Mortality Salience and Extrinsic Goal Orientation: the Moderating Effects of Self-Esteem and Materialistic Values

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Terror Management Theory (TMT) indicates that the terror associated with our awareness of death increases self-esteem striving. We experimentally manipulated self-esteem by having participants complete a word-search puzzle that was intended to either temporarily boost (easy word-search task) or threaten (difficult word-search task) self-esteem. We examined how self-esteem impacts consumers’ extrinsic goal orientations when mortality is made salient arguing that boosting (threatening) self-esteem may decrease (increase) extrinsic goal orientations. We also examined how preexisting materialistic values impacts extrinsic goal orientations when mortality is made salient arguing that preexisting high materialistic values may increase extrinsic goal orientations when mortality is made salient.

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Conceptual Background

Consumption is central to the meaningful practice of everyday life. Products that we buy, activities that we perform and beliefs that we hold tell stories about who we are. Certainly we do not consume products only to satisfy our needs, but also to enhance our self-esteem through products. Terror Management Theory (TMT) addresses the question of “why people need self-esteem.” It suggests that one reason people need self-esteem is to provide a shield against a deeply rooted fear of death inherent in the human condition. The theory implies that the death-related anxiety is mitigated when self-esteem is strong but this anxiety instigates various forms of defensive behavior aimed at bolstering self-worth through compensatory efforts when self-esteem is weak or challenged. If self-esteem functions to buffer anxiety, then mortality salience should increase efforts to procure self-esteem. Greenberg et al. (1992) provided the first evidence suggesting that mortality salience increases self-esteem striving by demonstrating that mortality salience led liberals, who are committed to the value of tolerance, to respond more favorably to someone who challenged their worldviews.

In consumer context, studies have implied that mortality salience increases extrinsic goal orientations such as the preference for high-status products (Mandel and Heine 1999) and desire for materialistic possessions (Arndt et al. 2004) as a way of bolstering a self-esteem. Extrinsic goal orientations are characterized as obtaining external approval and rewards: financial success (money), social recognition (fame), and an appealing appearance (image) (Kasser and Ryan 1996). TMT also suggests that mortality salience motivates people to behave in accord with their internalized values. A value is defined as an enduring belief (Rokeach 1973). Materialism is widely viewed as a set of important life values that guide people’s choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including consumption (Richins and Dawson 1992).

We were interested in testing directly whether mortality salience affects the importance placed on extrinsic goals. In addition, we wanted to directly test whether this relation is driven by self-esteem striving and whether it is stronger for those who place high value on materialistic possessions. If these propositions are true, then the positive relations between mortality salience and the importance of extrinsic goals should be greater for those with low self-esteem than those with high self-esteem and greater for those high in materialistic values than those low in materialistic values.

Method

Sixty-eight college students filled out a questionnaire run in a computer-based laboratory setting in exchange for partial course credit. They were told that the purpose of the study was to assess students’ attitudes and a variety of personality traits. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Participants were randomly assigned to either mortality salience conditions or control conditions. Participants were given 90 seconds to think about either their own death or physical pain (control) and to write down their thoughts. Participants in mortality salience conditions were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Please jot down as specifically as you can what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” Correspondingly, those in control conditions were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of intense physical pain arouses in you” and “Please jot down as specifically as you can what you think will happen to you as you physically experience intense pain and once you have physically experienced intense pain.” Immediately after the manipulation, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988). The purpose of the PANAS scale was to assess possible affective consequences of the manipulations and to serve as a delay and distraction so that mortality salience effects were driven by non-conscious accessibility of death-related thoughts. After completing the PANAS scale, participants were asked to complete a word-search puzzle, which was adapted from Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg (2005), to manipulate self-esteem. In the self-esteem boost condition, it was easy for participants to find words but in the self-esteem threat condition, it was impossible for them to find any words in the puzzle. In both conditions, participants were told that “the average student finds 4 words in 2 minutes.” Immediately after the word-search puzzle, participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale as a manipulation check. Also, to measure preexisting materialistic values, we used Richins and Dawson (1992)’s scale of materialism values, which consists of success, centrality, and happiness. For dependent measure, we used an extrinsic goal aspiration scale (Kasser and Ryan 1996), which consists of financial success, attractive appearance, and social recognition.

Results

First, we hypothesized that the effects of mortality salience would be greater for individuals with low self-esteem than those with high self-esteem so that when mortality is made salient a threat (a boost) to self-esteem would increase (decrease) the extrinsic goal orientations such as financial success, attractive appearance, and social recognition. The result indicates that the moderating effects of self-esteem did not appear in either attractive appearance or social recognition, but in financial success goal orientations. However, contrary to our hypothesis, the difference between threat and boost self-esteem was significant only in a physical pain condition not in a mortality salience condition, such that a threat (a boost) to self-esteem increased (decreased) financial success goal orientations in a physical pain condition. There was no significant difference in a mortality salience condition.

Second, we hypothesized that the effects of mortality salience would be greater for individuals with high materialistic values than those with low materialistic values so that when mortality is made salient preexisting high (low) materialistic values would increase (decrease) the extrinsic goal orientations. However, the analysis revealed no evidence that materialistic values moderated the effects of mortality salience on extrinsic goal orientations.

Self-esteem manipulations did not appear to work. The reason might be that we collected data at the end of semester so that students may not have been motivated or did not pay attention. Therefore, we plan to collect new data for further investigation.