Effects of Mortality Salience on Ethnocentric Consumer Behavior At a Regional Level

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Abstract

According to Terror Management Theory the salience of one’s own death leads to an increased preference of one’s own in-group and to a devaluation of out-groups. In this study we tested, whether this effect also holds for preferences about products that do have a strong regional significance. More specifically, in two German cities we asked N=192 participants to taste and evaluate beer that was either from their hometown or from the other city. Indeed, under conditions of high mortality salience participants preferred their own local beer and devaluated beer from the other city much more than in a control condition.

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Effects of Mortality Salience on Ethnocentric Consumer Behavior at a Regional Level

How do we react as consumers to information that reminds us of the inevitability of our own death (e.g., news of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, wars, murders, accidents)? Terror management theory suggests that one possible reaction to mortality salience is consumer ethnocentrism. But what are the cultural boundaries that define in- and out-groups in such comparisons? And are these ethnocentrism effects only responsible for consumer attitude change or do they also have an influence on less cognitive concepts, e.g., gustatory preferences for a local drink?

**Consumer Ethnocentrism** is an individual’s tendency to view the in-group’s objects of consumption as superior to those of the out-group. As Shimp and Sharma (1987) stated, this tendency increases when people experience an economic threat from foreign competition.

Economic threat may be an important source of out-group derogation but another existential threat that also seems to influence ethnocentric tendencies can be derived from terror management theory (for an overview see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). According to this theory, affiliation to an in-group and belief in its worldviews serve as a mechanism to buffer our death-related anxieties. The bolstering of a shared cultural worldview against views of the out-group could lead people to ethnocentrism (e.g. Nelson et al. 1997).

Consequently, priming thoughts of people’s own mortality (mortality salience) should also lead to stronger ethnocentric consumer preferences. Indeed, an ethnocentric bias related to mortality salience is not only an in-group–out-group phenomenon, but it can also be found towards objects of consumption (consumer ethnocentrism); e.g., preferences for national cultural items (cars, food, sports, etc.) under mortality salient conditions (Jonas, Fritsche, and Greenberg 2005). As information that reminds us of the inevitability of our own demise is frequently presented in the media, the influence of our existential concerns on ethnocentric consumption behavior should be investigated thoroughly.

Since many consumer brands and products (e.g., foods and beverages) are mainly or exclusively marketed and consumed within a local region, we were interested in whether ethnocentrism effects only occur on a national level or if they can be found among regions as well. In accordance with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), worldviews in a regional context should have at least the same strong influence on individuals’ cognitive structure as national views because regions are less inclusive than nations and so they should provide the individual with an even more homogeneous worldview.

We analyzed the local beer preferences of the inhabitants of two German cities under mortality salient versus control conditions. We chose the cities of Cologne and Düsseldorf because they are situated close to each other and, objectively, have an almost identical cultural background. Nevertheless, from the inhabitants’ perspective, a cultural competition can be observed that is manifest in different traditions, lifestyles, and consumption patterns. Hence, the residents of each city were assumed to perceive at least an unconscious threat to their regional worldviews if asked to evaluate a cultural symbol (we chose beer sorts) from the other city.

We were also interested in whether the predicted ethnocentrism effects would take place if a less cognitively controlled concept like taste was the dependent measure. Thus, gustatory preferences between two German beers that either came from either the participants’ own or the competing region (within the same nation) were examined.

**H 1:** A regional ethnocentrism effect—i.e., a main effect of beer sort—will occur across all experimental conditions: the beer sort of participants’ own city will taste better than that of the other city.

**H 2:** This main effect will be qualified by an interaction effect between priming and beer sort. Mortality salience will additionally increase this ethnocentrism effect.

In our experiment, we used a 2 (city) x 2 (mortality salience vs. control condition) x 2 (own beer vs. foreign beer) between-subject design with condition and beer sort randomly manipulated and two fixed city samples (Düsseldorf and Cologne). The dependent measure was evaluation of beer’s taste compared to an idealized one. 192 people (72 females and 120 males)—96 from each city—agreed to participate in our study (participants were between 19 and 88 years old; M=43.8).

Results show that both hypotheses could be confirmed. Participants in both cities and both conditions rated their own beer as tasting significantly better than the beer of the other city ($F[1, 184]=25.46, p<.001$). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect between sort and priming: the taste difference was greater in the mortality salience condition than in the control condition ($F[1, 184]=7.85, p<.01$) mainly due to a devaluation of the foreign region’s beer sort.

To summarize, we would argue that our research adds to the emerging line of research that relates terror management theory to consumer behavior. Our research showed that individuals that have previously thought about their own death have a tendency towards regional consumer ethnocentrism. According to terror management and social identity theories, we found that regional identity serves as an anxiety buffer when mortality is salient, and consumption objects that challenge our regional worldviews—like a foreign region’s beer sort—are devalued more strongly under that condition.

**References**


“Is This Product Really New?” A Study on the Effect of Category Information and Certainty on Newness Evaluations for New-to-Market Products

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Both academic and industry research shows that consumers desire and value new and original products (Battel.org/news; Dahl & Moreau, 2002; Lee & O’Connor, 2003). Individuals strive to obtain new products for both functional benefits that can provide utility as well as psychological benefits inherent with being the first to recognize an innovation. Research has shown that the perceived product newness can have a major impact on the product’s diffusion and adoption (Gatignon & Robertson, 1991; Rogers, 1976). A new product can also instigate demand and may even redefine major aspects of consumption in a particular product category. Finally, new products can motivate consumers to seek more information, stimulate word of mouth and can enhance consumers’ receptivity to marketing activities surrounding the innovation. Given the ascribed benefits of newness it is not surprising that organizations spend millions of dollars in developing new products and convincing consumers of their newness. Yet, very little research has been conducted to determine how consumers recognize and define newness in new-to-market products. What constitutes newness in the mind of a consumer?

Research suggests that people naturally rely on categorization and perceived prototypicality to form inferences about newly encountered objects (Cohen & Basu, 1987; Gelman & Markman, 1987; Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). Categorization is necessary to incite learning and the formation of product evaluations and preferences (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). Aesthetic response to product prototypicality is also influential in the development of preferences in consumers. Research on prototypicality indicates that people respond more favorably to objects that are stronger category exemplars than to objects that are less prototypical (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). To date, new product learning has been studied in a context that provides consumers with obvious categories and detailed attribute information (Hoeffler, 2003; Moreau et al., 2001A; Moreau et al., 2001B). However many consumer product encounters occur under information limited and ambiguous circumstances where a category label is not immediately available (e.g., limited visual exposure, teaser ad campaigns). This context provides a rich opportunity to explore the direct effect of categorization and certainty on newness perceptions. The following studies are the first of a series that are designed to illuminate the interplay between categorization, certainty and perceptions of newness. Thus far, we find evidence to support that newness perceptions, first rely on the ability of the consumer to identify a product’s category and, second, depend on the accuracy of this categorization.

Study 1 provided a direct test of the effect of categorization on newness perceptions for new-to-market products. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either a 30 second visual product exposure only or a product exposure and product category. The product stimulus was the Roomba Vacuum Cleaner, a new-to-market product. Following the manipulation, participants completed a survey containing measures relating to perceived product newness. There was a significant difference in perceived newness between individuals who received the product category [M = 5.33], and individuals who did not receive the category [M=4.24] (t (50) = -3.31, p<0.05). This finding demonstrates that categorization plays an important role in facilitating perceptions of newness during new-to-market product encounters. Having a category label enhanced newness ratings, and not having a category label reduced newness ratings.

Study 2 examined the effect of natural categorization processes on perceived newness for new-to-market products. The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 factor experimental design with product prototypicality (prototypical /non-prototypical) between-subjects design. The Roomba differed substantially from typical category exemplars and was used in the non-prototypical condition. The Dyson Cyclone vacuum was selected as a new but representative exemplar for the prototypical condition. After the manipulation, participants described the product as though talking to a friend. This description was coded for the use and accuracy of a category label. Participants then completed a survey with the key dependent variable, perceived newness and relevant manipulation checks.

A significant interaction between information level and product prototypicality on perceived product newness was found [F (1,76)=4.66, p<0.05]. Perceived newness was significantly higher for the high [M=4.83] versus low [M=3.76] information conditions for the non-prototypical product [t (39) = -3.06, p<0.01]. Perceived newness in both the low and high information levels for the prototypical product were significantly lower than perceived newness in the non-prototypical, high information condition [both p’s<0.05]. Perceived newness did not differ significantly among the prototypical and non-prototypical products at the low information level and the prototypical and prototypical conditions [all t’s<1, p>0.05].

A significant interaction between information level and product prototypicality on categorization accuracy was found [F(1,76)=37.06, p<0.05]. Accurate categorization for the prototypical product in the low and high information conditions and the non-prototypical product in the high information condition were all significantly higher than in the non-prototypical, low information condition [all p’s<0.05]. Prototypicality also had a significant effect on categorization, such that accurate categorization always occurred for the prototypical product in comparison to the non-prototypical products [F(1,76)=75.17, p<0.01]. There was also a significant main effect of information level on correct categorization [F(1,76)=37.06, p<0.01]. High information enhanced categorization accuracy in comparison to low information.