Mortality Salience, Control, and Choice

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This research examines how mortality salience affects consumer choice in large versus small choice contexts. Research indicates that people desire more choice but that satisfaction with the selected option is lower when choosing from a larger set. Based on Terror Management Theory, we predict that mortality salience alters consumers’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of choice, such that it enhances the benefits and decreases the costs of greater choice. Results indicate that having “too much choice” leads to greater satisfaction with the choice process and the selected option than limited choice when mortality is salient.

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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 former condition was manipulated, the latter was measured. 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 third 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 behaviors. 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.

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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 conditions, 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.

“The Effects of Mortality Salience on Consumption Quantity”

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Since September 11, 2001, Americans have become increasingly aware of their own inevitable mortality. Many people believe that “danger seems to lurk in every corner of life, from children’s toys to McDonald’s coffee, anthrax to secondhand smoke, West Nile virus to SARS.” (Spencer and Crossen 2003). One way that individuals cope with their existential concerns is through their purchasing habits. For example, Mandel and Heine (1999) found that consumers exposed to death-related information demonstrated increased interest in purchasing luxury brands, such as Lexus and Rolex, which may reinforce a consumer’s perceived value within a consumer-driven culture. These results have also been replicated among Japanese consumers (Heine, Harihara and Niiya 2002). However, because the above researchers did not control for the prices of the items chosen in their study, an alternative explanation for their results is that mortality salient individuals simply want to spend more money than do control individuals, regardless of the status of the products purchased.

To investigate this possibility, the current research examines whether exposure to death-related stimuli can affect the quantity of items purchased, as well as the dollar value of the purchase. Unlike the few studies that have previously addressed the effects of mortality salience on consumers (e.g., Ferrarro, Shiv and Bettman 2005), this research focuses on the quantity of products purchased and consumed, rather than consumers’ choices between a given assortment of products. In a series of experiments, we demonstrate that consumers who have been recently reminded of their own impending mortality wish to purchase higher quantities of products, such as food and drinks, than do their control counterparts. We also examine several possible explanations for our results. The various explanations we test are all derived from Terror Management Theory, because mortality salience can affect individuals through various paths.

In Study 1, the mortality salient (MS) group wrote a short essay about their thoughts regarding death, while the control group wrote a short essay about going to the dentist (both of which should result in negative affect, but not necessarily death-related thoughts). Participants were then told to circle all of the items from a prepared grocery list that they intended to buy in the next week. MS participants selected significantly more total items (M=30.64 vs. 23.28; F (1, 30)=7.47, p<.01) than did control participants, including significantly more fresh vegetables, fresh meats, canned meats, and frozen foods, as well as snacks and drinks. Therefore, it is unlikely that our participants simply wished to “eat, drink, and be merry” (Ferrarro, Shiv and Bettman 2005), since they increased their consumption of both healthy and unhealthy foods. Study 2 utilized the same manipulation as study 1, but asked participants to imagine that they were hosting an informal party for friends, and to circle the items on a hypothetical shopping list of items they might buy for a party. MS participants selected more items from the grocery list (M=25.64 vs. 22.73; F (1, 384)=4.84, p<.05), spent more total dollars (M=$139.85 vs. $125.02; F (1, 384)=4.70, p<.05), and spent a higher percentage of their budgets (M=131% vs. 113%; F (1, 384)=5.84, p<.05) than did control participants. Study 3 replicated these results with individuals’ choices of snacks and drinks, and also established self-esteem as a moderator. The MS effect was more pronounced for low self-esteem individuals than for high self-esteem individuals.

The goal of study 4 was to examine whether activating mortality salience also activates the cultural norm of conspicuous