

Creating Hysteria: The Influence of News Media over Consumption Behavior during COVID-19 pandemic

Participants:

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Dr. Joseph Morreale (Faculty Mentor)



Dyson College of Arts and Sciences

Provost's Summer 2020
Student-Faculty Undergraduate
Research Award



Researched the language used by three major news outlets

Context/Purposes for Research:

Questioned if the news media had a significant influence over the purchasing habits of consumers at grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

■ Hypotheses:

- *The news media influenced general consumer spending by households*
- *Whether consumers who identified as Republicans would spend more at grocery stores than Democratic consumers would*

Results and Conclusions:

- Consumption behavior varied between Democratic/Republican consumer, depending where readers obtain news (i.e. CNN vs. Fox News)
 - *Behavioral economics analysis on consumer decision-making*
 - *Policy Intro: the power of public health campaigns*

Participants

- **Isabelle LaBianco**
- Double major in Economics and Film & Screen Studies, minor in Communication Studies
- **Dr. Joseph Morreale** - Economics Department
- Dyson College of Arts and Sciences
- Research Requirement:
 - *Provost's Summer 2020 Student-Faculty Undergraduate Research Award*



Context/Purpose for Research

- Did the media and coverage of news during COVID-19 influence the purchasing decisions consumers made at grocery stores?
 - *Spring 2020, enrolled in Behavioral Economics & Public Policy*
 - *Behavioral Economics: the study of economic decision-making*
 - *Stockpiling: the action of mass-purchasing items at once*
 - *Herding bias: one consumer will decide based on the behaviors of other consumers*
 - *Status-quo bias: preference for things to remain unchanged or for how they currently are*

The
Philadelphia
Inquirer

Did you eat your two-week food supply? Here's why you need to restock it. Now.

Cops in the toilet paper aisle: Grocery stores add extra security

CNN

Techniques/ Methodology

Figure 1

How many MSNBC articles contain a COVID-19 related word published from January 1, 2020 to July 1, 2020

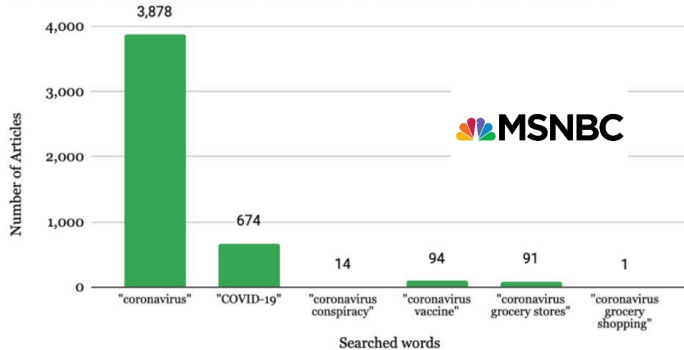


Figure 2

How many CNN articles contain a COVID-19 related word published from January 1, 2020 to July 1, 2020

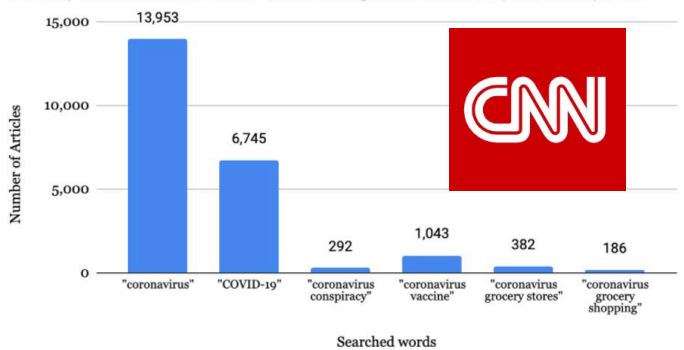
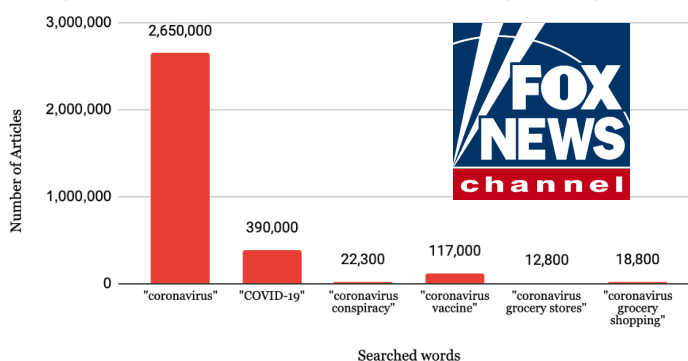


Figure 3

How many Fox News articles contain a COVID-19 related word published from January 1, 2020 to July 1, 2020



■ Two hypotheses:

1. *The news media influenced general consumer spending by households*
2. *Whether consumers who identified as Republicans would spend more at grocery stores than Democratic consumers would*

■ Surveys: Consumer Survey: COVID-19's Impact on Food Purchasing, Eating Behaviors and Perceptions of Food Safety International Food Information Council and Pew Research Center

■ Looked at the language of three major news sources: MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News

- *Searched words: coronavirus, COVID-19, coronavirus conspiracy, coronavirus vaccine, coronavirus grocery stores, coronavirus grocery shopping*

■ *The Economist*, "How to Frame Public Health Messages so People Hear Them"

- *proved that behavioral economics policies could improve consumers' habits*
- *concluded research with a suggested public policy that accounted for the ways behavioral economics would attempt to reduce irrational spending behaviors*

■ Republicans- more likely to believe in a coronavirus conspiracy

■ Democrats- more likely to believe that a vaccine will be developed within the next year

Results and Conclusions

- Hypothesis 1: News viewership rose among partisan groups since the beginning of the pandemic
- Hypothesis 2: Republican exhibited greater spending habits than Democrats at grocery stores
 - *Less likely to demonstrate stockpiling behaviors*
- Consumption between Democrats and Republicans can be attributed to how ideologies play into cognitive biases
- How the media portrays the risk of the virus
- Behavioral Economics application/Public Policy suggestion:
 - *Implementing a “Nudge Unit” in the U.S. government*
 - *Mass media campaigns and public health*
 - Standardizing public health concerns across partisan media outlets
 - *Proper communication of health practices can unite the political divide about the risk of the virus*