



Death and Consumerism: Desire for Social vs. Long-Term Status Items

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Abstract

Terror management theory (TMT) postulates that when mortality is made salient, humans cling to cultural worldviews to buffer the feeling of insecurity that death engenders. This article is building upon the link between TMT and consumer behavior. Recent research indicates that consumerism may be one way of obtaining symbolic immortality in a culture where materialism is considered a life value. This study examined the effects of mortality salience (MS), gender and age on perceptions of materialism and consumer choice. Participants' feelings of insecurity were experimentally activated by answering open-ended questions about death. The participants in the mortality salience condition, compared with participants who wrote about dental pain, were more inclined to invest in a savings fund (long-term status) compared with additional product choices such as social status items (e.g., jewelry). MS and gender also affected ratings of financial investment, such that males were more likely to make a financial investment overall, whereas females' desire for investment increased when primed with death. However, results did not reveal any significant effect of MS on materialism scores overall. In conclusion, these findings, and those of similar future research is instrumental to uncovering how terror management processes influence the emphasis consumers place on specific types of material products.

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Introduction

“The first thing we have to do with heroism is to lay bare its underside, show what gives human heroics its specific nature and impetus. Here we introduce directly one of the great rediscoveries of modern thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death.”

– Ernest Becker (1973, p. 11)

Terror management theory (TMT), inspired from the writings of Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), proposes that a potential for anxiety results from the juxtaposition of death awareness—presumably a uniquely human capacity made possible by cognitive abilities such as self-awareness and abstract thought—and the instinct for self-preservation, which is common to all animals (e.g., Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). To defend against this potential death anxiety, people must believe that some valued aspect of themselves will continue, either literally or symbolically, after cessation of their biological body. Literal immortality takes the form of an afterlife (e.g., heaven), whereas symbolic immortality takes the form of extensions of the self (e.g., children, achievements) continuing to exist after the person’s biological death (Martin, 1999). Whether literal or symbolic, this cultural anxiety-buffer consists of two components: (a) belief in the validity of a cultural worldview and the standards and values associated with that worldview, and (b) belief that one is meeting or exceeding those standards and values, i.e., self-esteem (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). Thus, as Becker (1973, p. 255) described it, a cultural worldview “is more than merely an outlook on life: it is an immortality formula.”

There is a certain complexity to materialism that makes it difficult to define. Belk (1985) and Mick (1996) have identified the virtues of materialism as a momentous American value. Richins and Dawson (1992) refer to materialism as “a mind set or constellation of attitudes regarding the relative importance of acquisition and possession of objects in one’s life” (p. 307). As human beings in a capitalist society, we are consumers by nature (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004), though it is *what* we choose to consume that may inadvertently symbolize materialistic trends (Mick, 1996). The desire to attain material possessions only emphasizes the notion that products are integral threads in the fabric of present day American culture (Solomon, 1983). Such possessions can represent success in life, importance of acquisition, and even happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Scholars have recently explored the influence TMT has on consumer behavior (Fransen et al., 2008; Arndt et al., 2004; Rindfleish and Burroughs, 2004; Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004). Though different aspects of TMT have been tested in various ways, by far the most common approach to examining the theory has been via the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis—i.e., that reminding participants of their own death should result in subsequent worldview defense (Arndt et al., 1997). For example, if an individual considers themselves to be patriotic towards America, when primed with MS, the individual is more inclined to defend America and its values. One way to understand the paradoxical nature of consumption behaviors is to recognize that materialism is a cultural value in western society (Greenberg, et al., 1990). Thus, by priming MS in individuals, the desirability of material possessions may increase (Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004). To the extent that the widespread cultural message of consumption and materialism becomes internalized at the individual level, we can understand humans’ desire for material

objects as a veiled effort to overcome the existential anxiety provoked by awareness of mortality (Choi, Kwon, & Lee, 2007; Arndt et al., 2004).

Previous research supports the notion that materialism is influenced by MS (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Mandel & Heine, 1999; Arndt et al., 2004). Kasser and Sheldon (2000) revealed that participants in the mortality salience condition had higher financial expectations for themselves 15 years in the future, as well as demonstrated more greed and consumption of additional resources, compared to participants in a non-mortality control condition who wrote an essay about listening to music instead of dying. Further, Mandel and Heine (1999) found that MS (primed by filling out a survey about death) increased people's interest in high-status items such as a Rolex watch and a Lexus automobile compared to a control group who filled out a survey about depression instead. Another experiment revealed that when participants were reminded of their own death, they were more inclined to retrieve a \$20 bill on the street versus those not primed with MS (Arndt et al., 2004). Finally, a more recent study illustrated that explicit exposure to an insurance brand increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts, which, in turn, increased personal spending intentions (Fransen et al., 2008).

While there is a wide body of research supporting TMT (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010), no data have yet shed light on how TMT affects desire for status items versus long-term value items. The current study examined the effect of MS, gender, and age in relation to materialism and consumer choice. We hypothesized that those in the MS condition would be more likely to invest financially in order to bolster their long-term cultural status. Specifically, we predicted that individuals in the MS condition would associate a savings fund or a house (which represented long-term status desires) with their legacy rather than a diamond bracelet or a sports car—items of high social status. We further predicted that men would be more materialistic overall; in American culture, men have been associated as the bread winners until recently and, despite the rise of women in business, money is still an important commodity to the male cultural identity. The third prediction in this study was that materialism would decline with age; we hypothesized that material wealth may become less important with age, because life satisfaction increases (Belk, 1985). Our research seeks to better understand materialism and consumer choice as influenced by reminders of death.

Method

Participants

Forty-seven Fort Lewis College business undergraduate students participated in this experiment. Ages ranged from 18 to 36 with a mean age of 21.89 ($SD=3.47$). There were 17 female and 30 males; 23 individuals were in the mortality salience condition, whereas the dental pain condition consisted of 24 individuals. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to explore personality and values and later debriefed as to the true nature of the research.

Procedure

A between subjects 2 (TMT: death condition vs. dental pain condition) X 2 (Gender: male vs. female) X 2 (Age: younger < 21 vs. older > 22) design was used to examine the effects of MS and consumer choices.

Following a brief demographic survey, randomly assigned participants completed the TMT manipulation with open-ended questions regarding death, which served as the mortality-salience condition (Greenberg et al., 1990). Specifically, the instructions were to “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouse in you” and then to “Jot down, as specifically as you can what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” The control group instead received parallel questions about dental pain (“Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own dental pain arouse in you”).

After completing the two-question essay, a short delay that consisted of three brain teaser puzzles was incorporated into the survey. A delay was used to remove the thought of death from focal consciousness, because previous research shows that MS effects are only found when participants are distracted from the thought of death immediately after the manipulation (Greenberg et al., 1994). Following the delay, all participants completed the 13-item Financial Success Scale (FSS; Richins & Dawson, 1992) to indicate their materialism stance; responses to the questions on the FSS were rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The FSS measures three correlated aspects of materialism: acquisition centrality, the role of acquisition in the pursuit of happiness, and the role of possessions in defining success.

In the final part of the experiment, participants rated product advertisements. Each participant viewed four high-priced product advertisements. Short generalizable descriptions for the products were listed below the visual image. For example, the product description for the sports car was as follows:

The V10 engine produces 386kW (525 hp) and launches to 100km (62.14 mph) in 4.1 seconds on its way to a top speed of 313km/h (194.49 mph). Featuring technologies such as permanent all-wheel drive, full-LED headlights and an innovative seatbelt microphone.

Alternatively, the product description for the investment was as follows:

Investment into a renowned investment savings company account that has steadily increased 5% for the last fifteen years even during this recession and will likely continue to increase up to 5% each year.

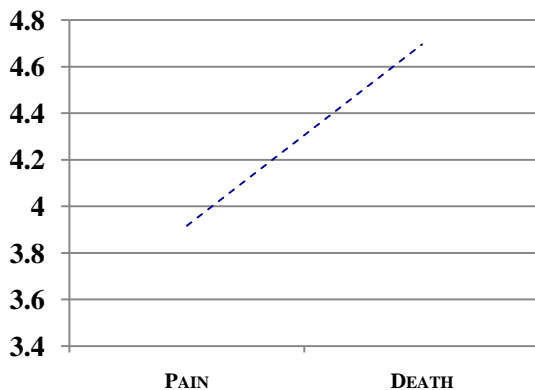
Each product was valued at 100,000 dollars; the two social status products were the sports car and the diamond bracelet whereas the long-term status products were the financial investment and the single family home. The order of these advertisements was counterbalanced. As the participants were students, they were told to assume they could afford any of the items. After each advertisement, the participants indicated their desire for each product on a 6-point Likert scale.

Results

Three-way analysis of variance was used to examine the effects of MS, gender, and age on ratings of the four product advertisements and scores on the FSS (materialism scale). Alpha was set at .05.

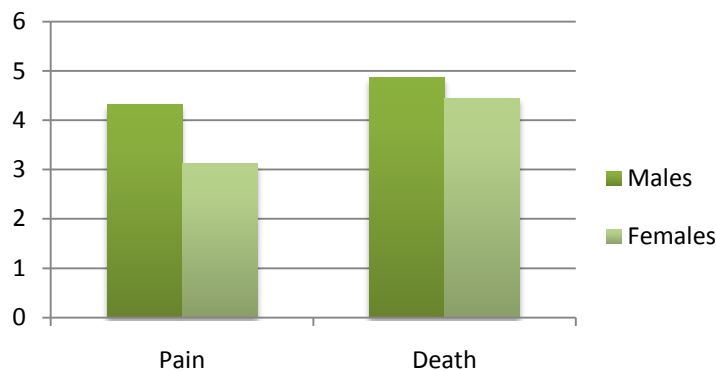
Ratings of the financial investment showed significant main effects of MS and gender but not age. Participants rated the financial investment significantly higher in the MS condition than did participants in the control condition, $F(1,46) = 4.718, p = .036$ (See Figure 1 below). This yielded an effect size of $r = .31$ for MS, near the average of $r = .35$ found for MS in a recent meta-analysis (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).

Figure 1: Desire for investment under mortality salience



As Figure 2 below displays, male participants overall rated the financial investment as significantly more desirable ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.46$) than did female participants ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.50, F(1,46) = 4.718, p = .036$). There were no significant differences found for ratings of the other three products—the house, bracelet, or car—by MS or gender.

Figure 2: Desire for investment between genders



The Financial Success Scale yielded a trend toward a gender and age interaction, $F(1,46) = 3.86, p = .057$, such that females' materialism declined with age whereas males' did not. Consistent with findings in this study, Lerman and Maxwell (2006) revealed that males were significantly more materialistic than females when tested with the FSS. With age, women become less materialistic. The average score for males on the FSS in the younger age condition was 52.94 ($SD = 10.94$), whereas it was 50.69 ($SD = 15.06$) for younger females. In addition, males also

averaged a higher materialism score in the older age condition ($M = 52.58$, $SD = 11.18$) than did females ($M = 36.50$, $SD = 13.40$). Arndt (2004) support the results of this data by verifying that there is a decrease, specifically in women, of materialism over the lifespan. No significant differences were found of scores on the FSS by MS versus dental pain condition, $F(1,45) = 1.02$, $p = .319$.

Finally, there was a significant main effect of age on the bracelet ratings [$F(1,46) = 8.03$, $p = .007$], such that the participants in the older age condition (22 years or older) were less likely to want a bracelet ($M = 1.50$, $SD = .81$) than those participants who were 21 or younger ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.61$).

Discussion

Previous research illustrates that people primed with MS are more likely to invest in cultural worldviews that convey a sense that the world is meaningful and offer opportunities for symbolic immortality (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 2003). The present experiment reveals that individuals do not necessarily become more materialistic—as FSS scores did not vary by priming condition—in the face of death but they may become *differently* materialistic. In other words, the value people place on consumer items may change due to terror management processes such that death reminders make long-term status items (investments) more desirable. Fransen et al. (2008) found that, when reminded of death, individuals buy items that they value positively within their cultural context.

The experiment successfully showed that participants who are thinking about their own deaths are more likely to be interested in a long-term product such as a safe financial investment. In comparison, there were no significant differences between ratings of the short-term material items by prime condition (MS versus dental pain). If anything, MS appears to affect the desirability of material goods that have deeper and longer-term meanings affiliated with them. In this study, MS greatly influenced individuals' desire for a financial investment in both men and women. It may be the case that, perhaps especially during a recession when saving and wise financial decisions are paramount, Americans place more cultural value on having “money in the bank” (or safely invested) than even having a high social-status item like a bracelet or car that others can see them wearing or driving.

The main effect of gender demonstrates that men may value financial stability more than women in American culture (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996). In terms of age effects, Belk (1985) explains that significance of individuals possessions vary between generations and materialism has been shown to decline with age. In the current sample, the drop in materialism with age may have chiefly been the result of women valuing social status items such as a diamond bracelet less as they get older. Having identified that materialism is negatively related to age, future research could explore how it is shaped by terror management processes. For instance, MS effects have been shown to vary between distinct age groups as a function of differing worldviews and the type of MS manipulation (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler, 2005; Maxfield et al., 2007). Recent work has also speculated that perhaps with aging death becomes more salient or more of a potent problem for people; yet, on the other hand, older people may come to accept death more, rendering the idea less threatening (e.g., Maxfield et al., 2007), which could account for a concomitant decrease in materialism like that observed herein.

Limits

One limitation to the materialism scale we employed—the FSS—is that its items may not be generalizable to individuals of different cultures (Lerman & Maxwell, 2006). Another potential validity issue when assessing individuals' FSS responses is that social desirability may result in individuals underreporting their materialism levels. In addition, the implications of our experiment may change depending on whether we consider a financial investment materialistic or not. The effects of MS depend on the norm that is made salient (Arndt et al., 2004); whereas current materialistic pursuits have been associated as a more common interest norm in western culture, they could also be considered a self-interest norm. In other words, it depends on what the individual was intending to do with the financial investment in the long-run—use it for themselves or share the bounty with friends or family members or even donate it to charity. Future studies could include that question to determine whether self- or common-interests are more likely to be served in the face of death. Finally, this study examined responses of undergraduate business students with a narrow age range (18-36), but older non-college individuals might react differently to materialism and certain product choices (Mandel & Heine, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

Conclusion

Our research provides preliminary evidence that consumer object meanings may lie deeper than simply their immediate social status and that these valuations may be altered by death reminders, gender, and age. In the face of death, individuals may actually make wiser long-term choices by selecting items of enduring value (investments) rather than fleeting value (sports cars). In conclusion, Arndt et al. (2004, p. 210) propose that “an awareness of mortality can be a springboard leading to meaning and health rather than a trapdoor leading to dissolution and destruction.”

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