Living With Uncertainty: the Impact of Terrorism

Krittinee Nuttavuthisit, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

The impact of terrorism looms larger than the actual killing and destruction, forcing changes in the behavior of people living with the uncertainty. This study explores effect of the ongoing terrorism activity in the south of Thailand, focusing on how people manage their experience of uncertainty by avoiding what causes the turbulence and seeking what brings stability and a sense of future. The research findings explain unique characteristics of coping with the current situation, based on different cultures and beliefs. The discussion proposes incorporating coping mechanisms from the self perspective into the theory of uncertainty management.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14750/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Living with Uncertainty: The Impact of Terrorism
Krittinee Nuttavuthisit, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Terrorism has become a global event that creates a continuous effect on not only killing and destruction but also on significant changes in people’s behavior. Nevertheless, in consumer research there have been few studies on the impact of terrorism on consumer behaviors. Possibly this is because of limited access to the victims of terrorism and affected locations. Literatures in related areas include studies of uncertainty, coping strategies, and terror management. The major findings are that when people feel uncertain about what will happen, they try to regain a sense of control which helps to reduce the stress of uncertainty. However, prior research mainly specified control over situation while the circumstance of terrorism is inexplicable and out of control.

This research explores the effects of the ongoing terrorist violence in the southern provinces of Thailand. It aims to address the theoretical gap in studying how people cope with their experiencing uncertainty when they feel victimized and powerless under the uncontrollable situation. Moreover, this study reflects recent terror management research which has emphasized cultural-specific responses (Rindfleisch and Burroughs 2004).

Thailand is considered a peaceful country with Buddhism as the dominant religion. Thai Muslims are mostly concentrated in the southern provinces of Thailand, particularly in Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani. With their different lifestyle, some Thai Muslims feel estranged from the rest of the country and, together with the chronic concerns of poverty, underdevelopment and discrimination by some abusive officials, these problems led to the insurgency led by Muslim separatists. In the beginning the targets of the terrorist attacks were government officials but now include all kinds of people, ranging from Buddhist monks to school teachers, Muslim farmers and innocent children. The reason for these attacks is unclear and no group has claimed responsibility for these events. The daily random attacks have resulted in sustained uncertainty and dramatic changes to the lifestyles of residents and their families.

Uncertainty is a dynamic state of discomfort, a situation that exists when people feel that they cannot predict what will happen. Uncertainty has long been recognized as a critical issue and different means of managing uncertainty have been identified in various fields of studies. Pavia and Mason (2004) emphasized the experience of uncertainty and coping strategies as a rich field for consumer research. Generally, the specified coping strategies can be categorized into two basic concepts, avoiding suspected causes of uncertainty and seeking what brings stability and a sense of future. The two major coping strategies may appear antithetical but they are linked by the common goal of regaining a sense of control.

This research study began early in 2005 with respondents including residents of the three southern provinces, soldiers stationed in the region and their families. Eight long interviews and two focus group interviews, one with soldiers and another with their wives, were conducted. Due to the upsurge in violence field visits were not possible, and interviews with residents in the troubled areas were carried out when they visited Bangkok. Verbatim transcripts were interpreted by means of a hermeneutical process (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

The research data illustrates that, in accordance with the previous theory of uncertainty management, people try to avoid suspected causes of uncertainty and seek what provides a sense of stability. The means to address their fear, worry and tension are reflected in their consumptions of time, place, faith and social affiliations which also suggest the unique responses to managing uncertainty depending on the context and cultural values. In this case, rather than avoiding the suspected causes of uncertainty (i.e., dangerous areas, or ‘ghostly terrorists’ which are impossible to identify), local residents instead attempt to adjust their own routines or lifestyles. Although theories of uncertainty management emphasize increased flexibility in creating alternatives (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Courtney, Kirkland and Viguerie 1999), this study found that people prefer the familiar even when this is unsafe to encounter the odds of daily attacks at anytime. In seeking what brings stability or sense of future, they relied on faith or miracles rather than performing concrete preventive acts within the community or with the authorities. They trust that fate will bring a natural end to these events over which they feel they have little or no control.

To some people, these coping behaviors may appear gullible, insubstantial or short-sighted, but they serve the purpose, as specified in previous theory, of enabling people to regain a sense of control which helps to reduce the stress of uncertainty. However, a difference must be noted here as the sense of control in this study is rather control over self rather than the situation. Based on the notion that uncertain events cause the sense of uncertainty, prior research suggested that constructing a new normalcy can enable individuals to restore order and envision a sense of future (Becker 1997; Pavia and Mason 2004). Creating a new normalcy in which individuals can explain the situation, i.e., what has happened and what will happen, enables them to choose the way to live their lives (Weitz 1989). However, the findings of this research illustrate that people rather try to recognize the situation and adjust the self (e.g., lifestyle and beliefs) to handle the experience of uncertainty. Instead of constructing a new normalcy they familiarize themselves with the uncertain events and, in this way, they can also gain the sense of control, but over self rather than the situation. The focus is on dealing with the present rather than unveiling the past or the future. Uncertainty is rooted in the individual’s perception of the outcome or meaning of a situation (Penrod 2007). Hence, whether it is managing the situation or managing the self should also induce changes in an individual’s perceptions of the circumstances. This study proposes extension of the theory regarding management of uncertainty to incorporate coping mechanisms from the perspective of self. It also endorses the view that cultural differences (i.e. belief in fate occurring by law of karma in Buddhism or by god’s will in Islam) significantly influence how individuals respond to uncertainty.

REFERENCES


