

# A Return to Mechanical Solidarity: Panic Hoarding and Social Media in the Time of Pandemic.

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## Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic brought many changes to daily life in Canada. One such behavior that surfaced was what could be defined as ‘panic hoarding,’ namely, the purchasing of items such as toilet paper, sanitizer and disinfectant in far greater quantities per person than other times, which risked the creation of shortages across communities. In order to understand such behavior, this article will use ideas from Émile Durkheim to analyze the relationship of social media and its impact on the behavior of panic hoarding. In particular, Durkheim’s concepts of collective consciousness show how social media provides enough impetus to make the case that this pandemic is better defined by mechanical than organic solidarity. We can see social media as the vehicle through which collective consciousness can be experienced, and more immediately so at this time, insofar as we see how it influences panic hoarding behavior. We can also see that social media’s use of memes can be likened to totems, and that they give clues to the values we hold at this time.

## Introduction

Although many people in Canada were aware of the coronavirus’ rapid spread through China and other countries prior to arriving in Canada, very few were prepared for the changes it would provoke. Once the World Health Organization declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020, it was a matter of time until the virus reached Canada in a globalized world, and that countries would have a narrow window to ‘flatten the curve.’<sup>1</sup>

In this context, Canadians were asked to self-isolate, work from home and were directed to practice ‘social distancing.’<sup>2</sup> If one had to venture out, it should be for essential things like groceries, or walks for health, and not to visit others, or simply go shopping. Province after province declared a state of emergency, and all non-essential businesses were asked to close down to the public, have as many people work from home as

possible, and offer delivery or pick up if applicable—all in a matter of just a couple of weeks.

One social behavior that surfaced was what I define as ‘panic hoarding,’ which is the purchasing of items in far greater quantities per person than previously, and by a large enough number of people so that it creates shortages in stores across communities. In the case of this pandemic, it was items such as toilet paper, sanitizer and disinfectant. If there had been a directive that limited the quantity per person of these items, as eventually were established, shortages and unfair distribution of these items might have been prevented. More importantly perhaps, significant levels of anxiety and fear might also have been alleviated.

‘End of the world’ scenarios are not rare—for example, the Spanish flu pandemic that took place approximately a century ago (Andrews, 2016)—, and a usual response involves large groups of people

<sup>1</sup> One of many new phrases coined over the pandemic, this one to describe changing our habits so that the number of projected cases did not curve upwards on the graph and would instead flatten out because the virus was not spreading.

<sup>2</sup> Another new term that means maintaining a certain distance between yourself and others so that the virus if airborne, would have a reduced chance of coming into contact with you.

behaving out of the fear preparing for an uncertain future. However, a pandemic of this magnitude in a hyperconnected world is unprecedented. In many ways, we are facing this as a new event, but there are sociological theories that can be applied that can give us valuable insights to understand our social situation. In this paper, I will present a selection of ideas from Émile Durkheim to the context of social media and its impact on the behavior of panic hoarding, to show one way in which societies have reversed, albeit slightly, to a state of mechanical solidarity.

To do this, I will begin by describing the nature of social media through a Durkheimian lens and utilize his concept of collective consciousness to show how social media provides enough impetus to make the case that this pandemic is one better defined by mechanical than organic solidarity. It is important to clarify a few of the assumptions I will be making. I will restrict the discussion of the behaviors strictly to panic hoarding purchasing and the nature of social media sentiments related to it, because there is simply no room to delve any further. Nor will I look at social media's impact on other social processes at this time, again because it is out of scope. Once the analysis is complete, I hope to have a convincing argument that a state of mechanical solidarity can provide a new way of looking at the current pandemic.

### **Social Media and Collective Consciousness**

The setting in which we are looking at the behaviors of panic hoarding and the way in which it is understood and received by society is through the medium of social media. For many people, social media has been a positive technology even before the pandemic and social isolation, but since then it has been elevated to a kind of lifeline for connecting with friends, family and the world. Social media as always allowed us to share our thoughts and experiences with others. We can get 'on the ground' perspectives from real people and in real-time, bringing us a broader range of perspectives than we might otherwise get from news media sources alone. It also means however, that we are exposed in the same way to the opinions of those motivated to share 'fake news' and other flights of imagination. On all fronts, social media allows us to design and embellish our statements expanding the creativity of our messages to make us appear witty or clever.

Panic hoarding is one particular behavior that we were able to see happening through social media. Videos of the local Costco opening the doors to people running to fill their carts full of toilet paper flooded the internet, created in the morning and shared before the afternoon. This led to comments posted about the 'insanity' of it all, but it also created enough fear to convince others to also make sure they had enough of their own before store shelves were stripped bare, which happened within days. Soon every store around had empty shelves where these items once were.

The effect of panic hoarding can be thought of in the sense of the collective consciousness in Durkheim's theory of social solidarity. In their book, *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory*, Kenneth Allan and Sarah Daynes (2017, p. 107) define Durkheim's collective conscious as referring to "...the collective representations (cognitive elements) and sentiments (emotional elements) that guide and bind together any social group". As a behavior borne out of the fear of an uncertain future and displayed on social media, it is easy to see how people responded both emotionally and rationally. That we have taken the advice on social distancing, begun self-isolating, working from home, making radical changes to business and institutions, we can also see larger scale behaviors that confirm the nature of the collective consciousness.

Allan and Daynes (2017, p. 123) also tell us that the collective consciousness can vary by four elements, two of which are particularly evident in panic hoarding and social media. The first two are the degree to which culture is shared and the amount of power the culture has to guide individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions. The first is considerably high in the medium of social media, and the second is demonstrated by the speed at which panic hoarding spread and caused shortages in supplies. The third element is its degree of clarity, which is low due to the fact most of the criticism on social media towards the panic hoarders takes issue with toilet paper's lack of relationship to the symptoms of the virus, missing the point altogether that it is the state of emergency that people are reacting to. The fourth and final element is its relative levels of religious versus secular content, which has low levels of religious content and high secular content.

### **Memes as Totems**

Memes, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, are defined as "... an idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture; an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media". Memes are the medium of the everyday person to share a sentiment and opinion they have. These can be likened to the symbols and totems that Durkheim describes because they are banners, emblems of the collective consciousness of the people (Allan and Daynes, 2017, p. 115).

Memes can also be considered a mix between material and nonmaterial social facts, because they are the cultural artefacts, a physical object that carries cultural meaning, but they have also symbolic meaning as collective sentiments (Allan and Daynes, 2017 p. 103). For Durkheim, totems are important elements for social groups as they materialize the collective consciousness and thus reinforce the group. Unlike memes, totems may share several sentiments, but both do have an underlying meaning of their own. Totems tend to refer to religious or sacred items by Durkheim's definition, and while it would be incorrect to say that there are no memes that are religious in nature, I would be hesitant to say that memes are 'sacred'. Still, in many ways, memes represent freedom of expression and a way of advocating. So when a meme pokes fun at people who are hoarding toilet paper because the symptoms of coronavirus have nothing to do with an increased need for toilet paper, they are actually making a statement about the anxiety in society at the moment, as well as connecting with others who share their opinion and respond with 'likes' and 'shares.'

### **The Case for Mechanical Solidarity**

Durkheim's social solidarity theory concerns itself with the level of structural and social diversity this society can have and still maintain consensus around the moral center. It is the degree to which social units are integrated (Allan and Daynes, 201, p. 120). Whereas mechanical solidarity refers to more basic social attachments related to high levels of group cohesiveness and normative regulation, organic solidarity refers to the type of solidarity of modern societies based on the division of labor. Under this

framework, in the context of the corona virus pandemic, it could be said that there is a shift from organic to mechanical solidarity through which people feel attached to more basic sentiments of belonging (which is quite evident on the nationalist focus of many commercials that have mobilized the idea of Canadian identity). It is likely that there would not be a complete shift without a greater degree of upheaval, but a change can still be seen to have occurred. This is evident in the immediate changes in behavior by many levels of society, and that it occurred with less hesitation than were it asked of them in any other, more 'normal' time.

This shift towards mechanical solidarity that I am arguing for checks all the criteria laid out by Durkheim and presented by Allan and Daynes (2017, p. 122). The individual is more directly connected to the collective consciousness and experiences it immediately and without the need to be socialized into it. We are all currently influenced by the common beliefs and sentiments that are relative to our society in pandemic, and it has already been shown that we are acting under collective ideas and behavioral tendencies that are strong. The social horizon is limited at the moment, and ironically, we find ourselves isolated with our families as well. Finally, there is a slight increase in repressive laws and other social rules in that fines will be handed out to those who do not maintain social distancing. There is also an increase in policing the behavior of people by both the police and citizens, and social media is also there to informally shame them as well.

### **Conclusion**

The argument for mechanical solidarity does not, nor need to suggest, that this trend will continue or that this tendency is permanent. It is sufficient to show that it has turned for the moment to allow us to see the way in which Durkheim's social solidarity has operated under the state of pandemic and in a society increasingly mediated by social media.

Canadian society in the time of pandemic can be freshly looked at through this lens. We can see social media as the vehicle through which collective consciousness can be experienced, and more immediately so at this time insofar as we see how it influences panic hoarding behaviors. We can also see that social media's use of memes can be likened to totems, and that they give clues to the values we hold at

this time. Finally, these contribute to and support the argument for mechanical solidarity, that the immediacy of our relation to the collective consciousness as well as the strength of our ideas and behavioral tendencies have put us in a place in which we can see our society in this time of pandemic in a new way, having shed some of the old, complex and possibly encumbering values and ideas.

### References

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