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## Letter to the Editor

## Psychological underpinning of panic buying during pandemic (COVID-19)



Dear Editor,

Epidemics and pandemics are the impending public health challenges whereby fear and panic are integral human responses historically (Bonneau and Van Damme, 2006). Panic behavior during disaster and calamities is an expected response they threaten the ability to cope and destroy the existing equilibrium. Many a time, people develop much-unexplained behavior which differs from country to country, culture to culture. Panic buying / increased buying behavior has been observed during public health emergencies since the ancient period. However, the exact psychological explanation responsible for it has not sought systematically. Therefore, we intended a thrust to identify the possible psychological explanations behind the panic buying behavior during crisis moments such as, pandemics.

A perception of scarcity (the *perceived scarcity effect*) is strongly linked with the panic buying behavior and hoarding behaviors increases if the scarcity develops for the immediate necessities (Wilkens, 2020; Dholakia, 2020; Bonneau and Van Damme, 2006). It also creates a feeling of insecurity which in turn activates another mechanism to collect things (Dholakia, 2020).

A perceived sense of losing control over the environment can responsible for that. During a crisis period, people generally like to control things and this brings them some aspect of certainty (Wilkens, 2000). People don't want to get engaged in any kind of debate, and the moral insecurity pushes them to take action to alleviate anxiety and bring back the feeling of control (Yap, 2020). The phenomenon may be explained as a remedial response to reduce fear and anxiety of losing control over the surrounding environment (Dholakia, 2020). As there prevail extraordinary uncertainty, individuals anticipate regret if they fail to collect necessities when they are available. Moreover, people have not to control the pandemic creating the wish to have control at least something those are needed during the crisis (Bonneau and Van Damme, 2006).

Panic buying also has been linked with perceived feeling of insecurity and instability of certain situations (Hendrix, 2013). The Pandemic status of corona in 2020 leaves the community with uncertainty. The people unsure when the calamity would end, thus saving basic needs by purchasing as many as possible is a shortcut to cope with the feeling of insecurity. Furthermore, supply disruption, a condition where normal product supply in supply chain interrupted, has been frequently observed during a disaster or other unwanted calamities (Shou, 2013). This also led to a feeling of insecurity.

As a social being, sometimes we gauge the intensity of the crisis by the reactions of our surrounding fellows which explain the *social learning theory* for the phenomenon. In response to the panic buying of others, people tend to indulge to buy madly (Dholakia, 2020). It can be also described as the herd instinct (Wilkens, 2020). The phenomenon can also be attributed to similar things that happened during other epidemics and natural calamities in the past. Stockpiling of drugs and

vaccines is regarded as a method of preparation in cases of pandemics (Jennings et al., 2008). So, by extension, the general public might start stockpiling the goods necessary to them.

In an emergency or crisis moment, the primitive part of our brain usually becomes more prominent and indulges us in the behaviors that are necessary for survival (Dodgson, 2020). Moreover, primitive instinctual behaviors have poor humanistic expression and rational thinking which could be an important aspect to explain the phenomenon.

It has been noticed that during the crisis of calamities, people sometimes believe that the Government will not be able to control black marketing and provide support to the countrymen. Lack of trust and anticipation of the exhaustion of resources might be responsible for panic buying. They unthinkingly overestimate the risk of danger along with underestimating the possibilities of help (Bonneau and Van Damme, 2006).

Sometimes people get threatening perception from the media reports that people are buying excessively than before; there is a possibility of a global crisis. Sometimes, the media reports the crisis in a sensational way which raises more panic. Another important factor is the way the viruses or any pandemic has been portrayed in the movies. People tend to learn from them and try to imitate whenever they are faced with pandemics (Schell, 1997).

In summary, fear of scarcity and losing control over the environment, insecurity (which could because of fear), social learning, exacerbation of anxiety, the basic primitive response of humans are the core factor responsible for the panic buying phenomenon. Further observational, as well as qualitative studies, are warranted to explore the psychological perspective of panic buying behavior during the crisis moments which in turn would help to find out preventive measures during the future moments. We present the possible hypothetical explanations for the behavior to draw the attention of global scientists.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

## Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113061](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113061).

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