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► **To cite this version:**

Rayan Fawaz, Stéphane Bourliataux-Lajoinie, Anna Roessner, Shintaro Okazaki. What do we know about consumers' ontological security in disaster scenarios?. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 2023, 47 (4), pp.1483-1499. 10.1111/ijcs.12926 . hal-04147024

HAL Id: hal-04147024

<https://cnam.hal.science/hal-04147024>

Submitted on 3 Jul 2023

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What do we know about consumers' ontological security in disaster scenarios?

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Funding information

Yoshida Hideo Memorial Foundation

[Correction added on 24 March 2023, after first online publication: The order of author names have been corrected in this version.]

Abstract

While prior consumer studies have adopted various theoretical perspectives to explain individuals' reactions to disasters, scant attention has been paid to the role of ontological security in shaping those responses. This study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by qualitatively exploring ontological security in two contexts: man-made and natural disasters. To this end, we conducted 35 focus groups in the UK, Germany, and France to address how people reacted to terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic respectively. Through thematic analysis, three themes emerged: fear versus anxiety, oneself versus others, and materialistic versus experiential purchases. Man-made disasters appear to elicit fear, concern for self, and a preference for materialistic purchases, whereas natural disasters seem to trigger anxiety, concern for others, and a preference for experiential purchases. Both types of disasters seem to evoke a desire to escape from reality. In closing, we discuss both transitory and prolonged threats to ontological security and how they shape individuals' behaviours while restoring their security.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, consumer response, disasters, fear, materialistic/experiential purchases, ontological security

1 | INTRODUCTION

Disasters are caused by hazardous, fleeting events that disrupt routines (Baker, 2009). For the past several decades, people have been facing a myriad of man-made as well as natural disasters. Man-made disasters originate from human forces which are avoidable but can occur when precautionary or preventative measures fail (Perry, 2007). For example, post-9/11 terrorism has taken many forms and continues to pose a significant threat to societies (Dube & Black, 2010). In contrast, natural disasters are unavoidable, unforeseeable, or beyond human control, but corrective measures can be taken to prevent or mitigate their future occurrence (Schenker-Wicki et al., 2010).

For example, according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, pandemics are classified as natural disasters (Seddighi, 2020). Currently, the world has been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and its various repercussions (hereinafter, 'the pandemic') (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Mehroliia et al., 2021; Sheth, 2020; Yap et al., 2021). The pandemic's prolonged restrictions have threatened not only individuals' physical health but also their mental well-being (Kim et al., 2022).

Such disasters cause serious disruptions to individuals' everyday lives, routines, and, consequently, their established ontological security. Ontological security is 'the extent to which individuals feel that their world and role in it is secure and predictable' (Giddens, 1991,

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p. 92). The degree of disruption to ontological security is determined by the scope of the threat (Campbell et al., 2020). As individuals' ontological security diminishes, they may exhibit affective, cognitive, or behavioural reactions. Affectively, individuals may endure short- or long-term psychological reactions, such as fear, anxiety, stress, or anger (Carver et al., 1989). Cognitively, they might experience uncertainty (Shen et al., 2019), a loss of control (Beck et al., 2020), and an increased prevalence of death-related thoughts (Schimmel et al., 2007). Behaviourally, individuals' actions may be a manifestation of both affective and cognitive responses. For instance, some could adopt maladaptive coping behaviours such as impulsive, compulsive, or over-consumption (Ruvio et al., 2014).

Consumer studies have often addressed individuals' reactions and coping behaviours following a specific traumatic event by adopting various theoretical perspectives, such as terror management theory (e.g., Okazaki et al., 2019), fear theories (e.g., Longmire et al., 2021), and life event theory (e.g., Sneath et al., 2009). However, ontological security has rarely been addressed in our domain (Table 2), whereas it has been widely examined in international relations (e.g., Mitzen, 2006), environmental sociology (e.g., Banham, 2020), and public health (e.g., Padgett, 2007). As a unique exception, Campbell et al. (2020) recently proposed a 'conceptual tapestry' to explicate consumers' responses to external threats, thereby calling for more research and a greater understanding of how consumers vacillate between ontological security and insecurity when facing threats.

This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by exploring ontological security in two contexts: man-made and natural disasters. More specifically, we focus on individuals' affective, cognitive, and behavioural changes in response to terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic to address how these disasters disrupt individuals' ontological security. To this end, we conducted 35 focus groups in the UK, Germany, and France.

The findings of this research contribute to the literature in three ways. First, the current stream of research on disasters and consumer behaviour highlights reactions that stem from the event's impact, such as aftermath recovery, panic buying, and hoarding behaviours (e.g., Anderson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these studies do not delve into the root causes of such responses. This study addresses this issue by exploring how consumers respond and adapt to threats caused by disasters and reestablish a sense of ontological security.

Second, despite an increasing number of COVID-19-related publications, little research has compared this global pandemic with other types of disasters. More broadly, to our knowledge, consumer studies comparing man-made and natural disasters have been almost nonexistent, with the notable exception of Schenker-Wicki et al.'s (2010) disaster classification.¹ Despite some apparent similarities (e.g., concurrent threats, no geographical limitations), these two types of disasters differ fundamentally in terms of their tangibility and visibility. This study serves as a stepping stone in this knowledge area by examining how such an (in) tangible and (in) visible nature affects consumers' responses to these disasters.

Third, the current study responds to Baker's (2009) call for an alternative approach to incorporate 'the role of markets, consumption, and economic/material aspects of life' to define disasters. In this study, we envisage terrorism and the COVID-19 pandemic as the most vividly exemplified man-made and natural disasters, respectively, as they severely affected consumers' needs and wants, particularly their right to participate in a meaningful way in making consumption choices. We address these issues through the lens of ontological security.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first provide a brief overview of disaster-driven consumer studies. Second, we establish a theoretical background on ontological security and our research contexts. Then, we describe the methods used to conduct a series of focus groups in three countries and explain the results. Afterwards, we discuss the findings and draw their implications. In closing, we address important limitations and suggest future research directions.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Disasters and consumer studies

Natural disasters and violent events have been regular occurrences in the lives of people all over the world. These catastrophic events jeopardize individuals' well-being and cause significant emotional distress (Sneath et al., 2009), thus hindering their ability to function normally (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). Even though the term 'disaster' often refers to the occurrence of severe random acts or force majeure (Cardona, 2004), it should, in practice, be defined as a 'social phenomenon' whose source 'is rooted in the social structure or social system' (Quarantelli, 2005, p. 339). In this light, the uncontrollable and unexpected nature of disasters often instigates feelings of anger, fear, and anxiety among citizens who experience a catastrophe in a given society (Kemp et al., 2014). Disasters also have a collective impact on societies in that they inflict damage on established social systems and shared values, thereby generating significant negative emotions (Cardona, 2004; Neal, 1998).

2.1.1 | Natural disasters

A natural disaster's aftermath often yields negative and, at times, positive outcomes. In the USA, for example, people tend to prioritize personal relationships and exhibit more resilient behaviours in the face of natural disasters (Norris et al., 2008). However, not all individuals experience such positive reactions. The victims of Hurricane Katrina resorted to undesirable consumption behaviours to cope with the stress and repercussions of the storm. To mitigate their feelings associated with losing control and material possessions, they exhibited impulsive or compulsive behaviours and increasingly made hedonic purchases (Sneath et al., 2009). Kennett-Hensel et al. (2012) identified a similar pattern of increased impulsive consumption among

individuals who anticipate an impending disaster but have not yet experienced it (Kemp et al., 2014). Thus, it is often the case that consumers are likely to spend more during natural disasters to indulge in luxury brands. Consumers in such situations may engage in emotion regulation consumption because of the limited control and amplified anxiety they may experience (Kemp et al., 2014). Such behaviours help individuals regain a sense of normalcy (Delorme et al., 2004) and navigate these problematic conditions (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted consumers' emotional states by triggering their feelings of loss of control and thus eliciting their coping strategies (Rogers & Cosgrove, 2020). These changes manifested in their shopping channel preferences (Mehroli et al., 2021), consumption of unhealthy foods (Gordon-Wilson, 2022), panic buying (Prentice et al., 2022), hoarding behaviours (Rayburn et al., 2022), and impulsive buying (Redine et al., 2023). An increasing number of consumers have become supportive of local businesses and more inclined towards conscious shopping (Kim et al., 2022). Others substituted products and brands they traditionally purchased as product availability became more important than brand loyalty during the pandemic (Tam, 2020). Consumers also adopted specific lifestyle changes (e.g., DIY) and, in turn, sought more lifestyle-supporting products (Das et al., 2022). These consumption changes seemed to help ease their anxiety (Mittal, 2023).

2.1.2 | Man-made disasters

Terrorist attacks in recent years have also shaped individuals' consumption decisions. As these traumas significantly challenge individuals' beliefs about themselves and the world, changes to their consumption behaviours seem inevitable. Behavioural shifts are driven by the risks associated with the worldviews that imbue individuals' lives with security, invulnerability, and meaning (Updegraff et al., 2008). In the aftermath of attacks, people may seek different ways to reestablish a sense of normalcy and thus experience a range of (mal)adaptive coping responses.

For example, to cope with the 9/11 attacks, US consumers came to lean on their traditional social beliefs (Norris et al., 2008), personal growth (Bonanno, 2004), and ingroup relationships (Fung & Carstensen, 2006) while becoming more ethnocentric and product quality oriented. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that after the 9/11 attacks, US consumers started to exhibit a stronger preference towards national products in patriotic ads over their foreign counterparts because they considered the former as having better quality (Dube & Black, 2010). Similarly, other studies show that terrorism increases compulsive consumption and online shopping (Herzenstein et al., 2015; Ruvio et al., 2014) while incentivizing safer leisure choices because people become 'more cautious and therefore more inclined to opt for alternative consumption choices but not to cancel their plans' (Baumert et al., 2020, p. 362). Such consumption behaviours may be motivated by individuals' implicit or explicit needs for security.

Below we present a summary of selected studies we reviewed on natural and man-made disasters (Table 1).

2.2 | Ontological security

The basic tenet of ontological security is that people maintain particular routines and patterns to imbue their lives with order and meaning, avoid overwhelming anxieties (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998), maintain safety and trust in the world, and buffer against existential stress. According to Giddens (1991), these routines and patterns also enhance individuals' psychological well-being and protect them from potential external threats and uncertainties, thereby contributing to persistent feelings of being ontologically secure. That is, ontological security is maintained when people realize that their social and material environments are dependable. Humans' confidence in their continued existence and self-identity further augments this sense of security (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Feeling ontologically secure is not confined to security of survival, but also extends to security of being (Mitzen, 2006). When either type of security is threatened, ontological insecurity emerges (Giddens, 1991).

Ontological insecurity does not stem from the absence of security, but rather from its diminishment (Banham, 2020). Thus, ontological security is not a dichotomous concept; instead, people move along a continuum between security and insecurity (Banham, 2020; Bondi, 2014). Ontological security is made up of three forms of consciousness—discursive, practical, and unconscious (see Figure 1)—that alleviate feelings of ontological insecurity. In fact, 'it is during times of ontological insecurity that the distinction between practical and discursive consciousness is more apparent, and states of security become more available for scrutiny' (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017, p. 362).

Each of these three forms of consciousness differs from the other in terms of the role they play. Giddens (1979) argued that discursive consciousness is the first layer of a more complex system. At a deeper level lies practical consciousness, and, at the deepest level, unconsciousness. Discursive consciousness refers to individuals' ability to verbally explain their actions in a well-thought-out and rational manner. Practical consciousness is tacit knowledge that individuals possess and apply situationally but are unable to articulate orally (Giddens, 1979). People can obtain this knowledge from life experiences, and it allows them to guide their behaviour (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). Beneath the first two levels of discursive and practical consciousness lies existential security in the unconscious, which is 'separated from the previous two with a bar of repression' (Ejdus, 2018, p. 887). Such existential security can be triggered by hazards, disasters, and catastrophes.

2.3 | Ontological security and disasters

Scholars have applied ontological security to natural disasters by examining how individuals' established security is either shaken,

TABLE 1 Selected studies on disasters.

Author (s) (year)	Disaster type	Objectives	Study site	Method	Findings
Fung and Carstensen (2006)	Man-made (9/11 attacks); natural (SARS epidemic)	To test whether people shift their social goals before and after the disasters	Hong Kong	Quantitative (telephone survey)	The disasters reminding people of the limited life increase their motives to maximize emotional payoffs in social relationships regardless of age, while the outcomes of this shift in psychological well-being differ by age
Sneath et al. (2009)	Natural (Hurricane Katrina)	To investigate the relationships between the emotional distress caused by a catastrophic event	USA	Quantitative (online survey)	Depression experienced by residents of the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina impacted impulsive and compulsive buying behaviour, depending on the magnitude of loss
Dube and Black (2010)	Man-made (9/11 attacks)	To examine differences in consumer perception before and after national traumatic events	USA	Quantitative (in-class survey)	A significant difference was found in consumer ethnocentrism, patriotism, time management, attitude towards business regulation, and product quality following 9/11
Ruvio et al. (2014)	Man-made (terrorism)	To examine the effect of materialism on the traumatic stress and maladaptive consumption in Israel and the USA	Israel; USA	Quantitative (offline survey/online survey)	The study confirms the harmful direct effect of materialism on psychological well-being while revealing its indirect negative effect by making bad events even worse
Kemp et al. (2014)	Natural (Hurricane Isaac)	To examine consumer emotions and consumption related to a natural disaster	USA	Quantitative (online survey)	Under natural disaster, individuals come to terms with the limited control they have, and experience heightened levels of fear/anxiety
Herzenstein et al. (2015)	Man-made (terrorism)	To explore how terrorism concerns impact consumer behaviour	Israel; USA	Quantitative (experiment); qualitative (interview)	Fear of frequent terrorism affects people's desire for control and avoidant behaviour. When perceived control over a casualty is low, they show more avoidant behaviour, changing their preferences and consumptions
Mehroliia et al. (2021)	Natural (COVID-19)	To examine demographic, psychological, and behavioural differences between online food delivery service users and non-users	India	Quantitative (online survey)	People perceived high threat, less product involvement, and less benefit on online food delivery services

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author (s) (year)	Disaster type	Objectives	Study site	Method	Findings
Prentice et al. (2022)	Natural (COVID-19)	To identify antecedents and consequences of panic buying	USA	Quantitative (online survey)	Government measures and media and peer influence significantly affect panic buying
Rayburn et al. (2022)	Natural (COVID-19)	To uncover the impact of a multifaceted crisis on consumers' immediate shopping behaviours, short-term financial spending, and long-term shopping and spending responses	USA	Qualitative (open-ended free response survey; grounded theory)	Consumers tend to adjust their shopping and spending behaviour during the pandemic by navigating from fear to frugality, after which they decide whether to maintain new crisis-induced behaviours or return to prior consumption behaviours
Kim et al. (2022)	Natural (COVID-19)	To examine the influence of cognitive assessment and affective response on restaurant customers' behavioural intention under COVID-19	USA	Quantitative (online survey)	People tend to commit themselves to hygienic behaviour, prioritize local restaurants, and engage in conscious consumption under COVID-19
Das et al. (2022)	Natural (COVID-19)	To investigate how consumers' socioeconomic background affects their changing way of life and buying behaviour under COVID-19	India	Quantitative (online and offline survey)	People tend to purchase health and hygiene products according to their current employment status and family earning status, which is affected by affordability and awareness towards health and hygiene

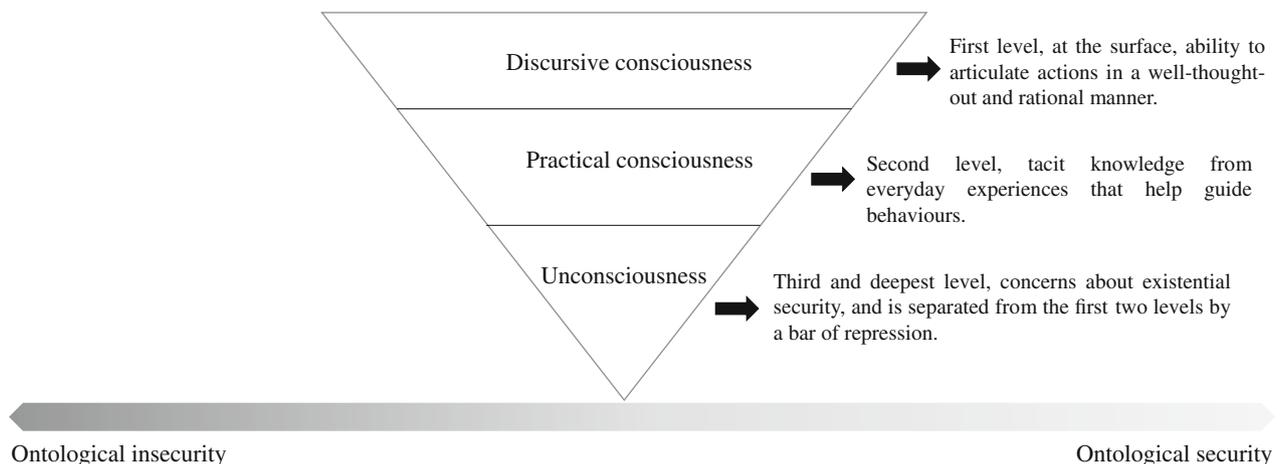


FIGURE 1 Constituents of ontological security. Source: Own elaboration based on Giddens (1979, 1991).

restored, or enhanced. For instance, Hawkins and Maurer (2011) examined survivors' responses to the physical and psychological loss of home and community following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Survivors appeared to share three common responses after

experiencing ontological insecurity: nostalgia, a sense of tangible and intangible loss towards people and objects that previously provided security and constancy, and an attempt to restore ontological security in their home community or their new one.

TABLE 2 Prior marketing research on ontological security.

Author (s) (year)	Research context	Method	Objectives	Findings
Phipps and Ozanne (2017)	Twelve-year drought in Australia	Qualitative	To explore how consumers adjust to unease following routine disruptions and to understand how different ontological states are enabled within practice realignment	Following routine disruption, individuals adjust by reworking their practical and discursive understandings anchored in materiality and constitutive rules by adopting one of five emergent ontological states: embedded security, embedded insecurity, discursive insecurity, acclimated security, and new embedded security
Areni (2019)	Engaging with nostalgia-evoking content on Facebook and YouTube	Conceptual	To understand the underlying motives for consumers' actions and interactions on social media platforms	Consumers' interactions and reactions to nostalgia-evoking content allow them to reintegrate past memories into an ongoing self-affirming narrative, and digitally archiving photos and videos allows them the possibility of 'digital immortality' in the future, which suggests an unconscious motive for ontological security
Campbell et al. (2020)	The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic downturn	Conceptual	To provide a conceptual framework for future projects within the broader landscape of consumer threat response and understand how consumers and markets collectively respond in the short and long terms to threats that disrupt consumers' routines and society in general	Future suggestions for research on three main areas: (1) disruption, (2) extent of threat, and (3) adaptive consumer responses

Similarly, Phipps and Ozanne (2017) investigated how the 12-year drought, which disrupted countless routines, forced Australian households to realign their practices to overcome insecurities. The studied households attempted to do so by adopting one of five primary ontological states. Each of these states—which range from embedded security, embedded insecurity, discursive insecurity, and acclimated security to new embedded security—varies in its extremity. Embedded security, on one end, is a set of established routines—a baseline—that allows households to maintain and perform their daily practices with ease. On the other end, new embedded security reflects some of the households' ability to restore new, stable, and fully anchored routines after adjusting to their new reality (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017).

Campbell et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual framework for understanding consumers' and markets' responses to threats, particularly as it relates to the pandemic. Their framework suggests that the extent of a threat, whether actual or potential, disrupts individuals' certainties and routines and urges both people and markets to adopt 'adaptive responses to get along in altered and uncertain circumstances' (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 315). We mainly focus on consumer responses. It is crucial that we first understand consumers' reactions following a loss of security. At present, people are not experiencing isolated threats, but instead, a combination of them. Once we establish knowledge on how the loss of

ontological security shapes individuals' responses, we can then address market responses in a later analysis (Table 2).

3 | METHOD

Given our scant knowledge about ontological security in the existing consumer studies, we adopted an exploratory approach to qualitatively examine how man-made and natural disasters affect individuals' ontological security in terms of their everyday lives. We conducted focus groups across two periods: before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. We chose the UK, France, and Germany because they have experienced a similar level of terrorist attacks while being severely impacted by the pandemic (Table 3).

3.1 | Data collection and participants

We sought individuals from diverse demographic backgrounds, particularly in terms of age and gender, to elicit varying points of view (Appendix S1). We recruited participants via our social networks, personal connections, university posters, and online advertisements. Each

TABLE 3 Characteristics of the countries included in this study.

Country	No. of terrorist cases during 2010–2020 ^a	No. of COVID-19 cases (deaths) ^b
UK	16 (e.g., Manchester attack and London Bridge attack in 2017; Westminster car attack in 2018; London Bridge stabbing in 2019; Streatham stabbing in 2020)	24,293,752 (204,898)
France	41 (e.g., Paris attacks in 2015; Normandy church attack and Bastille Day attack in 2016; Strasbourg attack in 2018; Paris police headquarters stabbing in 2019; Villejuif stabbing in 2020)	39,543,118 (164,427)
Germany	29 (e.g., Berlin Christmas market and Munich shooting in 2016; Halle synagogue shooting in 2019; Hanau shootings in 2020)	37,842,223 (166,292)

^aOur World in Data (2021) and Statista (2021).

^bWorldometer (as of February 7, 2023).

participant received a €20 Amazon gift voucher. We conducted 35 focus groups throughout the two periods: 26 were held in person before the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., between September 2017 and January 2019), and nine were conducted via Zoom after the outbreak (i.e., between June and November 2020). Collecting the data across two periods allowed us to capture consumers' evolving experiences and responses given the ongoing terror threat (Rayburn et al., 2022). All discussants were informed of the topic and gave their consent to have the discussions recorded. Most group sessions lasted between 75 and 100 minutes, after which we thoroughly transcribed each. In France and Germany, each session was conducted and transcribed in the local language and then later translated into English.

3.2 | Analytical approach

Following seminal studies with interpretive qualitative explorations (e.g., Koen et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018; Mayr, 2021), we adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to obtain a deeper understanding of how our discussants were interpreting their experiences within the contexts and phenomena in question. The goal of the interpretative phenomenological approach is to obtain a first-person description of specific experiences by asking descriptive, open-ended questions concerning the topic (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138). Across countries, we used a standardized approach whereby each native researcher acted as moderator, thus encouraging a detailed but flexible discussion. The questions consisted of two parts: (1) general questions about the discussants' personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions related to the threat of terrorism or the coronavirus pandemic, and (2) country-specific questions relevant to each situation. We explored these sensitive issues in a comfortable, relaxing setting

to stimulate interaction and spontaneous conversation. Whenever possible, we used probing techniques to clarify our questions and facilitate their responses and utilized a projective method showing videos, images, news, or graphs. For instance, we showed country-specific images of terrorist attack news headlines or evolutionary trends of new COVID-19 cases.

We scrutinized the transcripts by building, confirming, and refining patterns or themes from the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In so doing, we incorporated an iterative process of grounded theory to benefit from the structured nature of its analysis (Anderson et al., 2022; Rayburn et al., 2022). In the first stage—open coding—the authors identified emerging codes across the three countries. These open codes were grouped as separate concepts. In the second stage—axial coding—two researchers converged the open codes into higher-order subthemes to distinguish the subtle differences in discussants' responses. When analysing the transcripts, the aim was to identify the most significant categories through an inductive categorization approach and the themes' ability to capture the most critical information relating to the research questions. In the final stage—selective coding—the same two researchers connected the themes identified in the second stage into main themes. After completing focused coding in all countries, we compared results to identify emerging common categories. Throughout the coding process, there was consensus among the researchers, and any disagreement about possible interpretations was discussed and resolved.

4 | FINDINGS

Three important themes emerged from our analysis of the transcripts. Depending on the type of disaster, our discussants experienced distinct emotional responses (e.g., fear or anxiety), tried to address concerns over their impact on themselves or others, and adjusted their consumption behaviours by seeking materialistic or experiential purchases.

4.1 | Fear versus anxiety

One of the first questions addressed in the focus groups was how discussants perceived, felt about, and reacted to the news. Whether natural or man-made, disasters disrupt ontological security, which provokes a series of emotional responses (Banham, 2020). Among focus group members, the COVID-19 pandemic seemingly triggered more persistent anxiety over time than terrorist attacks, which appeared to elicit only occasional fear due to their sporadic occurrence. Terrorism evokes inescapable fear of physical harm, given that it involves 'the use of violence in order to attain political goals' (Romanov et al., 2012, p. 183). A French executive describes how he felt about terrorist attacks as follows:

Since the attacks, I am always looking at my surroundings. Whenever I am out, I pay more attention to people's

behavior around me. Thinking a bomber can choose this place and blow us up makes me nervous. Whenever the idea crosses my mind, I get scared no matter how much I try to push it away. If someone looks disturbing, I move away immediately. It may be dangerous. (Male, 51)

Fear affected some discussants' choices, even extending to their simplest everyday activities before the attacks. For example, a German finance manager explains that:

Before the attacks, I did not think twice about being in a taxi. Now, I feel very unsafe taking one. I am scared that the taxi driver is not really a taxi driver and that he stole the car to carry out an attack. It really is a scary thought that this is even a possibility that you are in the wrong place and time with someone who intentionally wants to harm others. (Female, 31)

The discussion around terrorist attacks was not limited to personal fear. As these attacks are a national threat, they provoke a collective fear that permeates society. A British journalist recalls that:

When the stabbings on the London Bridge happened, I was in a seminar, and everyone was plastered to their laptop screen. You could feel at that moment that everyone had a shared sense of grief that it happened. There was a palpable collective fear among us. (Male, 25)

Apparently, our discussants' responses to the pandemic seem to differ from those to terrorism. Such a difference may be due to pandemics' intangible and invisible nature. Interestingly, their feelings were not so reflective during discussions around the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic disturbed established notions of normalcy, thus forcing individuals to handle sudden changes at once. These sudden changes threatened established shared meanings, which amplified individuals' anxiety. Previous research has argued that the emergence of deadly viruses could force individuals to deal with severe psychological effects such as anxiety or stress (Hyams et al., 2002). As one French retail manager explains:

When I came back from my holiday in Mexico, I started seeing that the supermarket shelves were half-empty and how the number of cases and deaths were exploding. Every time I saw these things, I could feel the air getting heavy around me. I was a little lost, and I think many people felt the same way. I had never experienced something like this confinement before. Each time they prolonged the confinement, it was more agonizing. When the government announced lifting lockdowns after a prolonged delay, I was still anxious. What now? How will I deal with customers at work? What is going to happen next? I felt like I was in a state of uncertainty. (Female, 31)

The significant level of uncertainty unfolding alongside the spread of the coronavirus has amplified individuals' perceptions of risk. During the pandemic, people who continually expect negative scenarios are likely to experience increased anxiety (Prentice et al., 2022). As a German business graduate explains:

Seeing all these videos and images of people in the news made the virus always present in my mind. I tried to take my mind from it during this past summer and tried to travel, but when I heard about all the mutations, it brought all this worry back. I am concerned that everything will be worse again, and it will take longer for us to get out of this situation. I am anxious about the virus and how it is becoming more infectious. Is it going to end? How will it end? When? All these worries are on my mind. They come and go but are always there. (Female, 21)

The anxiety from COVID-19 not only relates to the actual virus itself but extends to the multiplicity of its repercussions on health, society, and the economy. These strongly affect uncertainty about the future (Sheth, 2020) and may lead to psychological distress (Rettie & Daniels, 2021). A British programmer articulates this phenomenon as follows:

Initially, my main worry was about the virus, but I am less anxious about it now. I would say much of my apprehension now is if the government imposes additional lockdowns because, in my opinion, that would have very, very catastrophic social consequences. People will lose their jobs, their homes, they will cause much political strife. So I would say my anxiety now is how to control the virus to avoid the prospects of more lockdowns. (Male, 27)

While fear and anxiety are 'strongly aversive, and uncomfortable affect states that individuals tend to seek to avoid or resolve' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 244), they are dissimilar. Fear is directed at a particular external threat that stimulates a fight to reduce uncertainty or regain control (Atalay et al., 2022; Rumelili, 2020). In contrast, anxiety can emerge before fear independently of any actual threatening object (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). Thus, while fear can be challenged and reduced by removing a known source given its tangibility and visibility, anxiety can be amplified by such attempts as individuals cannot pinpoint the source of the feelings they are experiencing.

4.2 | Oneself versus others

The two types of disasters appear to evoke contradictory feelings of concern. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, discussants were more concerned about their own safety and security. Some felt threatened, whether directly or indirectly. Despite their sporadic occurrence,

terrorist attacks are often personally disturbing and frightening (Huddy et al., 2002) and can thus become more readily available in individuals' memory, which leads to their overestimating personal risk (Johnson & Tversky, 1983). Some discussants explained how these attacks hit close to home and how they could have been hurt had they been nearby. For instance, speaking of the 2017 London Bridge attack, a British graphic designer expresses her feelings after the event as follows:

I frequently meet with friends in pubs there, and when I think about it, I could have been there that evening. I cannot help but feel a sense of threat and keep thinking that if I were there, I could have died. (Female, 33)

Such feelings of fear extended to people outside the city of London who were relatively far away from the affected areas. Remembering events after the attacks, a British marketing coordinator explains how colleagues decided against taking part in a charity event planned by their Kent-based firm due to personal safety concerns:

It happened right after the Manchester and London attacks. Many of my colleagues pulled out at the last minute. They simply did not want to go into London and put themselves at risk. A couple I worked with said they were unwilling to take such a risk and end up dying if something happened. It made me wonder, what if they are right? What if I go and I die? No one was willing to risk themselves, despite the noble cause behind the event. (Female, 28)

French and German discussants mirrored these feelings. During the discussions, some expressed amplified concern about their well-being, particularly with regard to the frequency of attacks. A German data analyst recalls how safety concerns intensified as follows:

Since the attacks, I had this feeling of unease about being in busy places. I do not feel safe. What if something happens and I am there? I am uncomfortable going to the Christmas market in Breitscheidplatz, or concerts, for example. I want to be safe and protected. I still have a lot to live for. (Male, 31)

Additionally, several French discussants addressed how, since the attacks, crowded places trigger anxiety, making them feel trapped and unable to save themselves should something happen. Subsequently, this has caused a shift in their choices. As one discussant, a management executive, states:

I avoid going to places where there are too many people. I do not feel good or safe. I am afraid. For the national day, I did not see the fireworks at the Eiffel Tower. I was afraid that there would be an attack. The crowd gathering in the same place for the national holiday is a strong temptation for terrorists to strike. If someone attacks and I am

there, I might die. Why would I risk my own safety for that? (Male, 40)

A French retail employee points out that terror threats are no longer confined to big cities. No place appears safe anymore; even small towns are now facing this threat. She recalls the carjacking and supermarket attack in 2018 in the southern towns of France as follows:

Attacks can occur anywhere in France today. This is possible and is happening. The fact is that even small towns are dangerous. We have seen it in Carcassonne and Trèbes. How can I feel safe if it is everywhere? (Female, 47)

In contrast, during the COVID-19 pandemic, discussants were less concerned about themselves. This could be because knowledge of the virus was still vague and irrelevant to them. Some said the frightening virus outbreak was affecting 'somewhere else' or 'other people in a different country, not ours,' as if their sense of reality was paralysed. To their surprise, the virus' abrupt outbreak and accompanying national lockdowns intensified their concerns unexpectedly. Instead of worrying about catching the virus, apprehensions were channelled towards the safety of their elders. Discussants seemed to underestimate their own risk while overestimating that of others. They seemed to rationalize the possibility of getting infected or minimizing their odds by displaying an increased belief in their safety. These sentiments of self-reassurance appeared in discussions across the three countries. As a German graduate candidate explains:

Even before the first lockdown in Germany, I already started to worry. I thought, what if I unknowingly get the virus and infect other people? I was not scared for myself. I am very fit and thought that even if I get it, the course of the disease will probably not be as bad as other people whose health is not as good as mine. But the worry was thinking about the others, the ones who could feel worse if I got it and passed it on. (Female, 26)

In France, some discussants voiced similar thoughts. While concern for self was not prominent, they expressed concern for others, particularly the elderly. One French business owner indicates that:

I have been following the news in general, not just the TV. When the virus was reported in France, I thought about my parents. They had cancer last year. Immediately, I changed my behavior toward them. I did not see them. I made sure my children did not get in contact with them. I know that for me, my wife, and my kids, the risk for us, if any, was shallow, but I worried about my parents. (Male, 41)

A comparable thematic pattern emerged from UK discussants. While exhibiting a somewhat collective effort to diminish one's own

risk in the face of the pandemic, they simultaneously emphasize the risk posed to specific groups. As a recruitment manager explains:

I was concerned about the people around me, not myself. Those experiencing severe symptoms are vulnerable or have underlying health conditions, whether major or minor. I am blessed, to, you know, not to have fallen in that category. I realize that my parents, mom, family, and other family members can fall under that category. I do not want them to get it and suffer. (Male, 45)

Ontological security emphasizes individuals' trust in the notion of continuity (Giddens, 1991), which takes various forms, including relationships with key figures in their lives. Actual or potential threats to these relationships shake this founded sense of security and trust. As individuals' worldviews are interdependent with those in their surroundings, ontological security relies not only on one's safety but also that of others (Banham, 2020; Bondi, 2014). Subsequently, others' well-being is increasingly important in individuals' quest to restore their ontological security (Dépelteau, 2018).

4.3 | Materialistic versus experiential purchases

A contrasting picture emerged as discussants reflected on how their behaviours changed while coping with the two threats. Some engaged in materialistic purchases, whereas others pursued experiential purchases. Discussants' shock at the terrorist attacks arose from their belief that such incidents typically happen in countries characterized by conflict or war zones but not in those in which they live. The ensuing distress motivated them to seek solace in various ways. Some indicated they consciously sought materialistic possessions in the aftermath of these attacks. Prior research suggests that materialistic purchases serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with life's adversities (Belk, 1985) and attenuate fears of death (Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004). Per terror management theory, such tangible, materialistic possessions are considered a source of surety against 'mortality salience'—an unconscious reminder of one's death (Arndt et al., 2004; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). In discussing the different attacks across England, a London-based digital marketer indicates that:

These attacks and the malicious intent behind them make me think of the various risks surrounding me. I do not know how to explain it, but something clicked, and suddenly I thought I wanted to reward and pamper myself. I want to buy what I want. Expensive and big purchases became increasingly tempting. Before, I only occasionally considered making such purchases, and I would pre-plan and budget accordingly. But now, I feel entitled to them. I happily splurge on them. (Female, 32)

Such a distinction was surprising. The moderator probed further to obtain a more profound understanding of what motivates such changes. The discussant continues:

It might be that since the attacks, I always think, what is the point of saving, and why plan for the future? I might as well spend my money and live in the moment instead. An attack could kill me at any moment. I experience this weird sense of comfort when I make these purchases. I savor these moments, the experience of it all.

Some French discussants echoed similar behavioural patterns by insinuating that they may spend money on materialistic purchases. Speaking of the 2017 Champs-Élysées attacks and their aftermath, a French office worker explains that:

When these attacks occurred, I started spending more money on personal pleasures. I buy exclusive X-box games, nice shoes, and fashionable clothes. I even redecorated my house and bought expensive furniture. I spend on expensive gifts for my family and myself. I now indulge in only the finer things that money affords me. It is a different experience, a pleasant distraction from reality. (Male, 29)

While some discussants appeared to focus on more materialistic or tangible things after the terrorist attacks, others reported contrasting behaviours vis-à-vis the pandemic. The coronavirus disease is psychologically threatening and anxiety-arousing (Jutzi et al., 2020; Pyszczynski et al., 2021), which shapes individuals' defensive behaviours (Reiss et al., 2020). In this sense, the pandemic activated individuals' ontological insecurity—it inflicted daily 'disruption, where people lost their stabilizing anchor, their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 246). In this regard, Areni (2019) points out that '[m]ore generally, ontological security can be established and maintained via the long-term relationships that the self has with others' (p. 87). Conversely, a lack of perceived social connectedness may trigger feelings of insecurity (Ambrey et al., 2018), and 'the absence of communal bonds aggravates anxiety because it renders it impossible for individuals to share experiences' (Rumelili, 2020, p. 264). Several discussants indicated a preference for pursuing emotionally enriching experiences or wanting to create priceless memories with close relations to tame their anxiety.

If socially shared with others, experiential consumption enhances one's feelings of belongingness and relatedness (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). When individuals' anxiety about their security is salient, they tend to reprioritize the things in their lives. This reprioritization may cause a shift from self-centred, egotistical, and materialistic behaviours to more other-centred and altruistic ones (Jonas et al., 2002). Additionally, these individuals may experience renewed interest in intrinsically meaningful pursuits instead of materialistic ones (Cozzolino et al., 2009). During the pandemic, some discussants realized the importance of social relations. Others indicated the value of sharing experiences with their surroundings, which they interpreted as being of critical importance during such times. A German attorney recalls that:

Since the lockdown was imposed, and even after it was lifted, I meet with my family and friends on Zoom and play drinking games quite often. I reach out more frequently to friends from my hometown whom I used to speak to or see only once a year. I am also part of a virtual beer pong league within my extended circle of friends. (Female, 30)

Echoing such preferences, some discussants, in the face of the pandemic, emphasized the importance of experiencing things with loved ones, feeling there are valuable moments still to be had. It took them some time to come to this realization, however: their embedded security was disrupted, and they were faced with sudden changes that ignited feelings of insecurity. Seeking these comforting interactions helped to establish a newfound sense of normality in their lives, thus facilitating their ability to achieve acclimated security while reflecting on new practices and, subsequently, their transition into a newly embedded security (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). As a British operations officer explains:

For me, visiting family and friends' houses and being able to do that without any restrictions suddenly felt valuable. Taking the kids to playdates and being more involved with their lives, meeting with family and friends for that pizza, or going to the cinema for that movie, all of that felt very fresh, and that somehow, we are regaining our normality. I am even excited about planning a summer holiday abroad with extended family members. (Male, 47)

Despite feeling anxiety at the pandemic's outset, discussants seemed to value the opportunity to reorganize their priorities. Realizing that they wanted to spend meaningful time with loved ones, some opted to capitalize on this desire by developing new routines and embracing the chance to share quality moments within the newly established normal. A French senior executive elaborates upon his experience as follows:

Before the pandemic, my wife, two children, and I were never home at the same time. We were busy with our lives and work. But when the first lockdown was imposed, my kids had home learning and my wife and I had to work at home. How could we endure the entire day all together? It took my wife and me a bit of time to realize that this may be a once in a lifetime chance to spend such uninterrupted time with our kids. We cook, eat together, make breakfast together, and even wash the dishes together. We are now embracing every little moment with them and realize how precious these moments are. (Male, 54).

During salient disasters, individuals may be more willing to choose experiences over materialistic possessions. Over time, these experiences shape and strengthen individuals' identities and become part of

their sense of self, thus enriching their lives and providing longer-lasting satisfaction (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Meaningful social relationships also contribute significantly to human happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002). The shared nature of experiences (Gilovich et al., 2015) motivates individuals to discuss and relive them with others happily. Doing so enhances positive social interactions, critical for individuals' psychological health and well-being (Van Boven et al., 2010). Paradoxically, materialism is associated with having negative consequences on individuals' psychological well-being and relations with others (Belk, 1985). People who report having materialistic values tend to report lower levels of psychological well-being and increased feelings of social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and diminished meaning in life (Kashdan & Breen, 2007). Overall, humans are the sum of their experiences, which are considered a vital and central component of individuals' selves (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Table 4 provides a summary of our findings.

Figure 2 also schematically summarizes the above findings for ease of understanding. Moreover, to illustrate the diversity of responses and supplement our inductive reasoning, we have included additional supporting quotes in Appendix S2.

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | Theoretical implications

While avoiding oversimplification, our findings seem to suggest that man-made disasters—that is, terrorist attacks—trigger fear, thus making individuals more concerned about their existential security. To alleviate such feelings, they appear to engage in materialistic purchases of, for example, luxury goods. This seems consistent with prior research on terrorism, including that of the 9/11 attacks (Arndt et al., 2004). Materialistic purchases may make individuals feel more in control against the background of a sense of insecurity. Furthermore, according to terror management theory, materialistic purchases may stem from consumers' desire to alleviate their fear of death by boosting their self-esteem, which is a protective function against existential insecurity (Arndt et al., 2004). In contrast, natural disasters (i.e., COVID-19) appear to elicit feelings of anxiety, which prompt individuals to become visibly concerned for the safety of others instead of themselves. In coping with this anxiety, experiences and shared moments with loved ones became progressively more important as people seek to create memories and forge deeper interpersonal connections. Consequently, a feeling of potentially losing those connections leads to unbearable insecurity (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011). Longing for close human relationships may be a way to navigate this insecurity. These contradictory responses may explain our discussants' conscious or unconscious attempts to restore their sense of psychological safety, continuity, and, ultimately, ontological security (Giddens, 1991).

Next, a unique temporal nature also distinguishes these two types of disasters. Acts of terrorism pose a transitory threat, whereas pandemics present a prolonged threat. This distinction may explain the

TABLE 4 Summary of the findings.

Key themes emerged	Summary findings	Sample quotes
Fear versus anxiety	Terrorist attacks evoked inescapable fear of physical harm leading to both personal and collective fear. In contrast, the coronavirus outbreak produced anxiety based on uncertainty and risk due to pandemics' intangible and invisible nature	<p>Since the attacks, I am always looking at my surroundings. Whenever I am out, I pay more attention to people's behavior around me. Thinking a bomber can choose this place and blow us up makes me nervous. Whenever the idea crosses my mind, I get scared no matter how much I try to push it away. If someone looks disturbing, I move away immediately. It may be dangerous (Male, 51)</p> <p>Seeing all these videos and images of people in the news made the virus always present in my mind. I tried to take my mind from it during this past summer and tried to travel, but when I heard about all the mutations, it brought all this worry back. I am concerned that everything will be worse again, and it will take longer for us to get out of this situation. I am anxious about the virus and how it is becoming more infectious. Is it going to end? How will it end? When? All these worries are on my mind. They come and go but are always there. (Female, 21)</p>
Oneself versus others	Terrorist attacks were often personally disturbing and frightening, thus directly related to personal safety. In contrast, COVID-19 made consumers more concerned about the safety others, especially their families and the elderly, whereas overestimating their own safety from infection	<p>Since the attacks, I had this feeling of unease about being in busy places. I do not feel safe. What if something happens and I am there? For example, I am uncomfortable going to the Christmas market in Breitscheidplatz, or concerts. I want to be safe and protected. I still have a lot to live for (Male, 31)</p> <p>I was concerned about the people around me, not myself. Those experiencing severe symptoms are vulnerable or have underlying health conditions, whether major or minor. I am blessed, to, you know, not to have fallen in that category. I realize that my parents, mom, family, and other family members can fall under that category. I do not want them to get it and suffer (Male, 45)</p>
Materialistic versus experiential purchases	Terrorist attacks consciously or unconsciously made consumers seek materialistic possessions in the aftermath of these attacks. In contrast, under COVID-19, reprioritization occurred, moving away from self-centred, materialistic consumption to more other-centred, experiential consumption	<p>When these attacks occurred, I started spending more money on personal pleasures. I buy exclusive X-box games, nice shoes, and fashionable clothes. I even redecorated my house and bought expensive furniture. I spend on expensive gifts for my family and myself. I now indulge in only the finer things that money affords me. It is a different experience, a pleasant distraction from reality (Male, 29)</p> <p>For me, visiting family and friends' houses and being able to do that without any restrictions suddenly felt valuable. Taking the kids to playdates and being more involved with their lives, meeting with family and friends for that pizza, or going to the cinema for that movie, all of that felt very fresh, and that somehow, we are regaining our normality. I am even excited about planning a summer holiday abroad with extended family members. (Male, 47)</p>

scope of disruption to our discussants' ontological security and their opposing reactions. The transient nature of terrorist attacks appears to set off psychological responses akin to an unconscious fear of death (Greenberg et al., 1992). In carrying out attacks, terrorists deliberately aim to inflict harm on members of an out-group and achieve specific objectives (LaFree, 2010). Despite their brevity, these violent attacks make people feel more vulnerable (Dube & Black, 2010) and thus ontologically insecure (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). Insecurity stems from realizing that the 'future will be unlike the past in ways one can hardly conceive of, much less control...making managing existential

anxiety at the heart of ontological security-seeking' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 245).

To ward off this anxiety, people seek security in established routines and practices or, alternatively, in the products they purchase (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). Specifically, materialistic purchases buffer against anxiety, bolster self-esteem, and confer a desired social status (Greenberg et al., 1992). Worldly-minded individuals believe that wealth acquisition plays a critical role in their lives by establishing and maintaining their self-esteem (Hunt et al., 1990). Expensive materialistic possessions are considered a source of surety during challenging

times (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). The role such products play may explain our discussants' purchasing inclinations after brief encounters with terrorist attacks. In contrast, the perpetual threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped individuals' reactions differently. Initially, due to the novelty of the virus, uncertainty around its spread amplified feelings of ambiguity (Martin et al., 2020). The coronavirus outbreak ravaged one country after another. This global health crisis disrupted founded routines, thus posing a challenge to established identities and leading to experiential purchases. However, this finding seems inconsistent with a recent study (Moldes et al., 2022) and requires further investigation.

In facing the COVID-19 pandemic, people tended to prioritize emotionally meaningful experiences and focus on socially close partners (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). Some discussants mentioned worrying for their parents, grandparents, children, or significant others while simultaneously underestimating their own risk. People associate their

identities with being part of various and distinct social ingroups (Tajfel, 2010). Individuals assume various roles within their social and professional lives. These roles contribute to the feeling that one's world is secure and predictable and thus maintain individuals' self-identity (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998), the preservation is crucial to sustaining feelings of ontological security. Life-changing events such as the loss of a loved one can sometimes result in a schism of the self over time such that a new and vastly different self finds it difficult to connect with prior selves (Areni, 2019), potentially deepening the individual's feelings of ontological insecurity. Individuals' social relationships may constitute a routine of their own. For instance, visiting parents' houses to celebrate the holidays or gathering around grandparents' houses at dining tables on special occasions may be long-cherished traditions and practices. Thus, losing those loved ones could be disruptive, thereby provoking ontological insecurity.

Due to the pandemic, individuals were forced to adapt their habits and routines to this new reality (Rayburn et al., 2022). People had to face a threat about which they had minimal knowledge, then became more familiar with it over time, though they continued to live against a backdrop of uncertainty. This sense of familiarity may attenuate anxieties by establishing a 'new normal.' Newly embedded ontological security will enable individuals to attach meaning to new practices, thus helping them achieve a sense of stability (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). The latter may explain why our discussants appeared to be flexible in adjusting to this unique situation, particularly within their households.

Prolonged exposure to the pandemic has possibly given people a greater chance to reflect. They may also be motivated to reprioritize life matters and experience psychological growth. In a six-country study investigating consumers' views of the COVID-19 world, 73% said their general views on life had changed (Carufel, 2020). Lykins et al. (2007) suggested that following prolonged exposure to reminders of death, 'people transcend defensiveness and maintain intrinsic goals or become more intrinsically oriented' (p. 1097). It is possible that extended exposure to the coronavirus and subsequent reprioritizations may have fostered discussants' preferences for

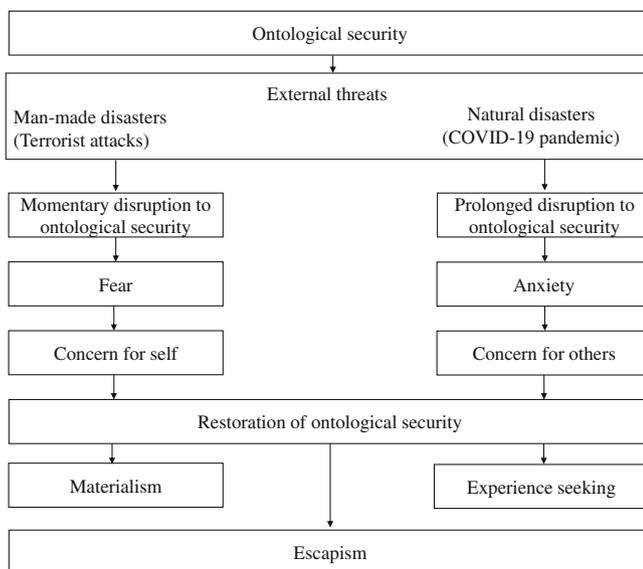


FIGURE 2 Conceptualization of findings.

TABLE 5 Future research directions.

Themes on ontological security research	Relevant concepts/theories	Related questions for future research
Type of emotional consequences driven by disasters	Time perspectives, transitory threat vs. prolonged threat, escapism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any perceptual or behavioural differences in consumers with prolonged exposure to disasters, as opposed to transitory ones? Would consumers' escapist behaviour lead to better well-being?
Consumers' individual and collective identity under crises	Self-identity theory, human relationships, in-group vs. out-group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How different would consumers' ontological security be when they are exposed to disasters individually or collectively? What are the theoretical relationships between ontological security and culture (e.g., collectivism/individualism)?
Material possession and experiential value	Existential insecurity (terror management theory), materialism, possession, self-esteem, experiential value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How would mortality salience driven by disaster affect experiential purchase? How would consumers' consumption behaviour change after society establishes a 'new normal'?

seeking experiences, which contribute to a person's identity, help create a richer life, and provide individuals with longer-lasting satisfaction than materialistic possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Sharing experiences with others also aids in building and enhancing a sense of relatedness (Gilovich et al., 2015), which helps people maintain their ontological security.

Finally, further analysis of the discussants' consumption choices—either materialistic purchases or experiential purchases—indicates that they may be driven by an unconscious, unspoken motive: escapism. Cova et al. (2018) suggested two forms of escaping: from something and into something. People may choose to 'escape from' social settings and structures when their primary motive is to get away. Contrarily, they 'escape into' something when they intend to immerse themselves in an alternative experiential context (Holmqvist et al., 2020). At times, escaping into something, or distancing themselves from reality, can be a way to alleviate feelings of and cope with distress (Gordon-Wilson, 2022). Such moments of escape may offer liberation from obstacles and the opportunity to achieve self-actualization (von Wallpach et al., 2020) while disconnecting from the reality of daily uncertainties. They may thus be a tool for regaining ontological security (see Figure 2).

5.2 | Managerial implications

Practitioners in the hospitality and tourism sectors may benefit from our findings. When consumers are facing man-made or natural disasters, they can craft their messages and offerings such that they focus on the emotional appeal of 'family time' and 'precious memories with loved ones.' Similarly, luxury brand managers may select particular incidents or dates for product launches, thereby appealing to individuals who prefer materialistic purchases. They may also capitalize on individuals' concern for themselves by foregrounding self-assuring messages about acquiring their products.

Policymakers may need to focus on the notion of concern for others. Public well-being campaigns and messages can address the importance of coming together, sharing concerns, and reaching out to others when feeling overwhelmed. Likewise, local police may engage with those who express concern for themselves and want to feel physically secure and safe against violence. Regardless of the type of disaster, understanding how individuals' mental health has been impacted will allow for a more focused effort to raise awareness around this issue.

6 | CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

By defining disasters as social phenomena (Quarantelli, 2005), our study is one of the first to shed light on the time-dependent nature of reactions to ontological insecurity. Individuals react differently depending on whether their exposure to a threat is momentary or prolonged. Moreover, our research indicates that individuals exhibit an unwavering desire for routine, even though this may not always be true. Occasionally,

individuals need to escape their daily life routines through 'little moments of luxury' (Holmqvist et al., 2020). This seems contradictory to their ontological security, but they do so because they want to augment their established identity further and ease their feelings of insecurity.

To make our findings more objective, we should recognize two important limitations. First, the number of focus groups was limited. Additional insights might have emerged from talking to a broader pool of people, particularly during the pandemic. Second, we did not consider any cultural perspectives while interpreting the data collected from the focus groups; doing so could have provided additional avenues for understanding the responses.

Besides overcoming these limitations, future research should further explore our findings through an experimental setting. For example, our explanation of materialistic purchases from the terror management theory perspective may also have a competing hypothesis. Prior research has found that mortality salience drives people into prosocial behaviour because 'acts involving kindness and generosity towards others also should affirm individuals' faith in their cultural worldview and self-esteem' (Jonas et al., 2002, p. 1). Thus, the same theoretical explanation could be applied to experiential consumption. Two competing hypotheses can be examined experimentally. Furthermore, Lykins et al. (2007) suggested that prolonged exposure to reminders of death generally makes individuals more intrinsically oriented than momentary reminders. Our findings echo a similar notion. Thus, empirically testing for these (seemingly) contradictory propositions is necessary to understand how, when, and why these differences occur. Next, the concept of escapism should be further explored. Our findings suggest that there appear to be two sides to concepts traditionally associated with negative behaviours. However, escapism may have a more positive and functional role in individuals' lives, thus offering deeper insights into their underlying motives, especially as they attempt to restore ontological security in a world characterized by daily struggle. Future research should therefore probe the various routes of escapism consumers pursue. Lastly, based on our findings, we propose relevant concepts, theories, and key research questions to be further explored in the future (Table 5).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the Editor-in-Chief, Dr Justin Paul, the Associate Editor, Dr Carmen Valor, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful readings of the manuscript and guidance throughout the review process. The authors acknowledge the financial support from the Yoshida Hideo Memorial Foundation for the data collection and from King's Business School for the preparation of the manuscript. This article is part of the first author's doctoral dissertation, supervised by the last author at King's Business School.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE

¹ While Schenker-Wicki et al. (2010) classify the pandemic as a man-made disaster, the present study views it as a natural disaster in light of Sedighi (2020) and Sheth (2020).

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How to cite this article: Fawaz, R. S., Bourliataux-Lajoie, S., Roessner, A., & Okazaki, S. (2023). What do we know about consumers' ontological security in disaster scenarios? *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 47(4), 1483–1499. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12926>