

Customers' social interactions and panic buying behavior: insights from social media practices

Naeem M and Ozuem W

Abstract

The increasing use of social media has developed certain social practices which can influence customers' buying behavior during an unprecedented situation. There is limited understanding regarding how the fearful environment of Covid-19 changes customers' buying patterns in retail stores. Therefore, this study intends to explore how social practices and social influence through social media create panic buying behavior among customers. Information shared through social media is able to create material and meanings which can support the process of socially constructed knowledge of panic buying behavior. Therefore, the present study used qualitative data collection and analysis methods in order to understand these subjective realities. A total of 40 UK customers were participated based on specific inclusion criteria and interviewed using semi-structured interview method. Findings reveal that material, such as audios, videos, pictures, and messages are delivered but people extract different meanings from the shared information. Pictures of empty shelves created uncertainty about stock availability; as a result, people started panic buying groceries and other items from retail stores. When people saw long queues and full shopping carts, then they started to imitate each other, which ultimately developed into competition for buying extra goods at local and global levels. The major theoretical contribution of this study is that the researcher merged social practice theory (SPT) and social influence theory and constructed a research framework which provides understanding of what social factors through social media platforms have increased socially influenced panic buying practices among customers of the UK. The findings of this study extended SPT as they offered four psychological factors (herding, scarcity, competition and anxious reaction) which lead towards socially influenced panic buying practices among customers of retail stores. This study has discussed practically why there is a need to control socially shared information and panic buying behavior and how socially shared information can influence different people in different contexts.