Public perceptions amongst Londoners following terrorist attacks in the UK in early 2017

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Abstract

In 2017, the United Kingdom experienced three major terrorist attacks: Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge. The goal of this research paper is to outline how these three terrorist attacks, have affected Londoner's perceptions of their own personal safety alongside the welfare of others. Moreover, this paper will convey whether such perceptions of safety have any further implications for the modification of individual behaviour such as visiting certain areas in London or attending public events. The methodology used was an online survey, comprised of open and closed-ended questions which was sent out through snowball sampling in order to generate responses. Quantitative results were analysed using SPSS software whilst qualitative responses were manually coded in order to highlight recurring themes and patterns. This paper contributes towards the growing literature on public perceptions on terrorism in the UK by confirming that respondents in London are not likely to change their day to day behaviour in response to terrorist attacks.

Key Words: *Public perceptions, London, terrorism, behavioural changes*

Introduction:

In the past three months in the UK there have been three terrorist attacks motivated by extremist Islamic ideology; Westminster (BBC, 2017), Manchester (The Independent, 2017) and London Bridge (Dodd, 2017). The impact of these attacks on the general public is of great interest. Despite the likelihood of an individual being personally involved in or affected by a terrorist attack studies documenting public opinion have consistently demonstrated that members of the public overestimate this likelihood, generating fear and uncertainty about personal safety. This paper provides a snapshot of public opinion following the Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge attacks, with a particular focus on the event in London Bridge as this occurred as data collection was underway. This paper seeks to analyse to what extent the public's perceptions of the terror threat impact their daily lives, namely behavioural outcomes by using an online survey dispersed via snowball sampling to capture public opinion.

Although this paper will focus on terror attacks in the last three months, the particular focal point will be on London Bridge as it occurred whilst data collection was underway. The methodology used were online surveys, dispersed via snowball sampling used to capture public opinion and behavioural outcomes. Previous literature suggests that the majority of respondents will not modify their behaviour in response to such attacks, this paper confirms this with relevant statistical data from June 2017.

Literature Review:

Previous literature which considers public perceptions of terrorism has been predominantly focused on the US, particularly following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Allouche and Lind, 2010). Studies have consistently shown that, following a terrorist attack, there is an impact on the public beyond those directly affected. Huddy et al (2002) demonstrated how increased stress levels amongst members of the public and had an impact on 'personal behaviors designed to minimize risk'. This is supported by research which demonstrates that there is 'wide discrepancy between the actual risk…and the proportion of the public…who express worry that they will be a victim of a terrorist attack' (Allouche and Lind, 2010: 22).

Following the 7/7 bombings literature on public attitudes towards terrorism in the UK began to emerge, as the issue became more prevalent in public policy debates. In 2005, following the 7/7 bombings, MORI conducted a survey for King's College London looking at how Londoners were affected by the attack. 30% of respondents said that the bombings would mean that they would try and travel less by tube when coming into central London (IPSOS

MORI, 2005) with 51% of participants saying that they think it is 'very likely' that London will experience another terrorist attack in the near future and 16% expressing 'a lot' of fear that the lives of those dear to them are in danger as a consequence of terrorism. Bux and Coyne (2009) found that fear of terrorism does result in some behavioural changes with 32% of participants asked reported that they intended to reduce tube usage.

More recently a YouGov poll in August 2016 found that a terrorist attack in Britain was expected by 84% of people, with a general trend of participants perceiving an increase in risk over the last five years, demonstrating how the perceived threat of terrorism is high amongst members of the general public (Smith, 2016). However these studies are limited as they can only serve as measures of public opinion following the events they concern.

It is important to keep contributing to this literature with an analysis of the impact of recent terror attacks in the UK, examining public perceptions of Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge, including whether individuals feel that such attacks have had an impact on their day to day lives. Public attitudes to terrorism are inextricably linked to the counterterrorism policies which the government chooses to pursue (Johnson and Gearty, 2007). The British Social Attitudes Survey concluded that was a 'significant drop in the number of people who adopt civil libertarian attitudes' and is lowered 'when the threat of terrorism is added' (2007: 17). As a result, the preference for 'controlling' terrorism through the reduction of civil liberties is a price worth paying for safety. Thus, the role of public opinion on terrorism can give an insight into emerging counter-terrorism policies. Previous literature on public perceptions regarding terrorist attacks has been useful in developing the research question and methodology for this paper.

Methodology:

The methodology used for this paper was an online survey, asking participants open-ended and closed-ended questions. Participants were asked for their demographic information of age, gender, religion and level of education. The second half of the survey concerns questions regarding the nature of the research question with a focus on perceptions of terrorism, and the impact on people's lives. Standard polling is frequently used to give a picture of public opinion following attacks. This method measures participant's attitudes towards risk and perceived personal risk. Yet, these studies fail to take into account the diverse ways individuals interpret risk. The notion of 'personal safety' can be subjectively interpreted by different participants, resulting in an unequal measurement therefore it was vital to include open-ended questions to allow participants to give reasons for their answers.

Closed-ended questions were asked in order to identify key themes and trends within the data. However, these are not sufficient to represent the different ways in which participants perceive risk so open-ended questions were also included.

The survey was distributed online via social media and also snowball sampling in order to acquire responses of different age groups within London as a means of emulating a representative sample. Questions were based on Lerner et al's (2003) study which was a two-part field experiment capturing emotional reactions to terrorism. Questions were formulated with a focus on the perspective of the respondent and how they perceive changes in the threat level and whether they intend to change their behaviour.

When dealing with the sensitive topic of terrorism there were a number of ethical considerations to make. Firstly, participants were warned of the nature of the topic and informed that they were able to withdraw from the survey at any time and their results would not be recorded. Secondly, all responses were kept anonymous and no personal information was taken from participants. In addition, the participants were provided with links to helplines which they could contact if they felt uncomfortable or upset during or after completing the survey. Finally, we initially intended to conduct both an online survey and approach members of the public on the streets of London. This methodology was agreed prior to the London Bridge attack on the evening of the 4th June 2017. Following this attack the decision was made to not approach members of the public as we did not feel the scale of the project provided a licence to do so, this created an unavoidable limitation for the project as it was only possible to distribute our survey online.

This methodology emulates other successful papers outlined in the literature review which means that it can be replicated and compared to previous studies on public opinion. The survey provides a particularly strong insight due to the inclusion of different types of questions. We chose a survey as a means to allow the public to express their views directly, rather than attempting to infer this information from alternative sources.

Results and Analysis

Quantitative analysis:

Descriptive Statistics		
	N	Mean
Safety level as perceived by Londoners after Manchester, Westminster, and London Bridge terror attacks	92	58.7935
Change in threat level as perceived by Londonders after Manchester, Westminster, and London Bridge terror attacks	92	2.01
Change in likelihood of themselves/the people they know being victimised in terror attack as perceived by Londoners	92	2.22
Rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners	92	2.74
Valid N (listwise)	92	

Demographic frequencies

In the data collected from the 92 people, 37% of were males, 58.7% were female, 2.2% were non binary, and 2.2% preferred not to say.

50% were 18-24 years old, 26.1% were 25-34 years old, 10.9% were 35-44 years old, 5.4% were 45-54 years old. 4.3% were 55-64 years old, 2.2% were 65-74 years old, and 1.1% were 75-84 years old.

Moreover, participants identified themselves as belonging to the following religions: 19.6% Christianity, 7.6% Islam, 6.5% Judaism, 3.3% Hinduism, 1.1% Buddhism, 3.3% others, 4.3% prefer not to say, and 54.3% had none.

The highest level of education completed among the respondents was reported as follows: 7.4% GCSEs, 29.3% A-Level, 37.0% Undergraduate degree, 25.0% Postgraduate degree, 1.1% Others.

According to the data of minutes spent engaging with the news, the mean value was 304.80 minutes.

Furthermore, according to the data of “Safety level as perceived by Londoners after the terror attacks in early 2017 in the UK”, on the scale ranging from 0 (not safe) to 100 (certainly safe) the mean was 58.79.

92 respondents were asked to rank “Critical threat level” out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners. The following is the data collected

Rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	1	27	29.3	29.3	29.3
	2	19	20.7	20.7	50.0
	3	14	15.2	15.2	65.2
	4	15	16.3	16.3	81.5
	5	17	18.5	18.5	100.0
	Total	92	100.0	100.0	

Then respondents were asked to judge the “change in threat level after the attacks in London”, out of 5 items varying from “greatly decreased” (scaled -2) to “greatly increased” (+2) with “stay the same” (scaled 0) as the midpoint. The following is the data collected

change in threat level after the attacks in London”	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	.00	29	31.5	31.5	31.5
	1.00	35	38.0	38.0	69.6
	2.00	28	30.4	30.4	100.0
	Total	92	100.0	100.0	

The respondents were asked to assess the “change in the likelihood of themselves/ someone they know being victimised in a future terrorist attack”, out of 5 items varying from “greatly decreased” (scaled -2) to “greatly increased” (+2) with “stay the same” (scaled 0) as the midpoint. The following is the data collected

change in the likelihood of themselves/ someone they know being victimised in a future terrorist attack”,	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	-1.00	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
	.00	37	40.2	40.2	41.3
	1.00	35	38.0	38.0	79.3

	2.00	19	20.7	20.7	100.0
	Total	92	100.0	100.0	

The respondents were asked separately as two questions whether uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink visiting certain area of London and attending certain events in London after the terror attacks in early 2017. The following is the data collected

Uncertainty about safety caused them to rethink visiting certain areas of London? (following Manchester, Westminster and London Bridge terror attacks)					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	28.3	28.3	28.3
	No	66	71.7	71.7	100.0
	Total	92	100.0	100.0	
Uncertainty about safety caused them to rethink attending certain events in London? (following Manchester, Westminster, London Bridge terror attacks)					
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	Yes	28	30.4	30.4	30.4
	No	64	69.6	69.6	100.0
	Total	92	100.0	100.0	

We hypothesized that the number of people stating that the uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink visiting certain area of London and attending certain events in London after the terror attacks in early 2017 and the number of people stating the opposite were equal. The one-sample binomial tests conducted allowed us to reject both of our null hypothesis: there is significant evidence that the number of people who said “Yes” was less then the number of people who said “No” for both questions. ($p<0.005$)

We tried to study separately the relationship between the following 3 variables: “Safety level as perceived by Londoners after the terror attacks in early 2017 in the UK” , “rank given to ”Critical threat level” out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners”, “change in threat level after the attacks in London”, and the following two variables: uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink visiting certain area of London and attending certain events in London. T-tests were conducted, and they allowed us to establish the following:

1. $t(90)=5.66$ gives us $p<0.005$: there is significant evidence that perception of safety level by Londoners after the attacks increased as people answered “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink attending certain events in London”

2. . $t(90)=6.09$ gives us $p<0.005$: there is significant evidence that perception of safety level by Londoners after the attacks increased as people answered “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink attending certain areas in London”

3.$t(90)= 4.644$ gives us $p<0.005$: there is significant evidence that rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats increased as people said “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink attending certain events in London”

4 $t(90)= 4.844$ gives us $p<0.005$ there is significant evidence that rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats increased as people said “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink visiting areas in London”

5.$t(90)=-4.510$ gives us $p<0.005$ there is significant evidence that “change in threat level after the attacks in London” was reported as increased as people said “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink attending certain events in London”

6.$t(90)=-3.499$ gives us $p<0.005$ there is significant evidence that “change in threat level after the attacks in London” was reported as increased as people said “Yes” to the question “uncertainty about safety has caused them to rethink visiting certain areas in London”.

Group Statistics					
	Uncertainty about safety caused them to rethink attending certain events in London? (following Manchester, Westminster, London Bridge terror attacks)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Safety level as perceived by Londoners after Manchester, Westminster, and London Bridge terror attacks	No	64	67.86	23.753	2.969
	Yes	28	38.07	21.948	4.148
Minutes spent engaging with news	No	64	300.42	256.753	32.094
	Yes	28	314.82	301.046	56.892
Rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners	No	64	3.17	1.432	.179
	Yes	28	1.75	1.143	.216
change in threat level after the attacks in London	No	64	.7656	.77136	.09642
	Yes	28	1.5000	.57735	.10911
Change in likelihood of themselves/people they know being victimized in the terror attack	No	64	.6875	.75330	.09416
	Yes	28	1.0000	.81650	.15430
Group Statistics					

	Uncertainty about safety caused them to rethink visiting certain areas of London? (following Manchester, Westminster and London Bridge terror attacks)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Safety level as perceived by Londoners after Manchester, Westminster, and London Bridge terror attacks	No	66	67.86	23.121	2.846
	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	35.77	21.794	4.274
Minutes spent engaging with news	No	66	301.77	243.815	30.012
	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	312.50	330.936	64.902
Rank given to critical threat level out of top 5 threats faced by Londoners	No	66	3.17	1.463	.180
	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	1.65	.936	.183
change in threat level after the attacks in London	No	66	.8182	.76277	.09389
	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	1.4231	.70274	.13782
Change in likelihood of themselves/people they know being victimized in the terror attack	No	66	.7121	.75986	.09353
	Yes (Please tell us where)	26	.9615	.82369	.16154

Qualitative analysis:

The results of our qualitative questions provided a greater insight to respondent's perceptions. The attack which had the greatest impact on participant's perception of safety was London Bridge, with 49 writing this as their response. This was to be expected as data collection began a day after the event. The most common reasons given for this answer were 'proximity/location', 'methods used', 'happened recently' and 'unexpected'. Of the 26

respondents who said they would avoid areas of London tourist attractions or 'central' London were cited as the response for 50% of participants, demonstrating high concern for such areas and a consensus about which areas are high risk.

Responses to the question 'has concern for your safety caused you to rethink visiting certain areas of London' were divided into two groups via the binary yes/no answer given. Responses were then manually coded to identify themes, firstly by identifying 'most used' words and then through content analysis. For those who answered 'yes' the perceived likelihood of certain areas being targeted was mentioned 11 times, and 'the risk is too high' was mentioned 7 times. Other reasons included lack of government action, frequency of attacks and lack of security. For who responded 'no' 'it is statistically unlikely that an individual will be involved in an attack' was mentioned 17 times, 'uncertainty about where an attack will happen means we cannot modify behaviour to avoid it' was mentioned 7 times, 'don't want to live in fear' was mentioned 12 times and 'can't let the terrorists win' was mentioned 7 times. Other reasons included the acceptance of risk living in a big city and improved security following attacks. Similar responses were given to the question 'has uncertainty for your safety caused you to rethink attending public events?' with the exception that the Manchester attack was used often as a specific example for a reason not to attend concerts.

These responses allow us to pick up on the nuances between different perspectives and the reasoning behind them. The main difference between the 'yes' and 'no' groups is that the 'yes' group felt confident in identifying which areas are at risk (tourist hotspots, crowded areas), some citing the terrorist's motives of 'maximum damage'. This contrasts with the uncertainty displayed in the 'no' group, with 7 respondents mentioning the uncertainty about where an attack may happen, 'it could happen anywhere' and using this as a reason to not modify behaviour as it is not possible to predict where another attack will take place. Within the 'no' group many respondents displayed a tone of defiance, with 'not wanting to live in fear' or 'let the terrorists win' being mentioned by 19 respondents. The 'no' responses also demonstrated a large amount of awareness of the statistical likelihood of being personally involved in a terrorist attack, with 17 respondents referring to such statistics which contrasts with the perception of 'not worth the risk' seen in the 'yes' group.

The language used by both groups had some similarities. Participants in both groups made distinctions between 'us' and 'them' to differentiation between citizens and terrorists. Language of competition and confrontation was also used, for example 'let them win' and 'fear is what they want', demonstrating how Londoners view combating terrorism as a fight.

This has echoes of some media coverage seen in the aftermath of the attacks and may be an interesting area for future study.

Participants made distinctions between the methods used in the varying attacks which they were asked about, with London Bridge having the most impact on 53% of those surveyed. Within this group 55% cited proximity as a reason for this answer and 14% noted the methods used, with participants expressing concern at the 'haphazard' nature and the tools used stating that 'anybody can carry out that kind of attack as all you need is a van, and a knife which anyone can buy'. This demonstrates that location and methods are important when we consider the impact which an attack has on a given individual's perception of risk.

However, there were some subcategories within the binary groups considered which demonstrates the importance of allowing participants to elaborate on their answers. Within the 'no' group there was a subsection who said they would not change their behaviour in response to attacks but mentioned hesitation to go to certain areas or 'feeling scared'. This highlights a group who do not wish to change their behaviour but are still uncertain and recognising that terrorism is having an impact on their lives by displaying caution when going about their daily lives. The responses gathered from our research highlights the complexities of public opinion on terrorism and risk.

Limitations:

This paper has a number of limitations. The first of these is the sample size is small. This issue arose as ethical considerations meant that we were not able to put the survey to the general public on the streets of London and instead had to rely on online circulation. This also means that the sample is not fully representative and may be closely linked to the networks of researchers, although a 'snowballing' method was used to attempt to counter this, by asking participants to forward the survey to other Londoners unknown to the researchers. Finally, the fact that another significant terrorist event happened just before we began collecting data means that our findings can be seen to be representative of the immediate response to the attack. This means that, although our findings provide an interesting insight into Londoner's opinions following these attacks, we cannot overstate our results as being fully representative of the whole of London.

Conclusion:

This paper has provided a snapshot of public opinion in London following the Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge terrorist attacks. In line with previous literature which demonstrates that people overestimate the likelihood of being involved in a terrorist attack we have shown that this is the case in London. However, this does not necessarily translate into behavioural changes. Our findings echo that of Bux and Coyne (2009) and the study they conducted following the 7/7 attacks in London. This paper is limited in that it only provides a view which is temporally specified. Further should could provide insight into the long-term impact of these attacks, through longitudinal studies.

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