

Panicked consumers seek control amid the crisis

March 18 2020, by Paul Mayne



Consumer Behaviour professor Bonnie Simpson, of the DAN Department of Management and Organizational Studies, said most of what we do as consumers is quite irrational – witness panic buying of toilet paper during the COVID-19 crisis. Credit: Western News

Empty shelves once filled with rolls and rolls of toilet paper. It is one of the more enduring—and strange—images of the COVID-19 crisis in Canada.

But scenes like these are not uncommon in times of stress as they are all products of the often irrational consumer mind, according to a Western consumer behavior expert.

"When it comes to items like toilet paper, this is generally because when we feel threatened we focus on core and immediate needs—very utility-based items," said Bonnie Simpson, a DAN Department of Management and Organizational Studies professor. "We focus on tangible things we can use to try to gain control of a situation that feels out of control.

"Being able to buy things we might need helps us gain that sense of control."

It has been over eight weeks since China confirmed its first case of COVID-19 and the outbreak began to spread globally. In that time, the Retail Council of Canada has recorded record-breaking sales of health-safety products, such as medical masks and sanitizers.

Last week, the [advocacy group](#) urged [consumers](#) not to panic after an "unprecedented" number of Canadians flocked to [grocery stores](#), stripping the shelves bare of items like toilet paper, hand sanitizer and non-perishable goods.

The Ontario government echoed that plea, issuing a statement for consumers to "please practice normal grocery-buying habits and rest assured that our grocery production and supply chain will continue to provide Ontarians with the food we enjoy each and every day."

Runs like these are a result of "the power of social proof," Simpson

explained. When we don't know what to do in a given situation, we rely much more heavily on those around us for guidance.

"When situations are uncertain or ambiguous we look to others. So, when we see them engaging in a behaviour we think, "Well, maybe I should, too." In this case, many people can afford to engage in that behaviour and don't see a lot of downside to doing so. Eventually, we'll use that stockpiled toilet paper—so there's no real loss to doing so."

Uncertainty and ambiguity surround the COVID-19 virus. But fear, Simpson said, is often not enough of a motivator on its own. Consumers must also feel personally threatened.

"You can see this as this situation evolves," she said. "In essence, people are starting to feel threatened and are buying as a means of trying to assert some psychological control where they can."

On Tuesday, Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency across the province, invoking a little-used statute to grant the government broad powers to cope with the spreading COVID-19 outbreak.

He announced the immediate closing of a litany of places, including bars, restaurants, theatres, concert venues, movie theatres, recreation centres, public libraries, private schools, and daycares, until March 31 at the earliest. Additionally, other retailers have opted to close their doors.

Simultaneously, companies have been sending an endless stream of communications regarding their response to the COVID-19. Most recently, Loblaws Executive Chairman Galen Weston addressed the rush on his and other stores across the country.

"Those who went shopping recently will have seen extraordinary numbers of people in stores, long lines, and aisles empty of product. This

was a result of extreme levels of buying as millions of Canadians stocked up their kitchens and medicine cabinets. I'm sure the many photos of bare shelves on social media only increased your level of concern," he wrote.

Weston went on to assure consumers that "we are not running out of food or essential supplies. Our supply chain and store teams are responding to the spikes in volume and quickly getting the most important items back on the shelf. Volumes are already normalizing somewhat, and we are catching up. There are a few items, like hand sanitizer, that may take longer to get back, but otherwise we are in good shape."

This kind of reaction from companies is not only expected, but smart, Simpson said. "This is a chance for brands to demonstrate responsiveness and empathy. This is increasingly important in today's society."

Simpson expects retailers will be able to meet demand and consumer expectations going forward. "As stores continue to restock, and the [supply chain](#) continues to produce, we'll see things stabilize," she explained.

"Consumers will also get a better idea of what they need and don't need. Right now, the uncertainty of that will lead them to overbuy in fear of not being able to get supplies when needed. The idea of scarcity naturally produces a competitive orientation in people as they feel threatened. When we realize supplies are there, we should calm down."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

Citation: Panicked consumers seek control amid the crisis (2020, March 18) retrieved 27 April

2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-03-panicked-consumers-crisis.html>

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