

## Toilet Paper Panic: Who's to Blame?

*A deep dive into the psychological and logistical reasons for this unusual phenomenon*

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Sweat trickles down flushed, red cheeks. A heavy left hook lands on the challenger's face, rattling her whole body. Yet, even as she is hit hard, the well-dressed woman still clings to a long bundle of white toilet paper rolls, guarding it like her “precious”. Screams and shouts punctuate the shocking scene.



A fierce fight for toilet tissue

What causes these primitive, violent impulses to come out of hibernation, in a bright and modern supermarket no less? The answer may bemuse you - these are shoppers paying the price of blood for a few rolls of toilet tissue.

As quick as a flash, toilet paper became the most wanted item during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. From Hong Kong to Australia, and then worldwide, anxious consumers were snapping up every roll they could find on the shelves. People were yelling, grabbing, and even using their fists, to hoard this treasured tissue. These daily conflicts were a global occurrence.

Why would ordinary, civilized people all of a sudden turn into savages? It could be that people are by nature impetuous, turbulent, and anxious, and these supermarket struggles were a reflection of a chaotic world. The reasons for this mass-scale hoarding are likely to be myriad, and behavioral psychology can shed some light on the root of this problem. So before we decide on who the culprit is, we may be able to find a logical explanation for the panic.

Let's first dig deeper into the origins of this unusual hoarding situation. In January 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 filled the air in Hong Kong with fear and anxiety, and the climate for spreading rumors was ripe. A post on social media insinuated that the importing of toilet paper from China to Hong Kong would collapse in mid-February. Within a few hours, the inventory of toilet paper was emptied by panic-stricken buyers. As photos of people stacking piles of white tissues in shopping carts filled the newsfeeds of Facebook and Twitter, this tiny spark in Hong Kong ignited a fire of a global toilet paper panic. So how did these unsubstantiated rumors set off a shopping frenzy?

“I can’t control the spread of the coronavirus; all I can do is to purchase as much toilet paper as I can find to deal with the uncertain situation.” A middle-aged woman at a Marketplace explained why her shopping cart was piled up with more than 10 packs. “That’s the only way I can protect my family. What if it [the rumor] turns out to be real?”

This irrational excessive hoarding behavior may be explained by the “zero-risk bias”. People are not only buying some rolls of toilet paper; they’re also securing a key which unlocks a door to a sense of safety. We as human beings are innately intolerant of uncertainty. We generally prefer situations that have absolute and anticipated outcomes, and we try to avoid negative or harmful consequences.



Toilet paper = control and safety?

“The whole world is facing uncertainty, so people may feel better if they are able to eliminate some of the risks that are in their life,” Prof. Kang, a researcher from the Ministry of Culture of the P.R.C., told me in a telephone interview. “Individuals cannot control whether or not they catch the coronavirus, but they can diminish the risk of running out of toilet paper. This hoarding offers them a sense of control in this difficult period.”

The desire for “zero-risk” is deeply rooted in our psyche. The coronavirus outbreak has intensified our sense of vulnerability, and the slightest turbulence in the air makes the atmosphere even more tense. In the trade-off between rational thinking and eliminating potential risk, the majority choose the latter. Since the risk of being unprepared in an uncertain situation is frighteningly high and the cost of toilet paper relatively low, the desire to cram household shelves with roll after roll may be understandable.

Prof. Kang also talked about “herd mentality”, a common reaction in times of crisis. The truth is not important to a crowd; thus, it would be hard to think rationally and independently when surrounded by a throng of panic buyers in the supermarket. “An individual in the crowd is just like a grain of sand in a desert. Even a breeze can blow it away,” Prof. Kang emphasized.

No doubt the hoarders and panic buyers should be blamed for the empty shelves, but they should not bear the full responsibility. Their psychology aside, we may still wonder why stores still had trouble keeping toilet paper in stock even while they limited how much a customer could purchase. A closer examination of the toilet paper supply chain might offer some logical explanations.

The toilet paper industry has two separate segments: consumer and commercial. In January,

most citizens began working from home, so they were using their own bathrooms more often. While people's frequency of bathroom use didn't increase, the bathrooms in their own homes were being used more often. So, actually, people *did* need to purchase more toilet paper. And as cities were placed in lockdown, suddenly the toilet paper in restaurants, offices, and campuses went completely unused. The coronavirus quarantine made the market demand shift suddenly from the commercial to the consumer.

A natural question then emerges: since there was a great amount of unused commercial products, why couldn't it simply be redistributed to the consumers?



No toilet paper in stores, but plenty in offices.

“Toilet paper in the commercial and consumer markets are fundamentally distinct. They use different paper mills and have different sizes,” a previous P&G paper factory worker, Mr. Wang, said in a video interview. “It’s very difficult for a company that produces commercial toilet paper products to shift to the consumer market.” There was no quick solution to be found at the manufacturing level.

But surely there was some extra inventory, somewhere? No. It turns out that the supply chain had other redistribution problems. “Neither the manufacturer nor the seller stores much inventory because toilet paper bundles have a large volume but a low profit,” explained Mr. Wang.

Thus, the supply chain is like a well-choreographed orchestra; it could not adjust to a surge increase in demand within a short time, leading to a continuous shortage of the product. It seems that the frenzied buyers aren't the only ones to blame for the lack of stock.

Despite all this, there may still be a silver lining in the story of the toilet paper panic. In the social media chatrooms of the Hong Kong district forums, citizens began offering their excess inventories of the precious paper to the people in need. The toilet paper panic started from the anxiety in people's minds, and was eased with kindness from their hearts. Humanity once again faced a challenge, and a solution was already in our hearts.