social media influencers. In addition, conducting similar research on other sectors in the KRI, other than the telecommunication, could help compare the results and highlight any changes in customer perspectives. Finally, conducting the same research in other markets, including other Iraqi provinces and neighbouring countries, would allow a better understanding of the examined issue.

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Appendix I: The Questionnaire

Part One:

	User Generated Content						
Question Number	**Statement**	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**	**I don't know**
	Content information richness						
1.	user generated content on social media changes my understanding of products						
2.	I think users would provide full information about their product usage experiences						
3.	I think the user generated content information regarding the products is comprehensive						
	Content valence						
4.	I post my honest personal feedback to help other users in their purchasing decision						
5.	The user generated content reviews are fair						
6.	I think user generated content are unbiased in general						
	Content trustworthiness						
7.	I trust the content generated by other users about products						
8.	I think content generated by other users is reliable						
9.	I think content generated by other users is credible						

Part Two:

	Firm Generated Content						
Question Number	**Statement**	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**	**I don't know**
	Content information richness						
10.	Firm generated content on social media deepen my understanding of products						
11.	I think firms would provide full information about their products						
12.	I think the firm generated content information regarding their products is comprehensive						
	Content valence						
13.	I evaluate the quality of firm generated content about their products						
14.	I do not think that firms delete negative comments on their posts						
15.	I think firms generated content is fair						
	Content trustworthiness						
16.	I trust the content generated by firms about their products						
17.	I think content generated by firms is reliable						
18.	I think content generated by firms is credible						

Part Three:

	Consumer Buying Process						
Question Number	**Statement**	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**	**I don't know**
	Problem recognition (user generated content)						
19.	User generated posts make me recognize my need to purchase a mobile line						
20.	User shares increase my interest in buying a mobile line						
21.	Exposure to user generated posts make me re-evaluate my need for a mobile line						

	Problem recognition (firm generated content)						
22.	Firm generated posts make me recognize my need to purchase a mobile line						
23.	Firm generated posts increase my interest in buying a mobile line						
24.	Exposure to firm generated posts make me re-evaluate my need for a mobile line						
	Information search (user generated content)						
25.	I use user generated posts to search for information regarding mobile lines						
26.	I consider other users experience on social media platforms when looking for information about mobile lines						
27.	I use user generated posts to identify the different purchasing sources of mobile lines						
	Information search (firm generated content)						
28.	I use firm generated posts to search for information regarding mobile lines						
29.	I consider sponsored posts on social media when looking for information about mobile lines						
30.	I use firm generated posts to identify the different purchasing sources of mobile lines						
	Evaluation of alternatives (user generated content)						
31.	I consider user generated posts regarding the comparative information of mobile lines offers						
32.	I think user generated posts are good sources to compare specifications over different mobile lines offers						
33.	I use user generated posts to compare prices over different mobile lines offers						
	Evaluation of alternatives (firm generated content)						

34.	I consider firm generated posts regarding the comparative information of mobile lines offers						
35.	I think firm generated posts are good sources to compare over different mobile lines offers						
36.	I use firm generated posts to compare prices over different mobile lines offers						
	Purchase decision (user generated content)						
37.	Through user generated posts I can decide over which mobile line to buy						
38.	I depend on user generated posts to make a better purchasing decision of the mobile line						
39.	I use user generated posts to increase my certainty towards the mobile line I decide to purchase						
	Purchase decision (firm generated content)						
40.	Through firm generated posts I can decide over which mobile line to buy						
41.	I depend on firm generated posts to make a better purchasing decision of the mobile line						
42.	I use firm generated posts to increase my certainty towards the mobile line I decide to purchase						
	Post-purchase decision (user generated content)						
43.	User generated posts reinforced the decision I made about the mobile line I bought						
44.	My experience in purchasing a mobile line helps me evaluate the quality of user generated posts						
45.	I posted my own opinion on social media sites after purchasing the mobile line						
	Post-purchase decision (firm generated content)						

46.	The firm generated posts reinforced the decision I made about the mobile line I bought						
47.	My experience in purchasing mobile line helps me evaluate the quality of firm generated posts						
48.	I shared my review on the firm generated posts regarding the mobile line I bought						

Part Four:

Demographic

(Please answer the following questions, by marking (x) in the right space)

1. Please select your telecommunication operator:

☐ Korek Telecom ☐ Asiacell ☐ Zain Iraq ☐ Others _____

2. Age:

☐ Less Than 18 ☐ 18-Less Than 24 ☐ 24-Less Than 30 ☐ 30-Less Than 40 ☐ 40-Less than 50 ☐ 50 and Older

3. Gender:

☐ Male ☐ Female

4. Marital Status:

☐ Single ☐ Engaged ☐ Married ☐ Others

5. Education Level:

☐ High School or Less ☐ 2 Years Diploma ☐ Bachelor's Degree ☐ Higher Education

6. The Number of Family Members:

☐ Two or Less ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-8 ☐ 9 and More

7. Income Per Month:

☐ 500 USD or Below ☐ 501-1500 USD ☐ 1501-2500 USD ☐ 2501- 3500 SUD ☐ 3501-4500 USD ☐ 4501 USD and Above

8. Based on your preferences, which one of the followings is the most favorable:

- User generated content ☐
- Firm generated content ☐

9. The time I spent daily on social media sites:

☐ Less than an hour per day. ☐ 1 to less than 2 hours per day.

☐ From 2 to less than 4 hours per day. ☐ From 4 to less than 6 hours per day.

☐ 6 hours per day and more

Thank you very much for your help!

Appendix II: Pilot Study Results

Part One: Validity

- **Validity Analyses**

The research validity of the instrument is analyzed through the following processes and tests.

- **Face Validity**

The questionnaire is presented by the researcher to a panel of experts with a total of 6 experts from the following universities (UKH, University of Salahaddin, Middle East University, and the University of Jordan) who are specialized in the field of marketing, digital marketing or consumer behaviour. The panel members' information is presented in table (I) below. The panel's thoughts and ideas are taken into consideration, and necessary revisions are made according to their comments and notes.

Table I Panel of Experts Reviewed the Questionnaire

Name of the Reviewer	University Name	The rank of the Reviewer
Kym Edwin Fraser	UKH	Associate Professor
Rebean Ramadhan Al-Silefanee	UKH	Lecturer
Sebar Haji Jumaa	University of Salahaddin	Assistant Lecturer
Dr. Ayman Adbullah	University of Jordan	Full Professor
Dr.Abdullah Batineah	Middle East University	Associate Professor

- **Construct Validity**

Construct validity was analysed through the correlation coefficients among dimensions of the variables and items. The results are illustrated in table (II) below.

Table II. The correlation coefficients among the items and their total for each variable

	Dependent Variable				
1	Problem Recognition	Information Search	Evaluation of Alternatives	Purchase Decision	Post-Purchase Evaluation
2	0.595	0.861	0.635	0.745	0.775
3	0.827	0.619	0.624	0.614	0.617
4	0.618	0.629	0.616	0.731	0.599
5	0.747	0.663	0.545	0.775	0.579
6	0.762	0.605	0.537	0.564	0.668
	Independent Variables				
	User Generated Content		Firm Generated Content		
1	0.662		0.669		
2	0.548		0.700		
3	0.698		0.600		
4	0.780		0.761		
5	0.812		0.600		
6	0.695		0.566		
7	0.804		0.727		
8	0.776		0.721		
9	0.854		0.784		

Table (II) illustrates the correlation which indicates the construct validity between the questionnaire items.
The greatest amount of correlation that could be achieved is (1), the lowest amount of 0.40 is regarded as an acceptable correlation amount (Laher, 2010). Examining the prepared amounts in the table above, all the correlation values are > 0.40 in all variables and dimensions, recommending acceptable construct validity for every dimension illustrated through its items of related.

- **Discriminant Validity**

Discriminant validity indicates the amount to that elements are uncorrelated and distinct.

Before assessing the discriminant validity, KMO and Bartlett's tests were performed, the results are presented in table (III) below.

Table III. Bartlett and KMO`s Tests

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measures of Adequacy.		**0.856**
	Approx. Chi-Square	**172.213**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	**Degree of Freedom**	**38**
	Sig.	**0.000**

The results of Bartlett and KMO's tests (such as Chi-Square) are illustrated in Table (III). KMO`s results of the adequacy of measurement are determining to what extent the given responses with the statements are adequate; the accepted KMO amounts are equal or more than 0.50. KMO amounts among 0.5 to 0.7 are regarded as moderate, values among 0.7 to 0.8 are regarded as good, amounts among 0.8 to 0.9 are regarded as very good, and amounts higher than 0.9 are considered excellent. The obtained values are between 0.8-0.9 and therefore are considered very good values, indicating that the data is appropriate to detection of structure (Hair, et al., 2006). The Chi-Square value (172.213), according to Cerny and Kaiser (1977), is higher than the revealed amount at 38 degrees of freedom that equals 49.766 at 0.05, suggesting that the data is eligible for analysis. Furthermore, the correlation matrix fails Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (0.000 less than 0.05), indicating that it is not a matrix of identity.

Part Two: Reliability

- **Reliability Analysis**

The reliability of the study tool was determined using Cronbach's alpha test. In the questionnaire, the answers of 48 statements are shown in Table (IV), along with how closely connected a collection of items is.

Table (IV) Analysis of Reliability by Results of Cronbach Alpha

	No. of Items	**Cronbach's Alpha**
Content Marketing		
User-Generated Content	9	0.741
Firm-Generated Content	9	0.778
Independents Variables	**18**	**0.796**
Consumer Buying Behavior		
Recognition of Problem	6	0.812
Information Search	6	0.714
Evaluation of Alternatives	6	0.719
Decision of Purchase	6	0.787
Decision of Post-purchase	6	0.720
Dependent Variable	**30**	**0.856**
All Variables	**48**	**0.884**

Based on Nunnally (1978, P. 245) because the coefficient of reliability of 0.70 and higher is regarded as "acceptable" in the great majority of social science study scenarios, table (IV) above demonstrates that every Cronbach's alpha amount is acceptable. All obtained values are higher than 0.7 and in the questionnaire, the overall amount is (0.884) refereeing to a very great amount of reliability and indicating relatively great internal consistency.