A Tale of Two 'Cities' (Ait Was the Worst of Times®; Ait Was Worse At Times®): Shoppers in Montgomery County, Md and Washington, D.C. During the Recent Sniper Attacks

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

I. Introduction:
The string of sniper attacks in the Washington, D.C. area beginning on October 2, 2002 and ending with the capture of two snipers on October 23, 2002, is by now familiar to most in this country (Tucker 2002); Two gunmen terrorized the Washington, D.C. area with their long-range rifle attacks on unsuspecting individuals (Subramanya et al., 2002), while most of them were engaged in some act related to shopping. Before this spree was brought to an end, 10 of these individuals were dead and three seriously wounded (Subramanya et al., 2002). In this article, I shall concentrate on what effect this shooting spree had on various aspects of shopping (e.g., driving to the store) of two samples of residents I surveyed in Montgomery county, MD and Washington, D.C., shortly after the shooting spree ended.

II. Objectives of Study:
More specifically, my intent in this study was to learn whatever I could about the following:

1. How consumers/shoppers in the D.C. area felt during the shooting spree,
2. How consumers and consumers/shoppers in the D.C. area behaved during the shooting spree,
3. What if anything consumers/shoppers in the D.C. area felt retailers &/or area-governments could have done to make them feel more safe during the shooting spree,
4. What, if any, residual effects this shooting spree has had on consumers/shoppers in the D.C. area, even after the shooting spree ended, and finally,
5. What implications this shooting spree holds for Marketing in general and Retailing in particular.

III. Background:
There is anecdotal evidence to indicate that during the shooting spree, the following were just some of the issues that were understandably, given much attention: (a) victims were mourned (Lew 2002; Purtill 2002b), (b) most people couldn’t focus on anything else (see e.g., Stanley 2002), (c) people (Purtill 2002a & b) and even the Police (Michael 2002) suffered from the stress of living in the sniper’s territory, and consequently were given counseling (Abrams 2002; Michael 2002; Rathner 2002), (d) people’s lifestyles and outdoor activities were severely hampered (Amato 2002), (e) some prepared to leave the area altogether (Hogan 2002), (f) schools were in a constant stage of siege (Dolinski 2002), and, (g) area retail businesses suffered (Ford & Monroe 2002).

There is anecdotal evidence to indicate that after the shooting spree ended, the following were just some of the issues that were understandably, given much attention: (a) people were thankful to the Police for successfully apprehending the gunmen (Boris 2002), (b) many citizens offered their thanks in prayer that the crisis ended (Hille 2002), (c) long-canceled/postponed activities were resumed (Sphuler 2002), and (d) others focused on the prosecution of the gunmen (Moore 2003; Johnson 2002; White and Schmidt 2002).

IV. Research Issues:
However, not much, if any attention was given to the following, which was understandable, until now. How did people in the D.C. area shop in this period? If they did not shop in this period, how did they cope with their consumption needs? Did shoppers feel that it should have been the task of Retailers &/or governments to protect them in this period? To answer some of these questions, I conducted a survey shortly after the snipers were caught, of individuals who live, work, go to school and shop in the Washington D.C. area. I briefly describe this survey next.

V. Methodology:
Questionnaire: The instrument that was used for gathering data in this study was a self-administered questionnaire and was comprised of three sections: (a) in section 1, respondents were queried on how they felt, how they behaved (where they did/did not go, what stores they did/did not shop at, how they traveled to/from stores, how they entered/exited stores, how they behaved in the store), what they felt stores did/did not do to help them shop as normally as possible, what they felt governments did/did not do to help them shop as normally as possible, etc., (b) in section 2, respondents were queried on how they felt about danger and how they assigned blame for this danger in the context of the sniper shooting spree, and (c) in section 3, were some simple demographic questions.

Sample: The first half of this survey was conducted in the first week of November, 2002, amongst the undergraduate students attending a major University in Washington, D.C. (n=72). The second half of this survey (n=52) was conducted at three different points in the Fall of 2002, on three different non-student populations in the D.C. area: (a) 32 questionnaires completed by staff/parents at an elementary school in Potomac, Maryland, (b) 8 questionnaires completed by employees and customers at a gas station in Kensington, Maryland, and (c) 12 questionnaires completed by parishioners of a church in Potomac, Maryland.

VI. Results:
The significant results from this study are too numerous to even attempt to list (let alone explain) in this abstract. Further, many of these findings mask complex subtleties in how different types of individuals react to danger and several of these findings are counter-intuitive.

That having been said, three broad conclusions that can be drawn from this study are as follows: (a) there were some basic similarities in how the two samples used in this study (i.e., D.C.-student-population-based sample versus a Montgomery-county-M.D.-non-student-population-based sample) reacted to the danger from omnipresent sniper attack, (b) however, perhaps more importantly there were several significant differences in how these two populations felt about the sniper-related danger, how they reacted to it as shoppers, who they felt was responsible for their safety and what actions they felt should have been taken (by themselves and...
others) to reduce their exposure to this danger, and, (c) the factor structures underlying the shopping-related sentiments of these two populations during the sniper-attack were drastically different.

VII. Marketing Implications:
This study has implications for businesses, but more importantly for retailers, who God forbid should ever find themselves in a similar predicament in the future. They range from obvious, in-store and out-door store-security issues, to merchandise pick-up and delivery issues, all the way to some less obvious findings, such as: (a) various danger-avoidance strategies (e.g., shopping at lesser known, off-the-beaten path type of stores), (b) switching to on-line-shopping-only-during-the-shooting-spree strategies, and (c) store/parking-lot re-design issues, to name just a few.

References
Available on request.