

Pathways Linking Content Marketing to Purchase Intention: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

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Content marketing has become a central strategy in digital and social media environments, where brands increasingly use valuable, interactive, visual, and narrative content to shape consumer responses. Although many studies have examined the relationship between content marketing and purchase intention, the literature remains fragmented across platforms, industries, consumer groups, content formats, and theoretical mechanisms. This systematic literature review synthesises 33 journal articles published between 2020 and 2026 on content marketing and purchase intention. Guided by PRISMA reporting logic and thematic synthesis, the review identifies three major themes that explain the pathways through which content marketing is linked to purchase intention: content and platform communication design, brand-building and social credibility mechanisms, and experiential, identity, and cultural responses. The findings indicate that content marketing rarely operates as a single direct stimulus. Instead, its influence is shaped through a layered pathway in which valuable and platform-appropriate content attracts attention and interaction, brand-related and socially credible mechanisms convert exposure into trust and evaluation, and experiential, identity, or cultural responses deepen consumer connection. This review contributes by organising scattered evidence into an integrated pathway explanation of how content marketing shapes purchase intention. For practitioners, the findings suggest that effective content strategies should combine valuable content, platform-audience fit, brand-building, credible communication, and experiential engagement.

1. Introduction

Content marketing has become one of the most visible and strategically important practices in contemporary digital marketing. As consumers spend more time on social

media platforms, short-video applications, live-streaming channels, online communities, and platform-based commerce environments, brands increasingly use content not only to advertise products but also to educate consumers, build relationships, create emotional resonance, and stimulate purchase-related responses. In the broader marketing literature, content marketing is commonly understood as the strategic creation and distribution of valuable and relevant content to attract and retain consumers rather than relying only on direct promotional messages (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Pulizzi, 2012). In digital contexts, this content-based approach has also been linked to engagement, trust, perceived value, and relationship-building (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

Unlike traditional one-way advertising, content marketing is usually designed to provide value before asking for a purchase. It may appear as brand-generated videos, informative posts, influencer-supported content, storytelling campaigns, memes, live-stream demonstrations, social responsibility messages, short-form videos, or user-generated interactions that circulate around a brand. This makes content marketing both communicative and relational: it informs consumers about products, but it also creates meanings, social connections, emotions, and expectations. The rise of social media has further intensified this process because consumers can react to, share, evaluate, and reinterpret content through likes, comments, eWOM, and platform-specific engagement behaviours (Brodie et al., 2011). In this review, content marketing is understood broadly as brand-related digital content that provides informational, entertaining, social, emotional, or experiential value. Studies on social media marketing, short-video marketing, brand-generated content, user-generated content, influencer-supported content, storytelling, and eWOM were therefore included only when they directly explained purchase intention or closely related purchase responses.

Purchase intention is a key outcome in this field because it reflects consumers' willingness or likelihood to buy a product or service after being exposed to marketing stimuli. From the perspective of behavioural intention, intention is often treated as an important antecedent of actual behaviour, although it is not identical to purchase behaviour itself (Ajzen, 1991). In the reviewed literature, purchase intention is examined across multiple contexts, including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, live streaming, green packaging, fashion, cosmetics, tourism, luxury branding, game merchandise, sustainable fashion, digital collections, and metaverse-related environments. This diversity shows that content marketing is not limited to one industry or platform. However, it also creates conceptual fragmentation because different studies highlight different mechanisms.

Some studies emphasise content quality, informativeness, entertainment, vividness, interactivity, visual design, storytelling, or platform affordances. Others focus on brand-related and socially credible mechanisms such as brand awareness, brand image, brand trust, brand equity, brand authenticity, brand identification, brand engagement, source credibility, influencer trustworthiness, eWOM, virtual key opinion leaders, and user-generated content. A further group examines psychological, experiential, identity-related, and cultural responses, including social presence, telepresence, inspiration, self-concept, cultural orientation, and consumer community meanings. These patterns suggest that the field has moved beyond the question of whether content marketing affects purchase intention. The more important question is how this relationship is explained through broader pathways and contextual conditions.

The main problem is therefore not the absence of research on content marketing and purchase intention. Rather, the problem lies in the scattered way in which the relationship has been studied. Existing research often examines isolated predictors or single platforms, making it difficult to understand how content marketing shapes purchase intention as a broader process. Some findings suggest a direct relationship between content-related marketing activities and purchase intention, whereas other studies show that the relationship becomes meaningful only through mediators such as brand awareness, brand trust, brand engagement, eWOM, perceived value, attitude, brand loyalty, brand image, or source credibility. This indicates that content marketing may not operate as a single linear pathway. Instead, it may shape purchase intention through multiple interconnected cognitive, affective, behavioural, social, and contextual mechanisms.

Accordingly, this review asks: How does content marketing shape purchase intention across content and platform communication design, brand-building and social credibility mechanisms, and experiential, identity, or cultural responses? This systematic literature review addresses the question by synthesising the final corpus of studies related to content marketing and purchase intention. Rather than examining only whether content marketing influences purchase intention, this review focuses on the pathways through which such influence occurs. Specifically, it identifies how content-level and platform-level communication, brand and credibility mechanisms, and consumer experiential responses explain the link between content marketing and purchase intention. This review makes three contributions. First, it consolidates dispersed predictors and mechanisms into three analytical pathways. Second, it explains why content marketing may be linked to purchase intention directly in some contexts but indirectly through brand, source, platform, and experiential mechanisms in others. Third, it offers a practical basis for matching content design, brand-building, source selection, platform strategy, and experience creation. By reframing the review around pathways rather than effects, the article provides a clearer explanation of how content marketing operates in contemporary digital marketing environments.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a systematic literature review approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesise existing research on the relationship between content marketing and purchase intention. A systematic literature review is suitable when a field contains dispersed findings that need to be organised, compared, and interpreted in a transparent way (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). This approach was appropriate because the objective was not only to summarise previous findings, but also to clarify the pathways through which content marketing is linked to purchase intention across different platforms, industries, and consumer contexts. The review procedure was informed by PRISMA reporting logic to enhance transparency and reproducibility in identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Because the retained studies varied substantially in platform, industry, country, theoretical framework, construct measurement, and statistical method, a meta-analysis was not appropriate. Instead, thematic synthesis was used to identify recurring conceptual patterns while preserving the mechanisms reported in individual studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The overall flow of information throughout the review process is shown in Figure 1.

2.1. Identification

The identification stage began with keyword recognition and database searching. The search strategy was constructed using two core keywords: “content marketing” and “purchase intention”. These keywords were identified from the review topic, prior studies, and common terminology used in digital marketing and consumer behaviour research. These terms were selected because they directly represented the review topic and allowed the search to identify studies examining the relationship between content marketing and purchase intention. Two databases/platforms were used: Scopus and the Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform. Scopus was selected because it provides broad multidisciplinary coverage and allows filtering by subject area, document type, source type, language, and publication stage. The Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform was used as a supplementary platform because it indexes peer-reviewed research articles in business, management, marketing, electronic commerce, and consumer behaviour.

In Scopus, the search was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords and then refined using year, subject area, language, document type, source type, and publication stage filters. In the Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform, the same keyword query, content marketing AND purchase intention, was used and refined using Business and Management, Research Article, English language, and 2020–2026 filters. The same core keyword logic was adapted to each platform’s available search fields and filters. The latest database search retrieved 1,358 records in total, including 265 records from Scopus and 1,093 records from the Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform. These records were then screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria established to ensure that the retained studies were relevant, recent, and aligned with the review objective. Only English-language journal research articles published between 2020 and 2026 were included. Studies were retained when they examined content-related marketing and purchase-related responses, including purchase intention, buying behaviour, willingness to pay, or closely related outcomes. Non-English publications, book chapters, conference proceedings, review articles, non-research articles, and studies without a clear content-purchase pathway were excluded. The selection criteria are presented in Table 1.

2.2. Screening and Eligibility

The screening stage focused on assessing whether the identified records met the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the review. After the initial database search, titles, abstracts, and available summaries were reviewed to determine their relevance to content marketing and purchase intention. Records were retained when they examined content-related marketing activities, such as digital content marketing, social media marketing, short-video marketing, brand-generated content, user-generated content, storytelling, eWOM, or influencer-supported content, together with purchase intention or closely related purchase responses. Records were excluded when they focused mainly on unrelated technology adoption, general consumer behaviour, price promotion, book chapters, conference proceedings, non-English publications, or topics without a clear content-marketing and purchase-response pathway. The formal screening exclusions are summarised in Figure 1.

After database screening, 67 records were retained for closer review, including 30 records from Scopus and 37 records from the Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform. No duplicate records were identified among these retained records ($n = 0$). The retained

records were then checked against the inclusion and exclusion criteria shown in Table 1. Records that did not meet the criteria, such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, publications before 2020, and non-English publications, were excluded. Following eligibility assessment, a further 34 records were excluded because they were outside the review scope or because their titles and abstracts were not sufficiently related to the objective of the study. This process resulted in 33 full-text articles being assessed as eligible and included for thematic synthesis. The overall flow of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion is presented in Figure 1, while the final included studies are listed in Table 2.

Figure 1: Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Source: Moher et al., 2009)

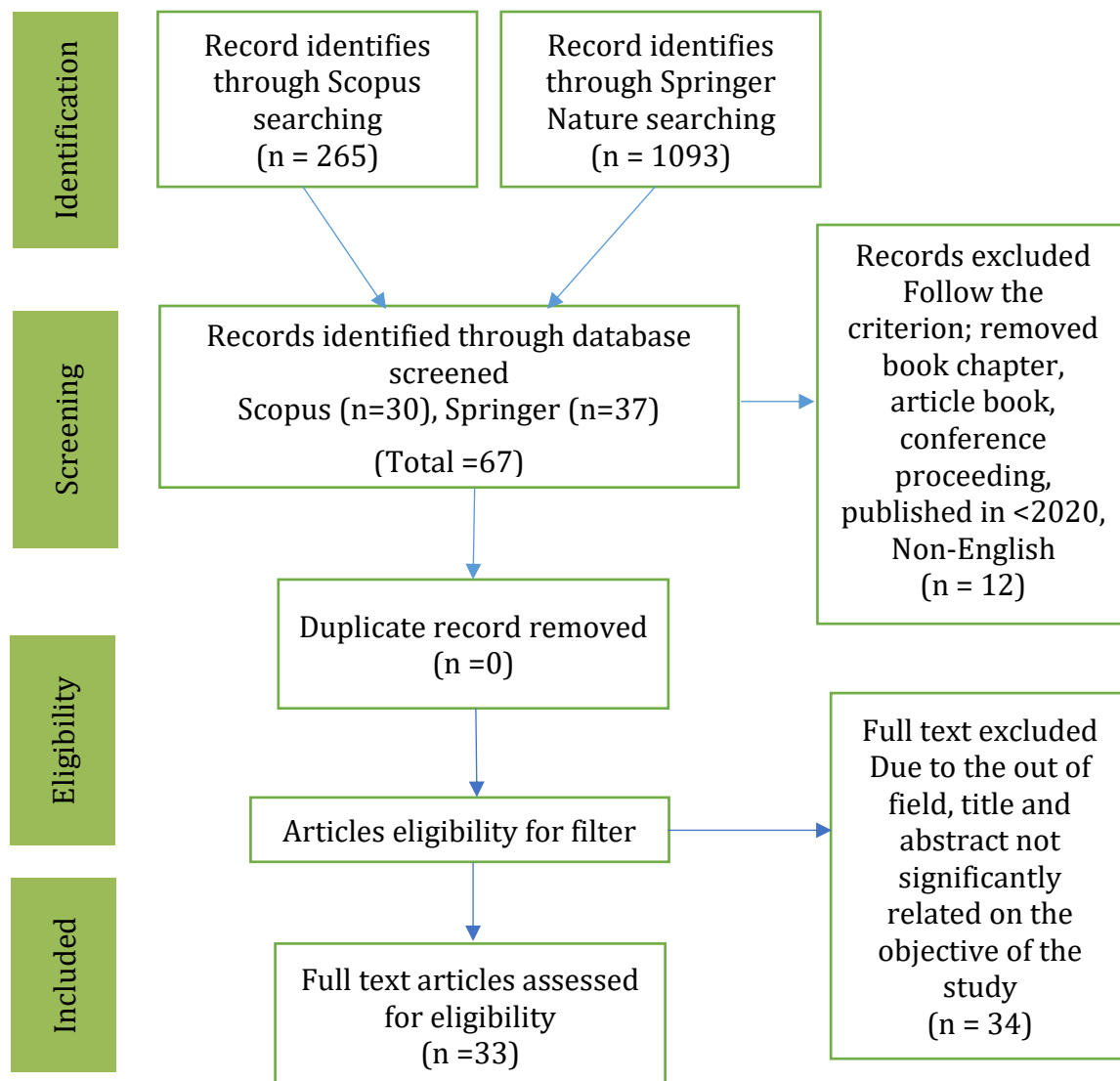


Table 1: The selection criteria used in the review

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020 - 2026	< 2020
Literature type	Journal research articles	Book chapters, conference proceedings, review articles, and non-research articles
Topic relevance	Studies examining content-related marketing and purchase-related responses	Studies unrelated to content marketing or without a clear content-purchase pathway
Outcome	Purchase intention, buying behaviour, willingness to pay, or closely related purchase responses	No purchase-related outcome
Research context	Studies relevant to digital, social media, brand, platform, or consumer-response contexts	Studies outside the scope of marketing, branding, communication, or consumer behaviour

Table 2: Research article findings based on the proposed searching criterion

No	Author	Journal	Title	Area of research
1	Osorio-Andrade, Rospigliosi, & Jiménez Zarco (2025)	European Research on Management and Business Economics	eWOM and content marketing strategies: maximizing brand engagement among social media users in Spain	Communication
2	Vitayapiruks, Nutittamont, & Phayaphrom (2026)	International Review of Management and Marketing	The impact of digital content marketing on brand equity and purchase intention: A study of green food packaging in Thailand	Branding
3	Grabowska, Jaciow, & Strzelecki (2025)	Journal of Economics and Management	The impact of TikTok on consumers' purchase intentions	Consumer Behaviour
4	Prasetio, Liew, Gan, Sari, Trianasari, & Wahyuningtyas (2026)	Qubahan Academic Journal	More than a good deal: The interplay of perceived value, multidimensional engagement, and intention to buy in live platform	Electronic Commerce
5	Admara & Indrawati (2025)	Quality - Access to Success	Impact of social media marketing on purchase intention via brand awareness, trust, and engagement: Evidence from The Originote on TikTok	Branding

No	Author	Journal	Title	Area of research
6	Hindieh, Samarah, & Momani (2025)	Quality - Access to Success	Consumer purchase intention driven by social media engagement and content quality: The moderating role of age and income	Marketing
7	Chang & Liu (2025)	Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	Decoding the gamer's code: A dive into game merchandise consumption through the lens of consumer culture theory	Consumer Behaviour
8	Lee & Youn (2021)	Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	Luxury marketing in social media: The role of social distance in a craftsmanship video	Advertising
9	Jiang & Chen (2025)	Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	Can short videos work? The effects of use and gratification and social presence on purchase intention: Examining the mediating role of digital dependency	Consumer Behaviour
10	Ramdani & Belgiawan (2023)	Contemporary Management Research	Designing Instagram Advertisement Content: What Design Elements Influence Customer Attitude and Purchase Behavior?	Advertising
11	Hasani, Zeqiri, Todorovik, Jaziri, & Toska (2023)	Business Systems Research	Digital content marketing and eWOM: A mediational serial approach	Marketing
12	Ali, Farooq, Yen, & Saqib (2025)	Journal of Logistics, Informatics and Service Science	Digital meme marketing as an informational service: Effects on self-expansion, brand attitude, and purchase intention in online shopping platforms	Advertising
13	Alrwashdeh (2025)	Innovative Marketing	How do social media marketing activities enhance online purchase intention among Jordanian consumers? The role of brand trust and brand engagement	Branding
14	Ngo, Quach, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen (2023)	Innovative Marketing	Short video marketing factors influencing the purchase intention of Generation Z in Vietnam	Marketing

No	Author	Journal	Title	Area of research
15	Rizomyliotis, Lin, Konstantoulaki, & Phan (2024)	Journal of Asia Business Studies	TikTok short video marketing and Gen Z's purchase intention: Evidence from the cosmetics industry in Singapore	Communication
16	Schivinski, Pontes, Czarnecka, Mao, De Vita, & Stavropoulos (2022)	Journal of Product & Brand Management	Effects of social media brand-related content on fashion products buying behaviour: A moderated mediation model	Branding
17	Izogo & Mpinganjira (2020)	Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	Behavioral consequences of customer inspiration: The role of social media inspirational content and cultural orientation	Consumer Behaviour
18	Rawangngam, Pongsakornrungsilp, Pongsakornrungsilp, Pongsakornrungsilp, & Moghadas (2025)	Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	TikTok marketing strategies and consumer response: A structural equation modeling study on purchase intention in Thailand	Advertising
19	Zeqiri, Koku, Dobre, Milovan, Hasani, & Paientko (2025)	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	The impact of social media marketing on brand awareness, brand engagement and purchase intention in emerging economies	Branding
20	Al-Qudah (2020)	Management Science Letters	The effect of brands' social network content quality and interactivity on purchase intention: Evidence from Jordan	Marketing
21	Kwangsawad, Jattamart, Saikatikorn, & Nusawat (2024)	Polish Journal of Management Studies	Exploring how marketing content and brand equity impact the continuous purchase using live streaming	Electronic Commerce
22	Nurlatifah, Ariyanti, & Iskanto (2025)	Quality - Access to Success	The effect of social media marketing on purchase intention: The mediating role of brand image and brand trust	Branding
23	Shaheen, Khataan, Awad, Shams Eldin, & Elnour (2025)	Innovative Marketing	The role of influencer content value and credibility in purchase intention	Communication

No	Author	Journal	Title	Area of research
24	Li, Zhu, Zhu, & Yu (2026)	Electronic Commerce Research	Consumer sticky purchase intention for personalized digital collections of cultural heritage in metaverse: From the prospective of self-concept	Consumer Behaviour
25	Hung, Chang, & Liang (2025)	Electronic Commerce Research	Beyond the avatar: How virtual key opinion leaders shape purchase intentions through cognitive and emotional engagement	Communication
26	He, You, & Mao (2025)	Marketing Letters	Find peace: Mindfulness messages and their impact on social media engagement and product purchase intention	Advertising
27	Liu, Lei, & Law (2022)	Information Technology & Tourism	Enhancing social media branded content effectiveness: Strategies via telepresence and social presence	Communication
28	Huang & Guo (2021)	Journal of Brand Management	The effect of a green brand story on perceived brand authenticity and brand trust: The role of narrative rhetoric	Branding
29	Fatma & Khan (2024)	Journal of Brand Management	Brand authenticity and consumers' willingness to pay a premium price (WPP): The mediating role of brand identification	Branding
30	Ugwuanyi, Sarker, & Jaffari (2026)	Journal of Marketing Analytics	From clicks to carts: The impact of consumer brand engagement on fashion brand expected value, attitude, and purchase intention	Branding
31	Lombardo (2024)	Italian Journal of Marketing	The role of YouTube channel characteristics in shaping followers' purchase intentions and behavioural engagement: The serial mediation of satisfaction and channel loyalty	Communication

No	Author	Journal	Title	Area of research
32	Chang (2025)	Future Business Journal	The mediating role of brand image in the relationship between storytelling marketing and purchase intention: Case study of PX Mart	Branding
33	El-Shihy & Awaad (2025)	Future Business Journal	Leveraging social media for sustainable fashion: How brand and user-generated content influence Gen Z's purchase intentions	Communication

2.3. Data Abstraction and Analysis

The thematic synthesis was conducted in three main phases: extracting, analysing, and synthesising. A total of 33 included studies were carefully examined for information relevant to the review objective. In the extracting phase, relevant information was recorded from each study, including author, year, journal, research context, platform, key constructs, theoretical lens, method, outcome variable, main findings, and relevance to the review objective. This phase ensured that the review captured not only whether content marketing was associated with purchase intention, but also how each study explained that association.

The analysis phase focused on comparing the extracted information across the 33 studies. Recurring concepts were identified, including content quality, informativeness, entertainment, interactivity, vividness, storytelling, platform affordances, brand awareness, brand image, brand trust, brand engagement, brand equity, perceived value, eWOM, influencer credibility, social influence, user-generated content, virtual key opinion leaders, immersion, telepresence, social presence, inspiration, self-concept, demographic conditions, and cultural responses. These concepts were examined in relation to the review question and the purchase-related outcomes reported in the included studies.

For synthesis, similar concepts were grouped into broader thematic pathways through repeated comparison. Each included article was assigned to one primary theme according to its main analytical contribution. This approach was used to avoid unclear overlapping counts and to ensure that all 33 articles were explicitly represented in the results and discussion. Three final themes were identified: Content and Platform Communication Design; Brand-Building and Social Credibility Mechanisms; and Experiential, Identity, and Cultural Responses.

A validation stage was conducted after the initial synthesis. The first author completed the initial data extraction, coding, and theme allocation, while the corresponding author reviewed the extracted information, coding decisions, and theme allocation. Any unclear classifications or inconsistencies in theme allocation were discussed and refined until agreement was reached. This review process helped improve the consistency, coherence, and relevance of the final themes.

3. Results and Discussion

The 33 included articles listed in Table 2 were categorised into three main themes: Content and Platform Communication Design (12 articles), Brand-Building and Social Credibility Mechanisms (14 articles), and Experiential, Identity, and Cultural Responses (7 articles). Across the 33 studies, content marketing appears not only as information delivery but also as a mechanism for engagement, trust formation, emotional connection, identity expression, platform interaction, and social influence. These themes show that the relationship between content marketing and purchase intention is multidimensional and explain the pathways through which content marketing is linked to purchase intention across content-platform design, brand and credibility mechanisms, and consumer experiential responses.

3.1. Content and Platform Communication Design

The first theme integrates content-level value and platform-level communication design. It contains 12 studies and shows that content marketing first becomes meaningful when consumers notice, process, and interact with content in specific digital environments. Content quality, informativeness, entertainment, visual appeal, creative message design, short-video format, algorithmic visibility, and channel characteristics are therefore treated as part of the same communication-design pathway. This theme combines the question of what the content communicates with how platform structures shape consumer exposure and interaction.

Al-Qudah (2020) provides an early foundation for this theme by showing that brands' social network content quality and interactivity are related to purchase intention in the Jordanian context. Hindieh et al. (2025) extend this argument by linking social media engagement and content quality with purchase intention, while also showing that demographic factors such as age and income can moderate consumer responses. These studies show that content quality is not only a matter of aesthetic presentation but also a condition that shapes whether consumers consider brand messages useful and trustworthy.

Short-video studies further demonstrate how content format becomes part of communication design. Ngo et al. (2023) examine short-video marketing factors influencing Generation Z's purchase intention in Vietnam and show that short videos can be persuasive when they provide relevant, enjoyable, and engaging content. Grabowska et al. (2025) investigate TikTok and show that purchase intention can be shaped by repeated exposure to short, entertaining, and algorithmically visible content. Rawangngam et al. (2025) similarly examine TikTok marketing strategies in Thailand and show that platform-specific marketing strategies can shape consumer responses and purchase intention. Together, these studies indicate that short-form content does not operate only as message delivery; it also depends on platform logic, visibility, rhythm, and audience expectations.

Jiang and Chen (2025) deepen this platform perspective by examining short videos, use and gratification, social presence, digital dependency, and purchase intention. The study shows that short-video content becomes persuasive when platform use satisfies consumer needs and creates a sense of social presence. Lombardo (2024) adds a YouTube perspective by showing that channel characteristics shape followers' purchase intentions and behavioural engagement through satisfaction and channel loyalty.

Compared with TikTok, YouTube appears to rely more strongly on sustained channel relationships and repeated follower engagement. These studies demonstrate that platform affordances shape how content is encountered, interpreted, and converted into purchase-related responses.

Visual and creative message design also form an important part of this theme. Ramdani and Belgiawan (2023) show that Instagram advertisement design elements, such as layout, visual presentation, and message structure, can shape customer attitude and purchase behaviour. Lee and Youn (2021) examine luxury marketing through a craftsmanship video and show that the way content presents distance, craft, and product meaning can affect consumer evaluations in social media luxury contexts. These studies demonstrate that content marketing is not only about what is communicated, but also how the message is designed and experienced.

Creative and message-framing studies provide another dimension of this pathway. Ali et al. (2025) investigate digital meme marketing as an informational service and show that humorous and creative meme-based content can influence self-expansion, brand attitude, and purchase intention in online shopping platforms. He et al. (2025) examine mindfulness messages and show that message framing can affect social media engagement and product purchase intention. Osorio-Andrade et al. (2025) focus on eWOM and content marketing strategies among social media users in Spain, showing that the characteristics of brand content can shape online engagement and brand-related interaction. Although eWOM is also socially oriented, this study is placed in Theme 1 because its main contribution in this review is to show how content marketing strategies are designed to stimulate engagement.

Overall, the 12 studies in this theme show that content and platform communication design serve as the entry pathway from content marketing to purchase intention. Informative, useful, entertaining, interactive, visually appealing, creatively framed, and platform-appropriate content increases the likelihood that consumers will attend to, engage with, and positively evaluate brand communication. However, communication design alone does not fully explain purchase intention. Several studies show that content becomes more persuasive when it strengthens brand-related meanings and socially credible mechanisms.

3.2. Brand-Building and Social Credibility Mechanisms

The second theme concerns brand-building and social credibility mechanisms. It contains 14 studies and represents the largest theme in the review. These studies indicate that content marketing often shapes purchase intention indirectly by strengthening brand-related constructs and socially credible signals. Rather than functioning as a simple promotional trigger, content marketing frequently works through awareness, image, trust, engagement, equity, authenticity, identification, eWOM, influencer credibility, source trustworthiness, and user-generated or brand-generated social proof.

Several studies focus on brand awareness, brand trust, brand image, and engagement as mediating mechanisms. Admara and Indrawati (2025) show that social media marketing influences purchase intention through brand awareness, trust, and engagement in a TikTok context. Alrwashdeh (2025) similarly finds that social media marketing activities enhance online purchase intention through brand trust and brand engagement among

Jordanian consumers. Nurlatifah et al. (2025) support this mediating logic by showing that brand image and brand trust explain the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention. Zeqiri et al. (2025) add evidence from emerging economies by showing that social media marketing contributes to brand awareness, brand engagement, and purchase intention. Together, these studies suggest that content-related marketing activities become persuasive when they build familiarity, trust, and relational engagement with the brand.

Other studies highlight brand equity, expected value, and buying behaviour. Vitayapiruks et al. (2026) investigate digital content marketing, brand equity, and purchase intention in the context of green food packaging in Thailand. The study is especially useful because it shows that digital content marketing can strengthen dimensions of brand equity, while the direct relationship with purchase intention may not always be significant. This finding supports the pathway argument that content marketing may operate through intermediate brand mechanisms. Schivinski et al. (2022) examine social media brand-related content and fashion products buying behaviour through a moderated mediation model, showing that brand-related content interacts with consumer and brand variables in shaping buying behaviour. Ugwuanyi et al. (2026) further extend the brand-value pathway by showing how consumer brand engagement affects fashion brand expected value, attitude, and purchase intention.

Brand authenticity, identification, and storytelling are also important in this pathway. Huang and Guo (2021) demonstrate that a green brand story can influence perceived brand authenticity and brand trust, indicating that narrative rhetoric can transform content into trustworthy brand meaning. Fatma and Khan (2024) show that brand authenticity can increase willingness to pay a premium price through brand identification. Although willingness to pay is not identical to purchase intention, it is a closely related purchase response and helps explain how authentic brand meanings can increase consumers' willingness to commit financially. Chang (2025) adds to this mechanism by showing that brand image mediates the relationship between storytelling marketing and purchase intention in the PX Mart case. These studies show that content marketing can build purchase intention by creating brand meanings that consumers perceive as authentic, identifiable, and trustworthy.

Social credibility mechanisms extend the brand-building pathway beyond firm-controlled communication. Hasani et al. (2023) provide an important bridge between digital content marketing and eWOM. The study uses a mediational serial approach and shows that digital content marketing is connected to purchase-related outcomes through mechanisms such as eWOM, engagement, brand awareness, and customer retention. Its contribution is central to this theme because it demonstrates that content can stimulate social transmission and credibility before supporting purchase-related responses.

Influencer and source-related studies further support this pathway. Rizomyliotis et al. (2024) examine TikTok short-video marketing and Generation Z purchase intention in the cosmetics industry in Singapore, highlighting the role of TikTok content and social influence in shaping purchase intention among younger consumers. Shaheen et al. (2025) directly investigate influencer content value and credibility, showing that influencer content becomes persuasive when it is supported by credibility-related perceptions. These studies suggest that consumers do not evaluate only the content

itself; they also evaluate whether the person or source delivering the content is trustworthy, relevant, and credible.

Emerging digital and user-generated contexts also demonstrate the importance of social credibility. El-Shihy and Awaad (2025) examine sustainable fashion and show how brand-generated and user-generated content influence Generation Z's purchase intentions. Its inclusion in this theme is important because user-generated content can complement brand-generated content by adding social proof and peer-based credibility. These social signals reduce uncertainty and strengthen the believability of content. Although Hung et al. (2025) also address source issues through virtual key opinion leaders, it is assigned to Theme 3 because its main analytical contribution in this review concerns cognitive and emotional engagement with virtual endorsers.

Taken together, the 14 studies in this theme show that the content marketing-purchase intention relationship is strongly shaped by brand-building and social credibility mechanisms. Content first generates awareness, meaning, authenticity, trust, engagement, credibility, or social validation; these constructs then support consumers' willingness to purchase, pay, or continue buying. This theme therefore challenges a simple effects-based interpretation and supports the title's focus on pathways linking content marketing to purchase intention.

3.3. Experiential, Identity, and Cultural Responses

The third theme highlights experiential, identity-related, and cultural responses. It contains seven studies and shows that consumers do not always form purchase intention through rational product information or brand trust alone. They may also respond to content because it creates immersion, inspiration, telepresence, social presence, cognitive engagement, emotional attachment, self-concept alignment, community meaning, or cultural resonance. This theme therefore extends the review beyond functional content design and brand credibility by showing how content marketing becomes personally and socially meaningful to consumers.

Live commerce studies illustrate how digital content can become an experiential purchase environment. Prasetyo et al. (2026) examine perceived value, multidimensional engagement, and intention to buy in live platforms. The study shows that live commerce content can shape intention to buy when consumers perceive value and become engaged through multiple dimensions of interaction. Kwangsawad et al. (2024) explore how marketing content and brand equity influence continuous purchase through live streaming. Although brand equity is relevant, this study is placed in Theme 3 because its live-streaming context highlights repeated interaction, continuous purchase, and consumer experience. Together, these studies show that live platforms can transform content marketing into an interactive experience that supports purchase-related responses.

Presence-based and virtual-source studies further explain the experiential pathway. Liu et al. (2022) examine strategies for enhancing social media branded content effectiveness through telepresence and social presence. The study suggests that branded content becomes more effective when consumers feel present in the mediated environment and perceive social connection. Hung et al. (2025) examine virtual key opinion leaders and show how digitally mediated endorsers can shape purchase intention through cognitive and emotional engagement. These studies suggest that

consumers may respond to content when it produces a sense of being there, being socially connected, or being emotionally engaged with a mediated source.

Inspirational and cultural mechanisms also appear in this theme. Izogo and Mpinganjira (2020) examine the behavioural consequences of customer inspiration and the role of social media inspirational content and cultural orientation. The study shows that inspirational content can move consumers from being inspired by content to being inspired to act. This mechanism is relevant to purchase intention because it explains how content can create motivation rather than merely communicate product information. The inclusion of cultural orientation also shows that experiential responses are shaped by broader cultural conditions.

Identity and consumer culture are highlighted by Chang and Liu (2025), who examine game merchandise consumption through consumer culture theory. This study demonstrates that purchase-related responses can be connected to identity, community belonging, and symbolic meanings rather than product utility alone. Li et al. (2026) provide a related but more technologically advanced perspective by examining consumer sticky purchase intention for personalised digital collections of cultural heritage in the metaverse from a self-concept perspective. Their study shows that self-concept and cultural identity can shape purchase intention in digital collection and metaverse contexts.

Taken together, the seven studies in this theme show that content marketing can shape purchase intention by creating experiences and meanings that consumers connect to their identities, emotions, cultural values, and sense of self. Consumers may buy not only because content provides useful information or builds brand trust, but also because it helps them imagine a lifestyle, feel inspired, connect with a community, express identity, or experience cultural and emotional meaning. This pathway is especially important for contexts involving live commerce, digital collections, gaming, cultural products, sustainable consumption, and immersive digital environments.

3.4. Discussion

Based on the three themes outlined above, the findings suggest that content marketing is linked to purchase intention through an integrated process rather than a single direct effect. Content and platform communication design first attracts attention, structures exposure, and encourages consumers to process brand messages. Brand-building and social credibility mechanisms then convert this exposure into awareness, trust, image, engagement, authenticity, eWOM, source credibility, social influence, and social validation. Experiential, identity, and cultural responses further deepen consumers' involvement by connecting content with enjoyment, inspiration, immersion, social presence, self-concept, emotional attachment, community meaning, and cultural value. Therefore, the relationship between content marketing and purchase intention is best understood as a layered pathway in which content design, brand credibility, and consumer experience work together. Contextual factors such as platform, demographic, cultural, and product conditions may further shape when these pathways become stronger or weaker.

This interpretation helps explain why the reviewed studies report different types of relationships. In some contexts, content marketing appears to be directly associated with purchase intention because the content is useful, entertaining, credible,

emotionally engaging, and well matched to the platform. In other contexts, the relationship becomes meaningful only after content develops mediating mechanisms such as brand trust, brand image, brand engagement, perceived value, eWOM, social presence, or identity connection. These findings indicate that content marketing should not be treated only as a promotional stimulus. It should also be examined as a relational and experiential communication process that links brand messages with consumer evaluation and purchase-related responses.

Theoretically, this review contributes by consolidating fragmented findings into three broader thematic pathways. Previous studies often examine content quality, platform affordances, brand-related constructs, source credibility, or experiential responses separately. The present synthesis shows that these constructs are connected and should be interpreted through the interaction of message value, communication design, brand meaning, persuasive credibility, consumer experience, and contextual fit. This view is consistent with relationship marketing and service-dominant logic, where value is created through interaction rather than delivered only through firm-controlled messages (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). It is also consistent with engagement and source credibility literature, which emphasises cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and credibility-based dimensions of consumer response (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that firms should not expect content exposure alone to generate purchase intention. Effective content needs to be useful, clear, visually appealing, credible, and designed for the specific platform on which it appears. Content strategies should also support brand-building by strengthening awareness, image, trust, engagement, authenticity, and perceived value. Source selection is equally important because influencers, virtual key opinion leaders, user-generated content, and brand-generated content become persuasive only when they are perceived as credible, authentic, and consistent with brand meaning. In addition, platform affordances should guide content design. TikTok may require short, entertaining, and algorithm-friendly content, YouTube may depend more on channel satisfaction and loyalty, while live-streaming platforms require real-time interaction, perceived value, and social presence. Content that creates inspiration, identity expression, cultural meaning, or emotional connection may be especially important in contexts such as luxury, fashion, gaming, digital collections, cultural products, and sustainable consumption.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review and thematic synthesis examined pathways linking content marketing to purchase intention. Based on 33 journal articles published between 2020 and 2026, the review identified three main pathways: content and platform communication design; brand-building and social credibility mechanisms; and experiential, identity, and cultural responses. These pathways show that content marketing is not a simple input-output process. Rather, it is a layered and conditional mechanism in which content attributes, platform affordances, brand perceptions, source credibility, social influence, social validation, consumer experiences, and contextual fit jointly shape purchase intention.

The review contributes to the literature by reframing content marketing as a multi-layered pathway instead of a single direct effect. It also provides a practical framework

for developing content strategies that combine value creation, platform-audience fit, brand-building, credible communication, and experiential engagement. For researchers, the findings highlight the need to test integrated models and distinguish purchase intention from actual purchase behaviour. For practitioners, the findings indicate that successful content marketing requires more than frequent content production or content exposure; it requires content that is meaningful, credible, platform-appropriate, brand-building, and capable of creating consumer experience.

This review also has limitations. The evidence base was restricted to English-language journal research articles identified through Scopus and the Springer Nature/SpringerLink platform and published between 2020 and 2026. These criteria improved focus and quality control but may have excluded relevant studies from other databases, languages, publication types, or regional outlets. The retained studies also differed substantially in platform, country, industry, product category, theoretical framework, measurement model, and statistical method. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted as a thematic synthesis rather than as a quantitatively pooled estimate of effect. Future research should distinguish more clearly between purchase intention, willingness to pay, buying behaviour, continuous purchase, and actual transaction data. Further studies could also test integrated models that combine content and platform design, brand trust, source credibility, social influence, and psychological engagement. More comparative research is needed across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, live-streaming platforms, and metaverse environments, as well as across cultural and demographic contexts. Emerging content forms such as AI-generated content, virtual influencers, short-video commerce, live-streaming commerce, digital cultural products, and sustainability-related content also provide important directions for future investigation.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This systematic literature review synthesised published research and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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