

# Grocery Shopping During COVID-19: A Privileged Perspective

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We stood in line on the cold, concrete, long-slabbed floors of the Costco warehouse for what felt like hours. The queue extended to the horizon – or at least to the milk section – and people scattered across every square inch like ants skittering across the forest floor. Towering above the aisles were shopping carts filled with everything from bags of rice to more toilet paper than families could consume in an entire year.

It felt like we were in a movie – a pandemic movie – except that we were not. Every television in Eden Prairie’s Costco on March 18, 2020, played Bill Ackman’s plea on CNBC to the President of the United States to shut down all nonessential sections of the economy. Global stock markets were in free fall, IRAs were depleting, and most of all, America’s faith in its stability was crashing. In Bill Ackman’s own words, “Hell is coming.” My own family’s cart was filled with \$457 worth of rice, dried beans, flour, and any nonperishable items we could find. Our next trip to the grocery store was uncertain, and we did not want to take any chances. It felt like a state of nature – every family fending for itself. But could you really blame anyone for that sentiment?

As we unloaded over \$400 worth of nutrition from the car and into the garage, wearing our coveted N95 masks, I could not help but think how selfish and privileged we were in that instance. Beyond the cost of the groceries, our home in suburban Minnesota had the capacity to hold an excess of supplies: we have two refrigerators, multiple pantries, and a storage room the size of a large bedroom in the basement. But what if we could not hold the supplies? What if we did not have the refrigerator space? Or the extra storage space if we lived in a multi-family unit? And beyond all, what if we did not have \$457 to spare to hoard at least a couple months’ worth of essential ingredients?

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it felt like the status of one's family was dictated by whether they could source organic berries or eat grass-fed beef. Within a matter of days, the status of one's family was dictated by whether they could source overpriced hand sanitizer, N95 masks, and Clorox bleach wipes.

Reflecting on this shopping experience, I cannot help but think of a famous Ron Swanson quote from *Parks and Recreation*: "Capitalism: God's way of determining who is smart, and who is poor." On any ordinary day, I would laugh at the comedic point that Ron Swanson makes; however, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst deteriorating supply chains, I gained firsthand experience of the divide that was created in the simple act of grocery shopping. If you could afford to buy groceries months in advance, had a place to keep the produce without it spoiling, and had a stable income to not have to worry about overpaying for groceries, then—and only then—did you get to feel the safety of having enough food in your house. At the beginning, COVID-19 did not discriminate against who it infected. You could have been a wealthy vacationer on a cruise ship or a middle-class child in urban Atlanta. COVID-19 did not seem to care.<sup>1</sup> However, grocery shopping, a seemingly mundane task, segregated the rich from the poor by not only the quality of the foods that each were able to buy, but whether they actually got to buy food in the first place.

The question I still ask myself, months after standing in that Costco, is "How did the simple act of grocery shopping become so discriminatory?" For me, the answer to this question was safety. We wanted to feel safe. During the week before the first lockdown, it felt like we were all acting in a triggered "flight or fight" response, and the only way we knew how to act was to prepare for the next Armageddon. If we had enough food in our homes, then it felt like we could at least sustain ourselves until the sun rose again. Through our collective actions to make ourselves feel more comfortable, we inflated the cost of common household products that are required for people from all backgrounds and walks of life. And for this, I feel terrible.

But did *we*, along with the multitude of other shoppers, do anything wrong? Were we supposed to act in another way? To this follow-up question, I have no clear answer. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught me anything, it is that we can only do the best knowing what we know in that instant. In that instant in Costco, it

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<sup>1</sup> As COVID-19 spread more, it became clear that people of racial minority and those in lower economic classes were impacted more by the virus, but here I am talking about the very beginning of the pandemic when little was known about how or where it spread.

felt like we were fending for ourselves in times of mass uncertainty, and we had the means to do so. Instead of trying to wash my hands of any wrongdoings or justify my actions, I thoroughly acknowledge that my family's financial privilege allowed us extra comfort and a sustained peace of mind. In my day-to-day life, I will work to decrease disparities in my community. But if we were to land ourselves in a true Armageddon, would I engage in buying a surplus of food like I did on March 18, 2020? Yes, for I am only human.