

Confessions of a Hoarder: Critical Reflections on a Trip to the Supermarket

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The content of this piece is from a shopping trip the author took with her mother, which took place about two days after the declaration of the Luzon-wide lockdown.

Cashiers over at the stores are probably one of the most professional people. They ring your stuff up with a straight face.

They're seasoned by who knows what combinations of things they've seen coming from a basket or cart. But during a pandemic, the most familiar sight would be a cart pulling up and overloaded with mostly canned goods, instant noodles, and the occasional powdered milk.

There's a line between preparing and panic buying. Preparing is about taking into account how much you really need, based on how long the supplies are supposed to last through a set period.¹ It's rational because of the sound reasoning and logic. Panic buying is its opposite. But what do we do if it's the lack of information on the virus, ambiguity of instruction, growing fears of lack, the unforeseeable, and prospects of extended suffering, and attempts to control the situation which made the most sense to us at the time? No one saw this coming. How many of us were *just* being irked at water scarcity or following the politics of the medical world? How many of us were onlookers

when Martha Stewart went shopping for things, ideas, and food experiences? We were just getting caught in the laughs and drama vicariously in ‘Kuyas’ household and reveling in the high of victories from the SEA Games, maybe even chuckling at the latent effects of food diplomacy in the sports world² — this was part of what 2019 looked like. And I was expecting to electroswing into 2020 with Parov Stelar.

Panic buying has some reason though, if we look at it from Steven Taylor’s³ point of view:

Under circumstances like these, people feel the need to do something that’s proportionate to what they perceive is the level of the crisis... We know that washing your hands and practicing coughing hygiene is all you need to do at this point. But for many people, hand-washing seems to be too ordinary. This is a dramatic event, therefore a dramatic response is required, so that leads to people throwing money at things in hopes of protecting themselves.

A reason is still a reason — questions of sense or validity aside.

For those who still know shame, it’s not until you get to the front of the line that the slight discomfort kicks in from the pit of your stomach, of a feeling of awkwardness as you bring the items up two by two, or four by four, depending on how much you can fit in the size of your hands. You get the feeling you’re being watched — and worse, judged.

One-third of my shared cart was loaded with feminine napkins.

At the helm of the cart was my Mom and I was dropping things into it.

She whisper-shouted to me, “*Nikka makarine! 70 na ku purus lang napkin deng atiu keng cart ku — pota isipan dang atin kung almuranas!*” (Nikka this is embarrassing! I’m 70 years old and my cart is full of sanitary napkins! People are gonna think I have hemorrhoids!)

...There was a little over a year’s supply in that cart, by the way.

You begin to second guess your own judgment despite the perfect action plan you had before leaving the house, despite the justifications underlying said action plan which told yourself that you knew what you were doing.

Everybody's talking about Mental Health. *But what about Menstrual Health?*

I honestly thought my haul was a smart move. Sanitary pads don't spoil, eliminating any need to be in a rush to 'use by.' Interestingly, the wall remained immaculately stocked compared to the canned good aisles "this was of course before the gaping hole I left" and the feminine products aisle was practically devoid of shoppers except for the two people on the opposite end leisurely perusing for their preferred brand. This was the direct opposite of what was going on in Indonesia⁴, and also developing countries like India,⁵ ^{6,7} Bangladesh,⁸ Papua New Guinea,⁹ and Zimbabwe,¹⁰ with sanitary care supplies being extremely hard to come by.

It's a truth globally acknowledged that the outbreak of disease affects women and men differently; the COVID-19 pandemic worsens the existing inequalities for women.¹¹ Periods don't stop for pandemics, and the difficulties surface when global supply chains get disrupted, deliveries get slowed, private sector enterprises stop trading along with the added restricted movement during lockdowns¹² and when supply hoarding becomes the style.^{13, 14}

Strangely, at the time we were in line, none of the women around us bought pads nor tampons, and they were at an age when one might reasonably assume they were menstruating. It was the same cart after cart of canned goods.

In this pandemic, is dealing with ones period left to the resourcefulness of the woman to 5-Minute Craft some old shirts and retired sheets? It's a reality true for some women in the Solomon Islands¹⁵ and Fiji.¹⁶

Is it 'anything goes' just as long as it's absorbent? Though more likely out of necessity, this attitude or outlook leads to the possibility that people might resort to using unhygienic alternatives which may increase the risk of their getting reproductive and urinary tract infections.^{17, 18, 19, 20} On the other hand,

reusable material and DIY designs like menstrual cloths and reusable pads serving as alternatives for store-bought sanitary products come with the assumption that there's access to clean water and soap, and time to really wash them and let them dry.²¹ The move is feasible if there are instructions for safe reuse accessible on digital platforms and networks which reach women and girls.²²

Or maybe resourcefulness has to do with a question of allocation — like a cheap pack of pads has the equivalent value of two instant noodles; at least the whole family can benefit from the noodles. This pans in to either a sense of sacrifice in deliberately setting aside a need for the benefit of the many, in terms of food and bills, which is generally the case for Filipinas and some Fijians;²³ or the politics of the household that women 'can be less likely than men to have power in decision-making around the outbreak' resulting in their reproductive health needs going unmet.²⁴

Has the pad suddenly become a luxury item instead of some part of a monthly dignity kit? It's definitely something to think about, given how menstrual health items are 'central to womens health, empowerment, and sustainable development.'²⁵

Before the pandemic, shopping trips with my Mom involved sharing one cart, her paying for everything, and then going over my part of the expenses when we got home. Presently, there seems to be this reality of standing in line — that perennial cycle of customers going from nosy spectator, to being spectated. If you were fortunate to be shopping with someone, the immediate strategy would be to split the contents to render the judgmental gazes of the people behind you for naught. To spare my Mom the second-hand embarrassment, I went before her and paid for all my pads, cereal, and my share of the canned goods.

The thing was, we never hoarded, we impulse-bought but never panic-bought anything until that day. We were the perfect example of Shahram Heshmat's²⁶ reasons for panic-buying behavior — we thought it was 'better to be safe than sorry,' experienced fear and dread of the unknown, felt the contagiousness of fear, and wanted some sense of control over this uncertainty.

Oh well — I guess there's always a first time for everything.

- 25 March 2020.

ENDNOTES

¹ Context of David Savage's (Associate Professor of behavioral and microeconomics, University of Newcastle Australia) remark in Brian Lufkin, "Coronavirus: The psychology of panic buying" BBC Worklife. 05 March 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200304-coronavirus-covid-19-update-why-people-are-stockpiling>

² See Ma. Angelica Garcia "Malaysian sports exec worried SEA Games food 'too good to resist'" GMA News Online. 03 December 2019. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/sports/othersports/717751/malaysian-sports-exec-worried-sea-games-food-too-good-to-resist/story/>

³ Steven Taylor is a professor and clinical psychologist at the University of British Columbia and the author of *The Psychology of Pandemics*. Also interviewed in Brian Lufkin, "Coronavirus: The psychology of panic buying" BBC Worklife. 05 March 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200304-coronavirus-covid-19-update-why-people-are-stockpiling>

⁴ Jane Gardner, Pasanna Mutha-Merrenge, and Leo Leong. "Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19". PLAN International Australia. 2020 <http://plan-international.org>

⁵ Jane Gardner, Pasanna Mutha-Merrenge, and Leo Leong. "Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19". PLAN International Australia. 2020 <http://plan-international.org>

⁶ Businesswire India. "Sanitary Napkins – An Essential Commodity to Keep Women Clean and Safe During COVID-19 Lockdown" 25 March 2020. <https://www.businesswireindia.com/sanitary-napkins-an-essential-commodity-to-keep-women-clean-and-safe-during-covid-19-lockdown-67537.html>

⁷ Rudrani Gupta. "COVID-19 Lockdown: Sanitary Pads Now Listed as Essential Commodity". *She The People*. 30 March 2020. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/coronavirus/sanitary-napkins-essential-commodity-lockdown>

⁸ Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 05.

⁹ Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 04.

¹⁰ Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 08.

¹¹ UNFPA Technical Brief, COVID-19: A Gender Lens Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Promoting Gender Equality. March 2020. https://unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf

¹² Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 04.

¹³ UNICEF. UNICEF Brief Mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on menstrual health and hygiene. April 2020.

¹⁴ Dr. Denita Utami, "Re-thinking Menstruation: From Clinical to Humanitarian Settings". *Public Health Columbia*. 16 December 2020. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/re-thinking-menstruation-clinical-humanitarian-settings>

¹⁵ Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 04 & 05.

¹⁶ Gardner, Mutha-Merrennege, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 03 & 04.

¹⁷ Padma Das, Kelly K. Baker, Ambarish Dutta, Tapoja Swain, Sunita Sahoo, Bhabani Sankar Das, Bijay Panda, Arati Nayak, Mary Bara, Bibiana Bilung, Pravas Ranjan Mishra, Pinaki Panigrahi, Sandy Cairncross, Belen Torondel. "Menstrual Hygiene Practices, WASH Access and the Risk of Urogenital Infection in Women from Odisha, India". *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6 (2015) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0130777>

¹⁸ Anoop Khanna, R.S. Goyal, Rahul Bhawsar. "Menstrual Practices and Reproductive Systems: A Study of Adolescent Girls in Rajasthan". *Journal of Health Management* 7, no. 1 (2005): 91-107.

¹⁹ Anne Sebert Kuhlmann, Kayasha Henry, Wall L. Lewis. "Menstrual Hygiene Management in Resource-Poor Countries". *Obstetrical & Gynecological Survey* 72, no. 6 (2017): 356-376

²⁰ PLAN International. Coronavirus is Making Periods Worse for Girls and Women. *Plan International Website*. 28 May 2020. <https://plan-international.org/news/2020-05-28-coronavirus-making-periods-worse-girls-and-women>

²¹ UNICEF. "UNICEF Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene 2019", 59

²² UNICEF. "UNICEF Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene 2019", 3

²³ Gardner, Mutha-Merrenge, and Leong. *Periods in a Pandemic: Menstrual hygiene management in the time of COVID-19*, 07.

²⁴ UNFPA Technical Brief, "COVID-19: A Gender Lens Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Promoting Gender Equality", 5.

²⁵ UNFPA Technical Brief, "COVID-19: A Gender Lens Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Promoting Gender Equality", 02 & 05.

²⁶ Dr. Shahram Heshmat. "7 Reasons for Panic Buying Behavior". *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY*. 22 March 2020. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/202003/7-reasons-panic-buying-behavior>

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