



## Do people change their buying behavior during crises? Insights from the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka

**T.Prabaharan**

Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

### ABSTRACT

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, panic buying occurs in several nations, including Sri Lanka, which causes shortages of merchandise, problems with supply chains, and numerous issues with daily life for individuals. Especially in the setting of Sri Lanka, this is a very new and uncharted area of consumer behavior. As a result, the objective of this study is to investigate the panic buying patterns of consumers in relation to Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) during the COVID-19 pandemic's height in Sri Lanka. The study employed a qualitative methodological approach due to the dearth of existing literature and the desire to unearth real customer insights. In the Western Province of Sri Lanka, interviews that were semi-structured with 25 individuals were conducted. Individuals were chosen using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling method. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The study discovered that during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly at the start of the pandemic period, customers' usual buying habits changed. Regarding purchasing quantity, mode of purchase, price-sensitive shopper, purchasing duration, purchasing location, and brand preference, seven basic variations were identified. In addition, four themes—fear of dread, protective behaviors, social influence, and social trust—were developed as explanations for why FMCG consumers engage in such panic buying. By finding changes in consumer purchasing behavior, especially in a pandemic condition, and the reasons for such changes, which is a rare phenomenon in the prior literature, the study provides new insights. The study provides authorities insight into the best ways to cope with circumstances where people are panic buying. Without interfering with their internal business procedures, retailers can use this expertise to efficiently address the various demand situations.

**Keywords:** Buying behavior, Pandemic, COVID-19.

\*Corresponding [nawammini2012@gmail.com](mailto:nawammini2012@gmail.com)

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### 1. Introduction

In late 2019 in Wuhan, China, a novel coronavirus, now known as COVID-19, was found (Tu, Tu, Gao, Shao, & Sheng, 2020). Since then, it has spread around the world, infecting over 220 million people and killing over 4.57 million by the end of September 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). Additionally, it has a significant negative impact on nearly every nation's economy and health. As of April 2020, Sri Lanka has also been classified as a country at risk of contracting the pandemic (Liyanapathirana, Ferdinando, & Palihawadana, 2020). The Sri Lankan government has occasionally imposed lockdowns for severely afflicted districts or the

entire nation to limit public gatherings and forbid holidays and festivities (De Mel & Kapilan, 2020). Additionally, the government worked to inform citizens of the value of preserving a social distance and taking the proper preventative measures to stop the virus from spreading (Silva, 2021).

The COVID-19 has resulted in unusual consumer behaviors, such as panic buying globally (Laato, Islam, Farooq, & Dhir, 2020). In addition to causing health and economic crises around the world. In Sri Lanka, during the COVID-19 outbreak, numerous customers displayed peculiar shopping patterns at specific stores (Weerasinghe & Selvarajan, 2021). Consumer commodities like rice, milk, oil, cookies, dairy products, etc. were perceived as being in short supply (Keane & Neal, 2021). They hurried to buy these items in large quantities, which led to a shortage of consumer goods on the market, notably for items like fuel, wine, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), and necessities (Thakur & Kiran, 2021). Supermarkets consequently had to contend with big crowds, empty shelves, and lengthy lineups at cash registers (David, Visvalingam, & Norberg, 2021). Additionally, it resulted in problems with client retention, handling of inventory, and demand management (Dulam, Furuta, & Kanno, 2021). Additionally, black marketing and other types of deliberate inflation were developed as a result of this aberrant purchasing behavior (Rubinstein, 2020).

Research on this subject is still in its infancy because it is a unique experience for many nations, and it is especially uncommon in Sri Lanka. The primary goal of this research is to ascertain how consumer purchasing patterns have changed, particularly with regard to FMCG, during the pandemic crisis in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the study seeks to comprehend the causes of these client behavioral shifts.

The conceptual basis of the study is presented next, followed by the study's methodology, and finally the results and commentary. The discussion concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical contributions, constraints, and future research prospects..

## **2. Literature Review**

### **A Brief History of Pandemic**

A massive epidemic of an infectious disease known as a "pandemic" strikes a whole nation or one or more continents simultaneously (Honigsbaum, 2009). However, a pandemic is defined by the dictionary as an epidemic that spreads internationally, across a big territory, and typically affects a lot of people (Last, 1990).

In the past, the absence of a vaccine allowed the Spanish flu to spread across international borders into numerous nations between 1918 and 1920 (Aassve, Alfani, Gandolfi, & Le Moglie, 2021; Hobbins, 2020). The first cases of HIV/Aids were discovered in the early 1980s and the disease now affects 40 million people globally, killing about two million people annually (Hemelaar, 2013). Though this number has decreased to over one million as a result of progressive awareness campaigns and the superiority of medical procedures (GBD 2015 HIV Collaborators, 2016). Early in the new millennium, the severe acute respiratory syndrome

(SARS) outbreak started in China and expanded to various regions of the world. (Huang, 2004). Although, it was soon put down and mostly affected China (Lu, Stratton, & Tang, 2020). Huremovi (2019) claims that despite the fact that the death rate was considerably lower than the average influenza death rate, it was still seen as risky.

The most recent instance is Novel Coronavirus, or COVID-19, which started in late 2019 in Wuhan, China and has now spread to more than 200 nations almost everywhere in the world (World Health Organization, 2021). It has an impact on the community's everyday behavior in addition to health problems, including changes in their social interactions how they spend money, and consumer behavioral changes (Marais & Sorrell, 2020; Hall, Fieger, Prayag, & Dyason, 2021; Okabe-Miyamoto, Folk, Lyubomirsky, & Dunn, 2021; Martin, Markhvida, Hallegatte, & Walsh, 2020). The existing scholarly discourses, however, have not sufficiently addressed these shifts in consumer behavior (Eger, Komárková, Egerová, & Mik, 2021).

### **Consumer behavior**

The selection, acquisition, and consumption of goods and services that fulfill human needs and desires can be characterized as consumer behavior (Al-Hashimi & AlDhari, 2019). The main influences on consumer behavior include cultural, societal, personal, and psychological ones (Cohen & Areni, 1991). Additionally, consumer perceptions and opinions about a brand or its products have an impact on those.

Anthropology, sociology, and psychology provide the theoretical underpinnings for comprehending consumer behavior (Fullerton, 2013). Consumers go through three stages of the decision-making process, including the pre-buy, purchase, and post-purchase stages. (Solomon 2018). However, depending on the situation, a person's position in making purchases may change (Chandan, 2019).

For marketers to fully comprehend customer expectations and the driving forces behind purchasing decisions, they need to understand consumer purchasing behavior (Solomon, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2012; Jo, Shin, & Kim, 2021). Marketers can close gaps in the market by understanding what influences consumers' purchase decisions (Santos, Ramos, Sousa, Almeida & Valeri, 2021).

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2000), purchasing behavior has a goal and is not necessarily deliberate. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the many consumer types with various buying choice behaviors based on the amount of participation (Galdolage, 2013), as well as the capacity to recognize important variations between the brands (Molthersbaugh, Hawkins, & Utomo, 2016). Consumers, however, do not restrict their behavior to a specific pattern and can change it according to the circumstance and purchase factors. When pandemics strike, consumer behavior changes and becomes uncommon, which has not been properly researched (Keane & Neal, 2021).

## **Panic Buying Behavior**

Panic buying of storable consumer goods is a prevalent habit during natural disasters or man-made crises (Yuen, Wang, Ma, & Li, 2020). As a result, it is not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused panic purchasing of storable consumer products in several countries, including toilet paper, rice, pasta, etc. (Loxton et al., 2020). When people buy unusually large quantities of goods in anticipation of a disaster or a crisis, they feel is imminent, or in expectation of a big price increase or scarcity, this is known as panic buying (Naeem, 2021; Kaur & Malik, 2020). Whether the fear of a shortage is genuine or imagined, panic buying is a sort of herd behavior (Arafat, Hussain, Kar, Menon, & Yuen, 2020), leading to a true scarcity of commodities (X. Li, Zhou, Wong, Wang, & Yuen, 2021). According to Sim, Chua, Vieta, and Fernandez (2020), fear and panic are important human responses to approaching public health threats including epidemics and pandemics.

In behavioral research, panic attacks or panic disorders—particularly in psychiatry—are used to define panic buying (Parks, 2002). The phrase "collective behavior" describes sudden, unexpected action that tends to be considered unusual instead of a regular (non-normative) activity (Oliver, 2013). If the problem of COVID-19 is closely related to purchasing in panic, it shares the same characteristics in that it occurs suddenly and spirals out of control (Billore & Anisimova, 2021). Shopping panic, sometimes known as "panic buying," refers to the behavior of consumers who purchase huge quantities of goods in order to prevent future shortages (Shou, Xiong, & Shen, 2013).

Additionally, during disasters or other unfavorable occurrences, supply disruption, a circumstance where normal supply of goods in the supply line is interrupted, has been regularly seen (Shou et al., 2013). Many individuals, fearing the worst, impulsively purchase as much nourishment, gasoline, and medical supplies as they can in such circumstances (Billore & Anisimova, 2021).

## **3. Research Methodology**

There is a paucity of research on how consumer spending patterns alter during pandemics, with the Sri Lankan setting being particularly devoid of data. Therefore, exploratory study was carried out (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Babu, Veluswamy, Rao, and Maiya (2014) claim that humanistic or idealistic thinking is used in qualitative research to better understand a study subject. The use of qualitative methods is the most appropriate because the goal of this study is to analyze changes in consumer behavior brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The non-probabilistic purposive sample method was used to select 25 clients from the Colombo District of Sri Lanka, representing various demographics (Abrams, 2010; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Data were gathered from February to May, 2022 through deep interviews, which are among the more popular qualitative research techniques. This is a one-on-one conversational interview with just one responder at a time, allowing for more information from the respondents. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the interviews were

done in a natural (unmanipulated) context solely for the respondents' convenience. The conversations began with introductions and a brief summary of the study and continued for 30-45 minutes or until there was information duplication. (Robinson, 2014). This is a one-on-one conversational interview with just one responder at a time, allowing for more information from the respondents. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the interviews were done in a natural (unmanipulated) context solely for the respondents' convenience. The conversations began with introductions and a brief summary of the study and continued for 30-45 minutes or until there was information duplication. (Robinson, 2014). The study's final step involved developing strong arguments by contrasting study results with relevant literature. (Aronson, 1995).

### **Theoretical Contributions**

By addressing a relevant issue that has gotten little consideration in scholarly work, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, this study addresses a theoretical gap. By analyzing shifts in consumer buying habits in Sri Lanka throughout the COVID-19 pandemic era and the causes of such changes, it adds to the theory. The study found a panic buying situation throughout the global epidemic and identified seven (07) significant changes in consumer purchasing, including changes to amount purchased, mode of purchase, less price sensitivity, shopper, purchasing time, location, and brand preference. The study also identified twelve (12) key causes of these panic buying circumstances and grouped them into five key themes: fear of fear, protective behavior, social influence, and social trust and communication.

### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

This study intends to 1. explore the changes in consumer purchasing behavior during the pandemic crisis in Sri Lanka, especially with regard to the purchase of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), and 2. investigate the causes of such changes in consumer behavior. The results are consequently given in the following sections.

#### **Changes in consumer buying behavior due to COVID-19**

Investigating shifting consumer purchase patterns in the FMCG sector during the COVID-19 epidemic is one of the study's main objectives. The research uncovered seven (07) significant shifts in consumer buying patterns: brand preference, purchasing quantity, less price sensitivity, shopper, purchasing time, location, and mode of purchase.

**Choice of Brands:** Customers give brand one of the most important considerations when making any kind of purchase. Most individuals prefer to purchase products from recognizable brands. However, the researchers found that, regardless of the brand they choose, people tend to purchase some products during the COVID pandemic. Brand loyalty is given up in favor of reducing the possibility of supply shortages.

In the past, we consumed Maliban milk powder. Nowhere could we find it. Additionally, the kids are accustomed to Maliban's biscuits. In any case, we cannot squander time looking for our preferred brands. Anything is preferable to nothing. Therefore, we bought whatever was on sale in the store. (50 years, female)

**Purchasing quantity:** In this pandemic crisis, people were unsure of how to react. As mentioned by respondents, they frequently buy large quantities of goods, particularly at the start of the pandemic. Because of unforeseen circumstances, such lockdowns, they hurried to purchase food and essential FMCGs in large quantities.

The initial COVID wave caused a great deal of fear. During that month, we spent over a lakh rupee on food and other items. In contrast, we typically spend 40,000 rupees every month on purchases of consumer items. (Male,35years)

The answers above demonstrate how the pandemic scenario in Sri Lanka has influenced consumer spending and the volume of products bought.

**Less price sensitivity:** During this time, it has been observed that individuals have gathered necessary FMCGs without considering price. Despite the fact that they were pricey, they wanted to purchase their essentials. They bought what was on hand at the first store they visited instead of wasting time comparing pricing of alternatives. Additionally, due to the dangerous environment brought on by the epidemic, consumers prefer home deliveries despite the higher delivery fees.

You are aware that costs might occasionally be excessive. But what should I do? We must possess them. We can't waste time looking at competing products or hopping from place to place in quest of what we really want. Supermarkets often advise customers to Get out of here as soon as you can. We had to pay delivery fees when I placed my item online. However, since they offered the identical items on our list, we were unconcerned about price (42 years male)

**Shopper:** Because of the global COVID-19 problem, many were reluctant to leave their houses. In spite of the fact that families used to shop together in normal situations, during the COVID-19 only one or a few members of a family, typically those who had to travel for work, were accustomed to shopping.

Previously, Saturdays and Sundays were reserved for family shopping trips. Children like taking part in their shopping experience with enthusiasm. But as of right now, my husband is the only one that shops and brings anything we need when he gets home from work (37 years, female).

**Shopping/ purchasing time:** The results of the study showed that under typical conditions, consumers spend more time shopping. On the contrary, it limits the amount of time individuals spend in stores during the

pandemic to the absolute minimum. Additionally, some supermarkets have limits on the number of visitors and the amount of time they can spend shopping.

We used to be able to purchase anything we wanted whenever we wanted in the past. Without a strategy, we go shopping and purchase anything we feel like at the time. In the past, we used to browse the shelves and make our selections. Now, though, I write a list before going shopping, go swiftly to pick up the items, and then hurry home (30 years, female).

**Shopping location:** Several participants reported that they had switched from their usual shopping locations and are now going to online stores or local stores that are less exposed and congested.

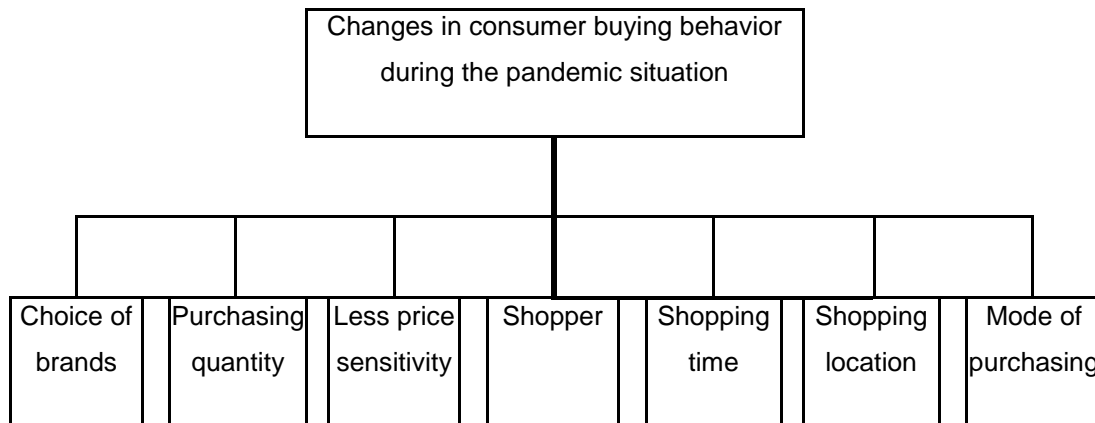
Before COVID, we used to buy fish at the fish market and other products at the wholesale shop, but we stopped going there and even stopped visiting the wholesale shop. Given that the wholesale store is frequented by many individuals and is a risky location, we made the decision to buy everything from our neighborhood store. (35 years, Male)

**Mode of purchasing:** People were terrified to leave their homes during the pandemic because of how quickly the illness was spreading. Three purchase strategies were identified by the survey as being used by people in Sri Lanka during the pandemic. They used to buy things from mobile distributors who came to their homes in lorries and from internet marketplaces.

Some respondents stated that they had shifted their purchasing habits from physically visiting the store to purchasing online.

When I learned that going into physical stores is dangerous, I stopped doing my customary shopping. I switched to internet shopping and placed my orders there, especially when the government was closed. Everything was ordered, including sugar, rice, dhal, milk powder, and a number of other needs. (Male, 46 years).

The idea of online shopping is still in the early stages for a nation like Sri Lanka. The elder generation was unfamiliar with the online purchasing system, despite the fact that the younger generation was. However, the survey found that throughout COVID-19, many consumers grew acclimated to making purchases via the internet or over the phone. Yet, certain individuals used to use mobile delivery vehicles to get their necessities.



**Figure 1: Changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic situation**  
(Source: The author compiled)

### Exploring the influencing factors of adapting to the panic buying behavior of FMCG

The investigation into what drives panic purchase of FMCGs during the COVID-19 outbreak follows. The study found 12 causes of panic buying, and after comparing them to the literature, it was able to group them into four main themes: 1) Fear to fear 2) Protective Behavior 3) Social trust and 4) social influence 5) Communication.

**Fear of Fear** - When faced with a psychological risk (such as the worry of running out of stock products) or a physical risk, a person may feel the emotional state known as fear of fear. (e.g., fear of illness). According to our research, four things—risk information, apprehension about the future, stockouts, and supply shortages—are responsible for people's feelings of fear and panic buying.

**Protective Behavior** - A safety consciousness and building resilience program called Protective Behaviors teaches adults and children how to identify circumstances that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable and then examines doable safety measures. People made purchases for their own and their family members' protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. We need food and drink to survive, so I packed a lot as I was unwilling to take a chance. Additionally, because my father is elderly and I couldn't risk my kids being hungry, I purchased enough rice and other necessities to last approximately an entire month. (Female, 55 years)

**Social Trust:** When a person has an elevated degree of social trust, they are less likely to hoard resources and share them with others who may be in need, which shows that they are more empathetic and supportive. A high degree of social mistrust in the nation can cause the populace to act in a selfish manner out of concern that others would take all of their share and leaving little behind. As a result, panic buying occurs. The results show that the public's confidence in society throughout the outbreak of a pandemic can be divided into two categories: trust in providers and trust in the government.



**Social Influence:** Decisions made by individuals may be influenced by other social groups. This study concludes that social impact explains how consumers adjust their behavior throughout the pandemic to satisfy distinct social environment criteria. The study highlighted social pressure and social trends as the sources of social influence.

**Social Trend:** The trend had an impact on consumer purchasing behavior during the crisis to some extent. One of the most significant changes in consumer behavior during the epidemic was the rise of online shopping. Additionally, some consumers changed their buying habits by copying the actions of others. A neighbor lady told me that she bought it online, and then I got that package as well online (Female, 42 years)

**Social Pressure:** Due to the fact that they had never experienced something similar before, people were under a lot of stress throughout the pandemic. They didn't know exactly what to do and what not to do in the face of the pandemic. Parents at home put pressure on me to keep stocks; they would contact me repeatedly and ask me to do so. When I observed others, I felt pressed as well. I therefore bought an abundance of products in the initial wave—more than usual. (Female, 23 years).

**Communication:** We discovered that during the COVID-19 epidemic, people tended to learn more about the disease from sources including rumors, news, and social media.

**Rumors:** There are widespread rumors that a lockdown will be established, a curfew will be implemented, and foreign items would not be imported. As a result, we made the essential purchases in order to be ready. (Male, 37 years).

**News:** I made the decision to purchase more items after learning from the news that the administration had chosen to impose a curfew and was planning to put the nation on lockdown. (Male, 30 years)

**Social Media:** While I was at home during the lockdown, I viewed YouTube videos related to the global epidemic and read Facebook updates about the current state of the nation. I was frightened by it, so I made more purchases. (Female, 29 years). Figure 2 provides a summary of the findings that explains the causes of changes in consumer purchasing patterns during the epidemic.

## Discussion

According to the current state of affairs, COVID-19 has altered work-life (Boland, De Smet, Palter, and Sanghvi, 2020), shopping habits (X. Huang, Kujipers, Li, Sha, and Xia, 2020), the educational system (Karunathilake and Galdolage, 2021), changes in communication (Viswanath, Lee, and Pinnamaneni, 2020), social gatherings (Malay, 2020), (Varade, 2020). This study concentrated on examining variations in customer impulse purchases of FMCG products as well as the causes of such fluctuations. The study discovered that during the pandemic, more FMCG products were bought and more money was spent on them. In a similar

vein, NielsenIQ (2020) discovered that because of the uncertainty at that time, people are inclined to purchase more FMCG products in bulk.

Similarly, Koch, Frommeyer, and Schewe (2020) discovered that when buyers sensed dangers, fear of disease, worry of shortage of supplies, etc., their online purchase intentions increased. The same was discovered by Ozturk (2020), who noted that throughout the pandemic, client shopping reasons shifted from in-person to online. Uncertainty and unfavorable outcomes, which were considered as the main causes of perceived risks that led to panic buying, (Bauer, 1967; Mitchell, 1999).

Four main themes have been identified by Yuen et al. (2020) as elements that influence panic buying: perception, fear of the unknown, coping mechanisms, and social psychological factors.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are numerous ways in which the COVID-19 epidemic significantly affects consumer behavior. It reveals that panic buying occurred during the epidemic among Sri Lankan consumers as well as the remainder of the world. They often change their usual buying habits, including how much they buy, when they shop, where they shop, and which brands they prefer. Additionally, most consumers changed from shopping with their families to shopping alone, particularly those who have jobs outside their homes or in the retail industry. During the pandemic time, it was widely known that consumers lost interest in price sensitivity and brand loyalty.

## **Practical Implications**

The study offers useful recommendations for managing panic buying situations, particularly during pandemics, for policymakers, retail outlets, grocery store chains, FMCG producers, and communication platforms. It is only normal for issues to occur when clients purchase a product in huge amounts, such as challenges with controlling demand, inventory, and devoted customers. The study's conclusions offer causes for impulse purchasing, which the appropriate authorities can concentrate on reducing.

Additionally, the data will help businesses who make products manage the numerous demand circumstances that develop during an anxious buying situation. Knowing the causes of impulse purchases and how consumer buying habits changes at such periods can help distributors and intermediaries develop their strategy. Authorities in advertising and communication can also use this understanding to manage crises situation and manage the control of prices and supply levels.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study is restricted to the Western Province of Sri Lanka and is only allowed to explore the research findings utilizing a qualitative methodological approach. Future scholars can carry out a study utilizing quantitative methods that compares other countries or covers the entire island. The findings may not be equally apparent during the entire COVID-19 epidemic period due to customers' adoption of such a circumstance over time as the present research is single cross-sectional in nature and is limited to a specific period. The study only looked at the FMCG category; hence, consumer behavior in a pandemic situation may differ when buying other types of products.

As a result, this study will open up opportunities for future researchers to carry out studies that span the entire island, take into account other product kinds, or perform longitudinal studies to evaluate consumer behavior throughout various epidemic time periods.

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