Marketing Under Frequent Terror Attacks

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We investigate the effects of frequent terror attacks on products’ evaluation and consumption, and explore the differences between these effects and predictions drawn from Terror Management Theory. In five studies and numerous in-depth interviews we find that frequent terror attacks lead people to behave in ways that elevate their perceived control over the uncertain situation (where, when and how will terror strike again). This need for controllability is incorporated into their decision making and accounts for differences in product evaluations and choices made by those prompted to think about themselves dying in a terror attack compared with those who are prompted to think about dying by other means (i.e., car accident, cancer, etc.).

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Understanding whether and how consumers react to the possibility of dying is becoming an important issue in marketing. Car accidents, terror attacks, cancer, and other causes of death are becoming more salient in individuals' minds due to their increasing frequency and extended media coverage. Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al. 1997) provides an explanation for behaviors exerted when individuals are prompted to think about mortality. TMT suggests that when individuals are reminded of their death they experience existential anxiety, which they try to relieve by bolstering cultural worldviews and/or enhancing self-esteem. In Western cultures, consumption is an important source of self-esteem. The research in this session contributes to the literature by examining the impact of mortality salience on different consumption and choice patterns. In particular, the first paper shows that different death causes impact differently consumption behavior and product evaluation, as a result of a desire for control. The second paper provides an in-depth view into the moderating effect of mortality salience on the desire for control. The third paper investigates how and why mortality salience changes consumption choices and focus.

The first paper, by Herzenstein and Horsky, compares predictions drawn from TMT with how individuals in terrorized areas behave. Three experiments and numerous in-depth interviews were conducted in Israel where terror attacks are frequent. The authors find that these attacks have caused individuals to behave in ways that presumably exert some individual control over the uncertain situation (in order to mitigate their fear of death and continue with their lives). This systematic change in behavior affects products' evaluations and choices. Specifically, luxury items that symbolize high status within the culture were more appealing to participants who were prompted to think about death (by causes such as cancer or car accidents) compared with those who were prompted to think about dying in a terror attack. Luxury products with characteristics that may allow individuals to feel more in control of their environment were also rated higher on the luxury scale by those in the death condition, but those in the terrorism condition stated higher purchase intentions for those products. Individuals' locus-of-control moderated this relation.

In the second paper, Ferraro and Agrawal suggest that one way to relieve anxiety resulting from mortality salience is by bolstering self esteem through desiring and exerting control. Having a greater desire for control counteracts the lack of control over one's death. The authors test this prediction in two experiments. In study 1, they directly measure desire for control and in study 2, they compare the benefits individuals may experience when choosing from a larger set with the psychological costs of such a choice. They find that when mortality is salient, having "too much choice" leads to greater satisfaction than having only limited choice.

The third paper by Mandel and Smeesters examines how mortality salience affects how much consumers buy and how much they spend. Across five studies the authors demonstrate that individuals who are primed to think of their mortality choose to purchase more of the same product for a weekly consumption, buy more products within a food category and spend more money than individuals in the control condition. The authors attribute these results to consumers' need to "die broke" and not to their need to endorse the cultural norm of consumption. The effects of mortality salience on consumption were more pronounced for consumers with low self esteem, as spending their money makes them feel good again.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Marketing under Frequent Terror Attacks”

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Becker (1973) suggested that fear of death must be present in all human functioning so that the organism is able to arm itself toward self-preservation. However, Becker added, it can not be present constantly in an individual’s mental functioning; it must be repressed so he can function normally. Building on that, Terror Management Theory (TMT; Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 1991) posits that events making an individual’s death and mortality more salient lead to existential anxiety. TMT suggests two mechanisms to relieve this anxiety, defending one’s cultural worldviews and bolstering one’s self esteem. That is, individuals may avoid experiencing existential anxiety by making an enduring mark on the world, for example, through acquisition of items that symbolize high value within their culture (Mandel and Heine 1999). Despite Becker’s suggestion that an individual should repress his/her fear of death to allow normal functioning, there are situations in which repression is difficult. For individuals who live in terrorized areas, not thinking about their mortality is practically impossible. For instance in Israel, since September 2000 there have been over 7,000 civilian casualties from more than 80 terror attacks (taking into account population size, this is equivalent to 445,000 casualties in the U.S.). Attacks occurred in buses, coffee shops, restaurants, shopping malls, markets and streets of major cities.

We suggest that when terror attacks are frequent and therefore death is constantly in mind, individuals account for the possibility of dying in a terror attack in their daily functioning, and systematically change their behavior. We confirmed this hypothesis through in-depth interviews we conducted with men and women of diverse ages that live in different cities in Israel. Further, we analyzed secondary data–interviews that were conducted in Israel in 2002. We found that interviewees consistently spoke of ways by which they are managing the risk of terror, and of their need to feel in control. For example, a young man said “when I go out I go only to a specific pub, because it has one door, no glass walls and I sit in the back. So if there is an attack, by the time the suicide bomber comes, I will be able to run away”. That is, when the possibility of death is constantly in people’s minds, they try to control it by behaving in a calculated manner.

In this research we show that predictions drawn from TMT regarding consumption behaviors do not hold when terror is frequent. Specifically, TMT suggests that concerns about death increase the appeal of products that imbue their owners with status. However, we show that this only occurs when individuals are prompted to think about death as a result of accidents, health related etc. This will not be the case when individuals are prompted to think about their death as a result of terror attacks. We tested the above hypothesis using luxury and non-luxury products in three studies. Participants were undergraduate students at a private college in Israel. In our studies we manipulated mortality salience to create three conditions: terrorism, death (other means of death), and
control (visiting the dentist). We followed standard mortality salience manipulations. The choice of Israel is straightforward as consumers live with daily terror; nevertheless given the globalization of terror the results of this research are indicative for other places.

Following Mandel and Heine (1999), in study 1 after the manipulation and distraction task, participants received four advertisements: two for luxury products (Jaguar and Rolex) and two for non-luxury products (local brands of pretzels and soft drink). After seeing each advertisement, participants were asked three questions (that were combined with good reliabilities): effectiveness of the advertisement, interest in product category and purchase intention for the specific brand. We found that Jaguar appeals more to those in the death condition compared with those in the terrorism and control conditions (results for Rolex were directional and marginally significant). However, there were no differences in the appeal of the non-status products among the three groups. The first study confirmed that while participants in the death condition follow predictions drawn from TMT, participants in the terrorism condition did not. As expected, participants in the terrorism condition did not find luxury products as appealing as those in the death condition.

TMT posits that the protection afforded by subscribing to cultural worldview confers a sense that the world is stable and controllable. According to Arndt and Solomon (2003), reminders of death should increase people’s desire for personal control when they have faith in a cultural worldview. However, when faith in the worldview is tenuous, or a basic tenet of the cultural worldview is threatened, the world may seem chaotic rather than controllable. Under these circumstances, Arndt and Solomon found that mortality salience engenders less desire for personal control. However, we found that the frequency of terror attacks has led individuals to behave in ways that presumably exert individual control over an uncertain situation. Further, their need for controllability impacts their products’ evaluations and changes their consumption patterns. Therefore, we suggest an exception to our findings from study 1: when high-status products are perceived as fulfilling consumers’ controllability need, those in the terrorism condition will state higher purchase intentions but those in the death condition will state higher evaluations. Therefore, the products will be rated higher on the luxury scale by those in the death condition, but will be purchased more by those in the terrorism condition. Locus of control, which assesses the extent to which individuals believe they control their own destiny, will moderate this relation. Specifically, higher purchase intentions will be among those in the terrorism condition that have internal locus of control, as they believe in their ability to control their fate.

The second study featured a 2 (mortality: terrorism vs. death) X 2 (locus of control: internal vs. external) between subjects design. While the manipulation was the same, we manipulated the order of stimuli to test whether the effect was due to order. After the manipulation and distraction task, participants saw an advertisement for a high-end home espresso machine. We tested whether home espresso machines could substitute going out to coffee shops (where many terror attacks took place). Results show that participants in the death condition rated the espresso machine as more luxurious than those in the terrorism condition. However, those in the terrorism condition reported higher purchase intentions for espresso machines. In addition, we found that participants in the terrorism condition who have internal locus of control had higher purchase intentions compared with all others.

In the study, we further investigated the need for controllability. The design was 3 (mortality: terrorism, death, control) X 2 (controllability: high vs. low) between subjects. Controllability was manipulated by creating two advertisements for the same espresso machine, one suggesting that consumers can invite friends and family to their in-home coffee shop instead of going out (high controllability--no need to go to coffee shops where a terror attack may occur); and the other only mentioned that this espresso machine makes great espressos and cappuccinos (low controllability). Similar to study 2, participants in the death condition rated the espresso machine higher on the luxury scale compared with those in the terrorism and control conditions. Furthermore, those in the terrorism-high-control condition had higher purchase intentions for the espresso machine compared with the other conditions.

In sum, across three studies and numerous in-depth interviews we show that the possibility of an individual’s upcoming death has a significant role in how he/she reacts and behaves. The need to feel in control of one’s environment is more pronounced when the possibility of death by terror is high. As a result, predictions drawn from TMT do not hold—individuals do not need to perceive themselves as people of significance in the cultural drama to which they subscribe through acquisition of luxury items. The exception of this finding is products that are perceived to allow individuals the feeling of control over their destiny.

“Mortality Salience, Control, and Choice”
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Given that people are exposed to death on a regular basis (e.g., a murder on the TV news, a movie with violent themes), it is likely that awareness of mortality can lead to systematic changes in people’s behaviors. Recent research in marketing has also suggested that mortality salience (MS) can have an impact on consumption related behaviors, including regulatory choice (Maheswaran and Agrawal 2004; Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005).

Terror Management Theory (TMT; Arndt et al. 2004) posits that MS leads to existential anxiety and that people cope with this anxiety through bolstering self-esteem or cultural worldviews. The TMT research suggests that after mortality has been made salient, people will seek opportunities to express themselves, to behave materialistically, and to exhibit control over their environment. Based on these findings, we build the case that mortality salience may influence consumers’ desire for more options in choice contexts.

A traditional view of choice suggests that more choice is better. Indeed, most people would prefer to choose from larger sets (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). Choice may be seen as an expression of control and empowerment, and so choosing from larger sets might be more desirable and empowering. Choice also provides a sense that people have the opportunity to select the best item and reinforces materialistic opportunities. But choosing from larger sets might also lead to psychological costs resulting from having “too much choice” (Iyengar and Lepper 2000) which manifest in lower satisfaction with the chosen alternative. As a result, while people like to choose from larger sets, they may be more satisfied with options chosen from smaller sets. However, there might be conditions when people are able to overcome the psychological costs of choosing and to experience the pleasures of too much choice.

We propose that MS alters perceptions of the psychological benefits (i.e., the opportunity to express control over one’s environment) and costs (i.e., difficulty of making the choice) of choosing from large sets, resulting in the benefits overriding the costs. When mortality is not salient, there is no pressing need to exert increased control or acquire the best option so the costs of choice override its benefits. We suggest that MS will reverse set size effects such that...
people under MS will be more satisfied with a chosen alternative if they chose it from a large (vs. small) set. When mortality is not salient, we expected to replicate past research showing that people are more satisfied with options picked from small (vs. large) sets.

Study 1 was a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) X 2 (small vs. large set size) design. MS was manipulated by asking participants to think about their own death or dental pain. Participants were presented with an assortment of six (i.e., small set) or 30 (i.e., large set) chocolates on the computer screen (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). They were asked to hypothetically choose a chocolate from the given assortment. Participants then rated their anticipated satisfaction with the option they selected and with the choice process. There was a significant interaction between MS and set size on satisfaction with the choice process. Participants in the MS condition with 30 options felt more positive about the choice process than did participants with only six options. Participants in the control condition felt equally positive in the small and large set conditions. Also, the results indicate a significant interaction between MS and set size on feelings of having too much or too little choice. In the dental pain condition, participants with 30 options felt they had too many options to choose from while participants in the six-option condition felt they had too few to choose from. This effect was attenuated in the MS condition, with both those having six-options and 30-options feeling more comfortable with the number of options available. This suggests that participants whose mortality was made salient were not overwhelmed by larger sets.

Study 2 was a real choice situation. It was a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) X 2 (small vs. large set size) design. MS was manipulated using drunk-driving advertisements. In the MS (vs. control) condition, participants read a print ad that explicitly mentioned (vs. did not mention) death as a possible consequence of drunk-driving. Participants were presented with an actual assortment of six or 30 chocolates and asked to choose and taste a chocolate from the assortment. Participants then rated their satisfaction with the selected option and with the choice process. Consistent with prior research, in the control group, participants’ satisfaction with the chocolate was lower in the 30- as compared to six-option condition. In contrast, in the mortality salience condition, participants’ satisfaction was higher in the large set than the small set. This same pattern was found for participants’ feelings about making the choice. There was also a significant interaction with regards to experienced regret. In the control group, participants experienced more regret at having selected the given chocolate in the large rather than small set condition. The effect was reversed in the mortality salience condition, with less regret exhibited in the 30 option condition.

What is the underlying reason why this would occur? We posit that the psychological benefits of more options override the costs under mortality salience due to increased perceived control over the choice environment. We expect that mortality salience increases people’s desire for control and this then affects perceptions of control over the choice context. In Study 3, we examine whether mortality salience increases people’s desire for control. Indeed, participants in the mortality salience condition expressed a greater desire for control. This effect persisted even after controlling for participants’ trait anxiety. Furthermore, the differences in desire for control were not driven by mood.

These findings enrich the literature on both MS and choice. We identify how consumers might use choice situations to exert control and consequently deal with the anxiety produced from mortality salience. Our studies identify MS as a moderator of set size effects as well as explore when and how the benefits of “too much choice” may override its costs.