

# A STUDY ON CUSTOMERS' INTENTIONS AND PREFERENCES TOWARDS DATES PURCHASING IN AL-DHAKLIYA REGION, SULTANATE OF OMAN

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## ABSTRACT

In today's highly competitive market, a key to success for any business depends on knowing the consumer, the consumption patterns and understanding factors influencing the decision-making. The aim of the study is to know the intentions and preferences of customers towards selecting and purchasing dates and to identify the factors which are influencing the respondents towards dates purchasing. A well-structured questionnaire is used for the collection of data. It is found that 62.8% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the statement that many dates' companies (brands) in market. 63.8% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the statement that they are confused which brand of dates to select. 68.9% of respondents agree to strongly agree that they do not know the total brands (dates) available in Oman. 56.7% of respondents agree to strongly agree that they prefer dates in gift package form. 61.2% of respondents disagree to strongly disagree with the advertisement of dates in media. i.e. respondents are expressing that the advertisements of dates are less in media. It is found that consistency is high for 'get instant energy. The second most consistent factors is the 'favourite for family and having less calories' in the product. The researchers concluded by providing appropriate suggestions to increase advertisements mode and frequency in modern and economic communication channels like twitter, Instagram, Facebook and blogs etc. There is a huge potential to attract more customers by making innovative advertisements. Frequent offers and discounts should be given for customers by creating occasions and events and Marketers should use innovative positioning strategies like health, energy booster, culture, union of family and friends, food supplement, children growth etc.

**KEY WORDS:** *Competitive market, Consumer intention, Consumer preference, Consumption pattern, Factors, Decision making.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Dates business

Date palm cultivation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Sultanate of Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Kingdom of Bahrain) has a long history, yet the efforts applied by the individual countries on its research and development, although significant, but still not enough and fall below expectations. In 2016 the Arab Region is the world leader of date cultivation with almost 75% of global area under date palm, around 77% of world production and approximately 69% of world total export of dates. In addition to the importance of dates for domestic consumption, this sector is also a source of employment, income generation, and trade in many of these countries. In some very arid areas, date fruit remains as an important source of subsistence and resilience for local population, given its adaptability to harsh environment and tolerance to high temperature, salinity, drought and other severe arid conditions.

### Popular varieties of dates grown in Oman

Oman has more than 250 indigenous varieties of dates, out of which, the most relished for their delectable taste and succulence are Khalas, Khunaizi and Fardh. The Ash Patash and Al Nagal varieties are among the first to hit the market, but not as sweet as the ones that followed. As the harvest season progressed, dates of the Al Khunaizi variety, described as the most sugary in taste, and Al Khalas, billed as the most delicious, also entered the market- followed closely by Al Mebselli and Al Khasab varieties.

**Dates in the Sultanate can be categorized into two groups:**

**Table dates** (dates desirable for human consumption): The number of palm trees under this type is about 5.1 million which accounts for 64 per cent of the total production. This type is consumed in raw form by people in various ways. These include dates such as Khalas Al Dhahira, Abu Naranja, Khaneezi, Khasab and Fardh.

**Manufacturing dates** (dates undesirable for human consumption): This type of dates is not good for human consumption in raw form, so it is used as fodder for animals or by humans after processing. These date varieties (approximately 2.9 million palm trees) include Mabsali, Umm al Sala, Shahl and Salani, which account for 36% of the total date production in the country.

**Some of popular varieties of dates grown in Oman:**

**Hilali oman:** Cultivated in various parts of the Sultanate, this late-season crop has light yellow dates with a 60 per cent sugar content.

**Khalas:** The most valuable date crop, the khalas thrives in the Interior, Sharqiya and Dhahirah region, besides Al Rostaq. With 65 per cent sugar, it is among the most delicious. The fruit is bright yellow, oval-shaped, and is eaten either fresh or half-dry.

**Khasab:** A late-season crop, the khasab grows in all date-farming regions of the Sultanate, though quality yields come from Al Rostaq, Ibri and parts of the Sharqiya region. The fruit is dark red in colour, but some sub-types are yellowish.

**Khunaizi:** Cultivated in most areas of the Sultanate, these dark red dates can usually withstand high humidity levels. They are relished fresh in season or dry outside the season.

**Mebselli:** A mid-season crop, the mebselli, in line with traditional practice, is cooked and dried and exported to markets in the Indian sub-continent. It is also eaten fresh or naturally dried. It grows extensively in the Interior, Sharqiya, Dhahirah and Batinah regions.

**Naghal:** An early crop, the naghal is sensitive to humidity and thrives best in the hot, arid Interior region. A large part of the naghal harvest is destined for Oman's date processing factories.

**Qashtabaq:** Reddish-yellow in colour, these oblongish dates grow in the Interior, Dhahirah and Batinah regions. Sugar content is pegged at a significant 68 per cent.

The date palm cultivation area are 78 per cent of the total fruit cultivated area, with 7,600,000 date palm trees producing 345,000 tonnes in 2015.

### **1.1 Statement of the problem**

Sultanate of Oman is blessed with ample dates' farms and due its cultural reasons dates have become indispensable in everyday life of Omanis. There are many organised and unorganised companies selling dates in Oman and huge competition is existing between these companies. Customers are facing difficulty in selecting the right quality dates at reasonable price.

### **1.2 Significance of the study**

The outcomes of the present study is specifically significant to dates companies in Al-Dhakliya region. It is also important for the customers to get clear idea about dates' selection in the market.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

1. To know the customers intentions towards dates purchasing.
2. To study the customers preferences towards dates purchasing.
3. To provide suggestions to the customers towards selecting appropriate dates.

### **1.4 Hypotheses**

Ho: Different geographical area wise intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing are same.

Ha: Different geographical area wise intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing are not same.

Ho: Geographical area wise respondents has no difference of opinion towards preference of dates purchasing.

Ha: Geographical area wise respondents has difference of opinion towards preference of dates purchasing.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mohammed Suleiman Rashid Al-Shabibi, (2011), in his article mentioned that First, is to apply the benchmarking approach to the dates export supply chain (DESC) in Oman and Tunisia (taking Tunisia as a benchmark) to identify gaps in the organizational and operational structures of the DESC in the two countries. Second, is to utilize the information generated to put forward recommendations to improve Omani DESC. Design/methodology/approach - Four benchmarking dimensions are developed, each dimension with a number of key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPIs are then used in the benchmarking exercise. Findings - Results show that Tunisia is performing better than Oman in all the four dimensions. Originality/value - The study enables the readers and the stakeholders to gain some valuable insights in the subject matter. Rashid Al-Yahyai, Mumtaz Khan, (2015), studied that Date palm is the primary agricultural crop in Oman and it constitutes 80 % of all fruit crops produced and 50 % of the total agricultural area in the country.

Oman is the eighth largest producer of dates in the world with an average annual production of 260,000 mt per annum. There are approximately more than over seven million date palms and 250 cultivars in cultivation, primarily in the northern governorates of the sultanate. However, around 70 % of the total date production is harvested from only 10 cultivars, and a small fraction (2.6 %) of the total date production is exported. Only half of the dates produced are used for human consumption, with the other half being utilized primarily for animal feed or considered surplus and wasted. Abdullah Alshureqi (2019, May 8) According to statistics issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Al Batinah North Governorate constituted the most productive through 77.3 thousand tons of dates, followed by Al Batinah South Governorate with 72.1 thousand tons, then Al Dakhliya Governorate with 66.0 thousand tons, while the statistical indicated that the most productive states were Rustaq State It reached 37,000 tons, followed by Sohar with 33,000 tons, then Ibri with 24,000 tons, and Suwaiq 18 thousand tons, and the state of Mudhaibi 17 thousand tons, and the rest of the productivity was distributed to the rest of the states. Gautam Viswanathan (2017 July 12) opined that this fruit is representative of more than just a source of sustenance.

Just like how Oman is rich in culture, humanity and a beautiful landscape, dates are not just fruits but high on nutritional value and health benefits. It is also easily accessible and provides the right amount of fibre, iron, calcium, and lots of other vitamins and minerals as well, and I don't know any person who is not in love with these delicious fruits, she added. Dates are also a good source of income when exported to other countries, he added. It was an opinion shared by Meena Pandya, for whom the fruit represented many fond memories. Scientists at the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), (2009 June) opined that Omani Bread, Dates Have Moderate Glycaemic Levels. , Three varieties of Omani dates and two types of Omani halwa were analysed for nutritional quality and glycaemic levels by scientists at the Department of Food Science and Nutrition of SQU's College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences. The results showed low to medium glycaemic index values. The researchers said the outcome of the study would help them in developing appropriate dietary management strategies for meal planning for both normal people and diabetic patients using the concept of glycaemic index of foods.

This, in turn, would help in reducing the risk of non-communicable chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiac disorders among the Omani population, they added. Glycaemic index of foods is a system of classifying carbohydrate-rich foods that determines how quickly they are digested and absorbed and increase blood glucose levels. Samieh Ameen (2018, March 18) mentioned that Oman Dates Production and Packaging Company SAOC ("Dates") announced that the establishment of Oman Dates Production and Packaging Company SAOC, which will purchase dates products from farmers, refilling, processing, packaging and selling them in local markets or exporting them. 2019. The Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Dr. Fouad bin Jaafar al-Sajwani, said that this is the first project and there are other projects coming to be based on the exploitation of all the components of the palm. Tone Delin Indrlid (2018 July 23) revealed that the heat of summer brings date harvesting season in Oman. Palm trees around the country are heavy with produce, shops and markets are full of juicy delicious dates.

"The date palm," according to research done by Rashid Al Yahiya and M. Mumtaz Khan with Sultan Qaboos University, "is the primary agricultural crop in Oman, and it constitutes 80 % of all fruit crops produced and 50 % of the total agricultural area in the country," making Oman the 8th largest producer of dates in the world. Traditionally, village date farms were family run and a palm tree would often be planted for the birth of a son. Gautam Viswanathan (2017, June 18) Emphasized that the "Dates of Oman are of supreme quality and are exported to the major GCC nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar."

“Oman’s agricultural economy has in the past primarily relied on short-term subsistence agriculture because of arid conditions, but dates have always been a major occupation among farmers in the region, with more than 35,000 hectares of land being used to plant date palms in the interiors,” he added. “We have planted more than 900,000 trees in farms, public spaces, in parks and even in households across the country.” Y Magazine (15 April 2019) Mentioned that the price of a single date fruit has soared to reach RO10 on one Omani farm, according to farm-owner Mubarak Al Hasni. The growing season for Al Nughal dates in Wilayat Dima Wa Al Taeen started four days ago, and date-lovers across the region are quickly scrambling to purchase these famous fresh summer fruits. Speaking to Al Wisal FM, Al Hasni said date prices gradually drop after a week to OMR8, while they get sold for cheaper value and in kilograms after the date-growing season is over. Al Hasni says: “Dima Wa Al Taeen is known for its dry, hot weather which contributes to the quality of dates.”

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Study area and study period

It is an exploratory study conducted to understand the dates’ business and its prospects in Al-Dhakliya region. This study will be conducted in Al-Dhakaliya region covering different cities like Samail, Izki, Nizwa and Bahla., The period of study is from September 2019 to November 2019.

#### 3.2 Sampling frame

This study includes all the respondents residing in Samail, Izki, Nizwa and Bahla (Al-Dhakaliya region).

#### 3.3 Population, sample size and sampling method

The population size of the present study is 350522 people in Al-Dhakliya Region covering four different cities viz., Samail, Izki, Nizwa and Bahla., the sample size is fixed as 196 and distributed among various strata’s of population with 95% confidence level and 7 % margin of error. The sample size is calculated from survey monkey sample calculator. 196 responses were collected through proportionate stratified random sampling

Table 1: Sampling distribution across cities in Al-Dhakliya Region

| City   | Population | Sample |
|--------|------------|--------|
| Samail | 80471      | 45     |
| Nizwa  | 123396     | 69     |
| Izki   | 59386      | 33     |
| Bahla  | 87269      | 49     |
| Total  | 350522     | 196    |

#### 3.3 Data collection method

Data is collected from primary and secondary sources. The supportive literature review and the conceptual framework are taken from secondary sources. Primary data is collected with the help of a structured questionnaire). Pilot study was done among 20 respondents to identify the validity of the questions. Thus well-structured questionnaire is used for data collection and the relevant literature reviews are supported by secondary sources.

#### 3.4 Tools for analysis

To know the intentions and preferences of customers towards selection of dates with reference to their geographic variables. Parametric test ANOVA is used for analyzing the data for achieving the objectives of the study. To know the intentions (factors influencing) of respondents towards selection of dates-mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation is used.

#### 3.5 Limitations of study

1. As the respondents are scattered in different cities, we may face challenges during data collection phase.
2. The study area is confined to Al-Dhakliya region. Other regions are not covered in Oman.

### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Hypotheses testing

Ho: Geographical area wise intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing are same.

Ha: Geographical area intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing are not same.

**Table 2: Geographical area wise intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing**

| Intentions                 |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F     | Sig.        |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|-------------|
| Nutritional values         | Between Groups | 4.367          | 3   | 1.456       | 1.630 | .184        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 171.444        | 192 | .893        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 175.811        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Have less Calories         | Between Groups | 1.803          | 3   | .601        | .817  | .486        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 141.258        | 192 | .736        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 143.061        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Get instant energy         | Between Groups | 4.545          | 3   | 1.515       | 2.072 | .105        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 140.409        | 192 | .731        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 144.954        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Favourite sweet supplement | Between Groups | 10.133         | 3   | 3.378       | 3.640 | <b>.014</b> |
|                            | Within Groups  | 178.168        | 192 | .928        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 188.301        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Inherited                  | Between Groups | 4.870          | 3   | 1.623       | 2.075 | .105        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 150.191        | 192 | .782        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 155.061        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Favourite for family       | Between Groups | 9.501          | 3   | 3.167       | 3.984 | <b>.009</b> |
|                            | Within Groups  | 152.637        | 192 | .795        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 162.138        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Dates from Omanis farms    | Between Groups | 2.101          | 3   | .700        | .669  | .572        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 201.103        | 192 | 1.047       |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 203.204        | 195 |             |       |             |
| Purchase dates online      | Between Groups | .109           | 3   | .036        | .052  | .984        |
|                            | Within Groups  | 134.885        | 192 | .703        |       |             |
|                            | Total          | 134.995        | 195 |             |       |             |

Geographical area wise intentions of respondents towards dates purchasing is tested with ANOVA and it is observed that favorite sweet supplement,  $F(3, 192) = 3.64$ ,  $p = 0.14$ . And favorite to their family,  $F(3, 192) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .009$ . It is clear that the P value is less than  $\alpha = 0.05$  in both cases. Hence it is rejected.

### Hypothesis-2

Ho: Geographical area wise respondents has no difference of opinion towards preference of dates purchasing.

Ha: Geographical area wise respondents has difference of opinion towards preference of dates purchasing.

**Table 3: Geographical area wise opinion of respondents towards preference of dates.**

|                                          |                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F      | Sig.         |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|--------------|
| Good quality dates                       | Between Groups | 29.543         | 3   | 9.848       | 15.361 | <b>.000</b>  |
|                                          | Within Groups  | 123.09         | 192 | 0.641       |        |              |
|                                          | Total          | 152.63         | 195 |             |        |              |
| Preserved for long-time                  | Between Groups | 16.087         | 3   | 5.362       | 5.727  | <b>0.001</b> |
|                                          | Within Groups  | 179.77         | 192 | 0.936       |        |              |
|                                          | Total          | 195.85         | 195 |             |        |              |
| Know many locations where dates are sold | Between Groups | 8.485          | 3   |             | 3.073  | <b>0.029</b> |
|                                          | Within Groups  | 176.72         | 192 | 0.92        |        |              |
|                                          | Total          | 185.2          | 195 |             |        |              |
| Offers and discounts motivate me         | Between Groups | 6.929          | 3   | 2.31        | 2.841  | <b>0.039</b> |
|                                          | Within Groups  | 156.07         | 192 | 0.813       |        |              |
|                                          | Total          | 163            | 195 |             |        |              |

|                                        |                |        |     |       |       |              |
|----------------------------------------|----------------|--------|-----|-------|-------|--------------|
| Big sales of dates during special days | Between Groups | 7.876  | 3   | 2.625 | 2.779 | <b>0.042</b> |
|                                        | Within Groups  | 181.36 | 192 | 0.945 |       |              |
|                                        | Total          | 189.24 | 195 |       |       |              |
| Dates packages which keep them fresh   | Between Groups | 12.865 | 3   | 4.288 | 6.025 | <b>0.001</b> |
|                                        | Within Groups  | 136.66 | 192 | 0.712 |       |              |
|                                        | Total          | 149.53 | 195 |       |       |              |
| Packages which are easy to carry       | Between Groups | 7.128  | 3   | 2.376 | 3.216 | <b>0.024</b> |
|                                        | Within Groups  | 141.87 | 192 | 0.739 |       |              |
|                                        | Total          | 149    | 195 |       |       |              |
| Dates packages which are colorful      | Between Groups | 15.386 | 3   | 5.129 | 4.920 | <b>.003</b>  |
|                                        | Within Groups  | 200.14 | 192 | 1.042 |       |              |
|                                        | Total          | 215.53 | 195 |       |       |              |

Geographical area wise preference of respondents towards dates purchasing is tested with ANOVA and it is observed that good quality dates,  $F(3, 192) = 15.36$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . Dates preserved for longtime,  $F(3, 192) = 5.72$ ,  $p = .001$ . Offer and discounts motivate  $F(3, 192) = 2.84$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . Big sales of dates during special days  $F(3, 192) = 2.77$ ,  $p = .04$ . Known many locations where dates are sold  $F(3, 192) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .02$ . dates packages which keep them fresh  $F(3, 192) = 6.02$ ,  $p = .01$ . Packages which are easy to carry  $F(3, 192) = 3.21$ ,  $p = .02$  and colorful dates packages  $F(3, 192) = 4.92$ ,  $p = .00$ . It is clear that the P value is less than  $\alpha = 0.05$  in all the above cases. Hence it is rejected

**Table 4: Intentions of respondents towards choice of dates**

| Sl.no | Intentions                                               | Mean | Standard Deviation | Coefficient of variation |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1     | I purchase dates which have more nutritional values      | 2.87 | 0.94               | 33%                      |
| 2     | I purchase dates which have less Calories                | 2.87 | 0.85               | 29%                      |
| 3     | The purpose of buying dates is to get instant energy     | 2.98 | 0.86               | 28%                      |
| 4     | Dates are my favorite sweet supplement                   | 2.88 | 0.98               | 34%                      |
| 5     | I like to purchase dates because it is inherited         | 2.87 | 0.89               | 30%                      |
| 6     | I purchase dates because they are favorite for my family | 3.06 | 0.91               | 29%                      |
| 7     | I prefer dates only from Omanis farms                    | 2.76 | 1.02               | 36%                      |
| 8     | I purchase dates online                                  | 1.50 | 0.83               | 55%                      |

The Intentions of respondents towards choice of dates is analyzed in table no.22, the mean value shows that they purchase dates because they are favorite for their families with a highest value of 3.06. The second highest factor consumers prefer because it gives instant energy with a mean value of 2.98. To know the consistency of these factors, coefficient of variation is calculated. It is found that consistency is high for ‘get instant energy. The second most consistent factors is the ‘favorite for family and having less calories’ in the product. It is also clear that consumers do not give importance to purchase dates online and also to purchase only from Omani farms.

## 5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Major findings observed from the study infers that 78% of respondents agree to strongly agree they prefer good quality dates while purchasing. 63.78% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the dates price rises every year. 61.2% of respondents disagree to strongly disagree with the advertisement of dates in media. i.e. respondents are expressing that the advertisements of dates are less in media. 50% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the offers and discounts motivate them towards purchasing dates. 62.8% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the statement that many dates’ companies (brands) in market.63.8% of respondents agree to strongly agree with the statement that they are confused which brand of dates to select.68.9% of respondents agree to strongly agree that they do not know the total brands (dates) available in Oman. 56.7% of respondents agree to strongly agree that they prefer dates in gift package form. It is found that consistency is high for ‘get instant energy. The second most consistent factors is the ‘favourite for family and having less calories’ in the product.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As the preferences are concerned all the demographic variables are having very little difference of opinions on the purchase of dates, but as geographical area is concerned they have difference of opinions. Different geographical locations people like Samail, Izki, Nizwa & Bahla have difference of opinion, which is significant for the study to understand the intentions and preferences of people towards all the factors like product quality, price, distribution channel and packaging etc. Hence, it is concluded that there is a lot of scope for improving the dates’ business in Oman with reference to customer awareness, improving (life) quality of product, maintaining the stable prices and applying innovative packing methods to attract customers. Least importance given by respondents to choose dates online, which is a challenge for the marketers to attract them online with innovative strategies to enhance their business.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers recommended the following for the improvement of dates’ business in Al-Dhakliya region is to increase Advertisements mode and frequency in modern and economic communication channels like twitter, Instagram, Facebook and blogs etc. Frequent offers and discounts should be given for customers by creating occasions and events. Marketers should use innovative positionig strategies like health, energy booster, culture, union of family and friends, food

supplement, children growth etc. Marketers should focus on brand identity creation and brand building strategies by participating in dates exhibition conducted every year in various parts of Oman (like Nizwa, Salalah etc). Marketers should use modern and innovative package with shapes of toys, decorative items and traditional baskets etc, to attract more customers and increase their market share. Marketers should focus on processing dates with natural herbs and other things to keep dates fresh for long time and also use package of environmental friendly. Develop an application and add all the brands of dates and their benefits to all the customers, which will help them to take effective decision. Dates association is to be formed and price fixation will be done once in a year (minimum and maximum). It is a win-win situation for both companies and customers.

## **8. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The present study can be conducted by including all the regions of Sultanate of Oman to get a broader perspective and further research can be extended to Gulf Cooperation Countries. The research can also be conducted to identify the brand preferences among respondents.

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