

**The 2020 Toilet Paper Stockpiling Phenomenon:  
A media analysis revealing the role of the news media in toilet paper hoarding**

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### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the influence that the news media has on the population by exploring how the news media influenced people to stockpile toilet paper in March and April 2020. The method that I used is media analysis. I analyzed articles published in March and April 2020 about toilet paper hoarding. I discuss the specific techniques used to urge readers to participate in the craze. I observed two main components that most articles about toilet paper had in common. The two components are fear-inducing images and captivating headlines. People were exposed to articles like this on digital and printed newspapers and, consequently, social media. However, this paper focuses on digital news articles. These articles promoted a sense of urgency, and many people took part in toilet paper hoarding as a result. Stockpiling was a global phenomenon, and many news outlets in almost every country published articles about the craze; however, this analysis focuses on Canadian news outlets. My data sources are various Canadian mass news articles with relevant content published in the aforementioned time frame. The results of this research indicate that the news media did not intentionally push people to stockpile toilet paper, which is evident because almost all of the articles mentioned that stockpiling was not necessary and even discouraged it. However, because it was a global phenomenon and needed to be reported on, the media did publish many articles about it, which drew attention to the issue. There were also many headlines and images published that were agents in influencing people to stockpile.

**Key Words:** Toilet paper, Stockpiling, Hoarding, Headlines, Images

### **Introduction**

As the UN's secretary-general declared on July 18th, 2020, "coronavirus brought the world to its knees" (Guterre, 2020). Nobody saw the life-altering disease coming and creating such worldwide panic and confusion. The virus spread rapidly in early 2020 and continues growing and raging in the present day. There have been many side-effects on society as a result of COVID-19. One of the first noticeable side-effects was a change in consumer behaviour, which started to reflect panic-buying and hoarding. One of the most coveted items in March and April of 2020 was toilet paper.

By the second week of March 2020, toilet paper sales in Canada had risen 241% compared to the year before (Statistics Canada, 2020). In Australia, sales increased by 98%, and in the United States, by 60% (Bucholz, 2020). Seemingly every news outlet only published articles about the virus and its many contingencies. News about the virus became inescapable. COVID-19 was terrifying from the beginning because it was so unknown and has since killed 1,474,643 people. Stockpiling gave people something practical to do in the face of immense confusion. Soon the toilet paper craze seemed more inescapable than the virus itself. Every international, national, and local newspaper printed jarring images of empty toilet paper shelves and narratives about the need to purchase more. The purpose of this paper is to discover the role of the news media in influencing people to stockpile toilet paper during the initial stages of COVID-19 and what made people eventually stop. I will be analyzing various images and articles produced by Canadian news outlets.

I chose to talk about this issue because I witnessed the phenomenon first hand working at a grocery store part-time as a cashier. Many people disclosed to me their extreme fear of COVID-19 and the need they had to buy toilet paper. I had customers swear at me because I limited their toilet paper purchase. I had people rant, scream, and cry over toilet paper. I asked myself what would cause these people to be so irrational? My first-hand experience and shock inspired this paper.

### **Literature Review**

Stockpiling was part of the normal human reaction in the face of crisis. However, it grew from a normal response to a global phenomenon of irrational behaviour when it came to toilet paper. Consumer behaviour always changes to some extent during times of crisis (and especially pandemics), as established in "I'll trade you diamonds for toilet paper" (2020) by Colleen P. Kirk and Laura S. Rifkin. Their study concludes that if scarce items are deemed essential, and there is a threat of unavailability, people will continue to stockpile until that threat is gone (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). There is also a chance of threat and violence between consumers to secure the scarce product for themselves (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Kirk and Rifkin's ideas support my research question because the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon did not end until people were limited on the quantity they were allowed to buy, which secured availability even if only one package per household. However, the article focuses on explaining and predicting behaviour changes during crises, not what factors trigger these behaviour changes. It does inform my research in describing behaviours and personality traits associated with stockpiling during COVID-19.

In a study on media influences on consumer behaviour, Loxton et al. (2020) concluded that the mass media provokes heightened responses in people during pandemics and that the news media gain a massive audience increase during crises (Loxton et al., 2020). This paper supports my research because it exposes motivations the people could have for wanting to participate in the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon. However, there is no evidence given in the study if the mass media influences directly caused people to hoard toilet paper (Loxton et al., 2020). The study is highly theoretical without many practical examples of the media's strategies to influence the panic.

The final study directly related to my research topic was a cross-sectional study where the researchers scrutinized the media reports of panic buying from the English media reports published up until May 22nd, 2020 (Arafat et al., 2020). This research is a powerful narrative about the content of news articles about toilet paper stockpiling. Their findings, such as the need to practice greater caution in reporting about panic buying (Arafat et al., 2020), reflect in my research as well. However, the study has many limitations, like only analyzing news articles which are not reliable data. They also did not use a systematic search strategy, nor did they use an established instrument for conducting their research (Arafat et al., 2020).

I found many articles that were not directly related to toilet paper stockpiling but were nonetheless relevant, such as discussing the impact of headlines (Basenko & Radchenko, 2020) and the effects of photographs in news-reports on the issue perception (Zillman et al., 1999).

Although I do not reference it often in the paper, the Hypodermic Needle Theory coined by Harold Lasswell in the 1920's/1930's (Lamb, 2020) did aid my research process. This theory states that the masses are a passive audience into which the mass media "injects" ideas which

they then blindly adopt as truth (Lamb, 2020). This theory has been heavily criticized and largely dismissed by many scholars but this theory can explain the way the toilet paper stockpiling trend became a phenomenon. Even if it was not the intention of the media, much of the content they published preyed on people's fear leading them to believe in a worldwide toilet paper tragedy.

### **Research Method**

This exploratory study is conducted using media analysis: a qualitative method applicable to all media forms (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2014). I analyzed news articles printed in March and April of 2020 about toilet paper stockpiling. Media analysis as a qualitative research method is used to understand historical and current phenomena (Bouma et al., 2019) and examine, interpret, and critique the channels' material content (Allen, 2018). This method is appropriate for this study because I aim to explore different mass media responses to the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon, which occurred in early 2020 at the start of COVID-19. Similar to the 2020 study by Arafat et al., I will be analyzing news articles. However, rather than evaluating the nature, extent, and impact of panic buying (Arafat et al., 2020), I will be seeking to understand to what extent the mass media played a role in proliferating the stockpiling phenomenon. This research project solely uses secondary research and will be informed by already available data (Bouma et al., 2019).

### **Method of Data Collection**

I will examine news articles from mostly Canadian news outlets to find to what extent the mass media influenced the stockpiling phenomenon. I selected the sample using purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling (Bouma et al., 2019). I selected articles from five major news outlets in Canada: CBC News, Global News, The Globe and Mail, CTV, and Narcity.

I chose two articles for each newspaper, reflecting the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon (range mid-March-early-May 2020). The articles I selected are all reports and not opinion pieces or interviews with people who are not authorities. I wanted to focus solely on digital articles for ease of access. Although the issue skyrocketed on social media, it was not the main source of primary information but rather a reaction to the mass media articles, so I will not be discussing its role in the phenomenon.

### **Data Analysis**

Although social science research usually studies the individual (Bouma et al., 2019), my research will focus on the mass media at large and different media outlets within it. The units of analysis for this research are various mass media outlets in Canada. Specifically, I will analyze the headlines and photos presented with the articles. I will explore headlines based on "a pragmalinguistic analysis of newspaper headlines" (Baskenko & Radchenko, 2020) and the photographs based on "effects of photographs in news-headline reports on issue perception" (Gibson et al., 1999).

### **Discussion**

The biggest take away from my research is that it seems it was not the news media's intention to stimulate the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon. The origins of the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon are likely a result of people feeling the need to buy hygiene supplies (Sajan, 2020), or protect their family and be well-prepared (Andrew, 2020). Earlier this year, the Government of Canada advised people to stock up on essential items (food, hygiene supplies,

and medicine) to last a two week period. Because COVID-19 is a virus, it is natural for people to want to protect themselves with sanitary products available, and reasonable for them to stock up on those items. In addition to this government advice, many people became emotionally vulnerable during the initial stages of COVID-19, leading them to make more irrational choices (Garbe et al., 2020). The mass media did not "start" the craze, but it did impact its intensity and length.

I believe the news media did influence people to stockpile but more through subtle and unintentional ways. Of course, writing about the phenomenon would increase their audience but not more than writing about other notable contemporary issues, and not enough to make substantially more revenue. Visits to news media sites in Canada peaked in March and April and remain an average of 28% higher than before the pandemic (Essling & Whiteman, 2020), which means knowledge of the issue was widespread across Canada (and the world).

### **Headlines**

I found that headlines alone potentially did play a large role in perpetuating the panic as 80% of readers were found to judge news articles based on their headlines (Basenko & Radchenko, 2020). Even though many of the initial articles about toilet paper said things along the lines of "Canada won't be wiped out of toilet paper" (Glowacki & Mussa, 2020), they still generated discussion about the issue. These articles had a lot more reader comments than many other articles. Headlines were mostly very informative but did not give any indication that people should stop. They would state that hoarding was not necessary, but not that it was out of control (Proctor, 2020). I think this made people feel they were justified in stockpiling and participating in the trend. In this way, the Hypodermic Needle Theory presented by Harold Lasswell has some

merit. Essentially this theory states that "media messages are injected directly into the brains of a passive audience" (Lamb, 2019). It does seem to me that the media zoned in on this issue, and immediately it went from a trend to a worldwide phenomenon erupting in a world of fear, amusement, memes, and non-stop news. Everyone was talking about it, and many people's beliefs were based off of the mass media's depiction of the issue, and many were likely based just on headlines. Many "prosumers" even took what they heard on the media and began advertising it themselves (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2014) on social media. This was done in many forms, both out of amusement and fear. People shared news articles on personal social network pages, posting memes, and anecdotes about the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon. By sharing the issue with others, more and more people started paying attention to it in the news.

Newspaper headlines essentially serve as a "bait" for readers to get them emotionally interested in the article attached to the headline (Baskenko & Radchenko, 2020). People "higher in conscientiousness" tended to be more fearful of covid and thus more likely to stockpile (Garbe et al., 2020) and be affected by news articles about the phenomenon. I hypothesize that many people did not make it past the headlines for articles about toilet paper because they were already emotional after just reading the headline.

What was especially impactful were anecdotes such as on Narcity on March 26th, "People are calling 911 for toilet paper in Calgary." (Hilash, 2020). Hearing these specific stories made people want to buy toilet paper more because it was "valuable" and "worthy of being stolen".

### Images

Another aspect of news articles that likely encouraged people to stockpile was images which can "stir up emotion...like no other means of expression" (Gibson et al., 1999). The pictures published alongside news media articles about toilet paper stockpiling only enhanced the bursting emotion that many people were feeling. The purpose of images in news reports is to "support, and not contradict the overall message of a report" (Gibson et al., 1999). There were definite links between the images and what was being reported, but the photos all were fear-invoking. The pictures were not terrifying in the way the portrait of Alan Kurdi washing up on a Turkish shore was; that was far away. These articles were rampant with images of empty shelves, carts full of toilet paper, signs displayed announcing a limit for customers, or signs displayed in stores saying they were out of stock. The threat was so near home at the Costcos and Walmarts only five minutes away from people's homes. Images are automatically more poignant when taken in familiar places that seemed so steady and safe before (Gibson et al., 1999).

Toilet paper packages are large, which is very noticeable when there is a lack of stock (Proctor, 2020) or an unusually high amount in someone's shopping cart. To present my findings for this section, I will include images corresponding with the types of photographs described above.

## 2020 TOILET PAPER STOCKPILING PHENOMENON



Image courtesy of CBC News. Man piling toilet paper into a shopping cart.



Image courtesy of CBC News. Empty toilet paper aisle.



Image courtesy of CTV News. Limiting toilet paper purchases.



Image courtesy of CTV News. Stores experiencing product shortages.

These pictures are just a sample of the images that I found in my analysis of the news articles. In every single article, I read there was a variation of these images. Because a lot of articles and stories started circulating the web, there was no escape from seeing the images associated with them. When I look at these images I am reminded of how empty and uncertain those early days in the pandemic were. I remember my roommates and I ran out of toilet paper and we couldn't buy any for more than a week. I remember seeing articles about the phenomenon and being annoyed because we actually could not buy any. It was nice to be informed about the issue, and I think the images published were a realistic depiction of the situation. However, it did not help halt the panic when I saw other people's carts full of toilet paper, leaving behind an empty aisle, when so many people could not find any.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with other research done about the 2020 toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon, this research fills a knowledge gap about phenomenons during the initial stages of COVID-19. However, there are limitations of the study. I analyzed mostly English Canadian news reports, so this study cannot speak for reports in other countries and languages. The samples I used were all

news reports, which are only one aspect of the mass media. I did not analyze print-only news articles or articles that circulated on social media. I would have also liked to conduct interviews with people who admitted to stockpiling and what their perceptions were, and with others to get a general perspective. However, primary human research of any kind was not in the scope of this research project.

Since I used purposive sampling there was a high risk of researcher bias in selecting the articles. However, I tried to be as objective as possible and choose samples that seemed representative of the issue, and not of what I wanted them to say.

### **Conclusion & Further Research**

In conclusion, the role of the news media in perpetuating the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon was instrumental. Especially in the initial stages of the panic, many people were heavily influenced by the news because it was a source that knew more than they did about the mysterious coronavirus. It is important to note that the baiting headlines and jarring images seemingly played a considerable role in spreading the phenomenon. The headlines often were informative about the issue but not reassuring that toilet paper stockpiling was not necessary. The images were always depicting empty toilet paper shelves, people with carts full of toilet paper, or signs stores had put up to inform people of delays in toilet paper shipments. These images relay a bleak message to the viewer that a shortage was upon us, and the need to stockpile was imminent.

In May 2020 (only two months after the phenomenon began), the stockpiling craze ended. Stores quickly began limiting the amount of toilet paper per household. Large sanitary manufacturing companies such as Kruger paid workers substantial overtime to meet the demand

(Glowacki & Kruger., 2020). Slowly the supply met the demand, and toilet paper was once again available for purchase whenever people desired it.

After conducting this research, I am very motivated to place this issue into a broader context. I have many more questions now than when I started the project. For example, I would like to know what type of people were more likely to stockpile toilet paper and what crimes were committed in Canada to obtain toilet paper. I would also like to know first-hand experiences with the phenomenon and how different people would respond to articles I have studied. If I were to do the study again and had more time, I would like to explore international news articles about the phenomenon and see if the type of news writing varies between countries. I would also like to study the more humorous side of the issue such as people posting on social media with their “toilet paper forts” and like-material.

Overall I did find evidence that news articles perpetuated the phenomenon, but not as much as I thought I would. I thought the media played a larger role initially, but it seems that they just reported on it in an elaborate way rather than instigating it.

Lastly, research is a never-ending process, and I acknowledge that this paper scratches the surface of the toilet paper stockpiling phenomenon and the news media. It has been a great experience to reflect on my observations and to bring an academic perspective. I hope to do more research on this topic in the future.

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