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Panic Buying: Is It a Normal Social Construct?

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The current COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on different dimensions of unusual human behaviors; panic buying is one of them. Surprisingly, panic buying has got less attention than it ought to be. It has been observed in many countries and several psychological phenomena of panic buying have been proposed by recent authors, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors explained the triggers to be: the fear of scarcity and lack of control over the environment, vulnerability due to fear, social learning, anxiety exacerbation and simple primitive human reaction.^[1] However, it has been noticed even without the above-mentioned triggers as we may buy and hoard the essential goods during social occasions, such as festivals. Also, people may buy more items than they need in cases of special situations, such as black Friday sale and end of season sale throughout the world.^[2] Many consumers in different countries with less government aid show this pre-disaster behavior to prepare by purchasing essentials in large quantities. Findings show that this form of pre-disaster shopping is not marked by fear, hoarding, and other anti-social behaviors instead most shoppers are prepared before an emergency and ready to help others.^[3] It can be understood as a phase transition between two modes of operation of a consumer: purchasing only when necessary (the procrastination effect) and hoarding (part of psychopathology).^[4] Hence, it is imperative to distinguish between the normal behaviors of buying in excess and panic buying.

Intention and behavior are two major aspects of panic buying, where background mass psychology plays a major role.^[5] Sometimes, panic buying may be a part of the hoarding disorder as a result of individual cognitive distortions, but when we talk about panic buying as a social phenomenon, it cannot be regarded as a pathological mass behavior. Also, this should be differentiated from compulsive buying disorder, which is characterized by excessive shopping cognitions and buying behavior that leads to distress or impairment. In panic buying, distress after buying is not present. Hence, we need to be clear that though panic buying may be an important social construct, there are several other psychological underpinnings. The pre-disaster preparation or the bulk purchase during festivities or sale cannot be defined as panic buying. It is also important to understand the marketing psychology. The marketing



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announcements (percentage of discounts, the deadline for sale, free items on purchase) act as rewards for the consumers, which compels them to buy more than they need. Further studies are warranted in this regard to understand its psychology and to define it scientifically.

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