Existential Anxiety and Essentialism Explain Negative Reactions Toward Brand Extensions

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Brands, to the extent they represent cultural values, provide an effective means of dealing with existential anxiety. Brand extensions may therefore evoke increased death anxiety, particularly for highly value representative brands and among essentialistic people—those who believe that there are stable and unchangeable underlying essences to entities. Study 1 showed that a combination of high essentialism and reminders of mortality leads to more negative reactions toward a brand extension scenario for a highly value representative brand. Study 2 revealed that antagonistic responses toward brand extensions are predicted by a three-way interaction of death thought accessibility, essentialism, and value representativeness.

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Terror Management Theory posits that the knowledge of one’s mortality, combined with a biologically rooted desire for self-preservation, is apt to create paralyzing existential terror. As revealed by a variety of studies, individuals seem to hold on to their cultural worldviews in an attempt to manage this terror (Greenberg et al. 1990). Cultures, as shared symbolic conceptions of reality, not only give meaning and order to existence, but also provide a venue for expanding and perpetuating oneself in a larger beyond. Individuals thus seek solace in the knowledge that whereas they might be mere mortals, the cultural worldviews they subscribe to are imperishable and everlasting.

Brands, to the extent they represent cultural values, may carry a similar death-anxiety mollifying function. Highly revered brands that represent the culture’s core values and are perceived to be “timeless” are also commonly referred to as iconic brands. If such brands function as a buffer against death anxiety, it stands to reason that brand extensions may be perceived as contamination of these icons and thus lead to increased death anxiety and engender negative responses.

One individual difference variable that might influence the degree of negative reactions toward brand extensions is essentialism. Essentialism is the tendency to believe that there are stable and unchangeable underlying essences to entities. Previous research on essentialism has examined essentialism toward social categories, such as race, sexual orientation and ethnic groups, and found that essentialist beliefs are associated with stereotyping and prejudice (Haslam et al. 2006). For example, people who believe that there are important, inherent, and stable differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals are more likely to endorse stereotypes about homosexuals.

People who generally endorse essentialistic beliefs may also exhibit essentialism toward brands—a tendency to believe that there are stable and unchangeable underlying essences to brands. Such people might be bothered by brand extensions, since brand extensions by definition damage the “essence” of the original brand and “contaminate” it. We hypothesized that a high degree of essentialism might engender negative reactions toward brand extensions, particularly when the brand in question is representative of cultural values and the individual has chronically high or experimentally increased death anxiety.

Study 1 aimed to show that when reminded of their mortality, highly essentialistic participants would disapprove more of a brand extension scenario involving a highly iconic brand. Participants first completed a 21-item measure of Essentialism, and then were randomly assigned into a mortality salience or control condition. In the mortality salience condition participants were asked to answer two open-ended questions about their mortality, whereas in the control condition they answered two similar questions about dental pain. After this manipulation, all participants read a scenario about Coca Cola Peppermint—“a beverage that is quite similar to regular Coke, however has a distinct peppermint aftertaste.” Following this, participants responded to three questions about Coca Cola Peppermint on a seven-point Likert scale. These questions were: (a) “How good do you think Coca Cola Peppermint is going to taste?,” (b) “How much do you approve of Coca Cola’s efforts to come up with new tastes;” and (c) “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Products such as Coca Cola Peppermint dilute the image of Coca Cola, and weaken the brand.”

Participants’ responses to these questions were separately submitted to univariate general linear model analyses, which revealed, as expected, a significant Mortality Prime x Essentialism interaction, for all three different questions: Participants in the mortality salience condition were more likely to think that Coca Cola Peppermint would taste bad, to the extent that they were high in essentialism. Similarly, participants reminded of their mortality disapproved more of Coca Cola’s efforts to come up with new tastes, and believed that products such as Coca Cola Peppermint dilute the image of Coca Cola and hurt the brand—again to the extent that they were essentialistic. Importantly, in our analyses we controlled for the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski and Webster 1996), which allows us to conclude that the observed effect of essentialism is unique and different from a general potential effect of closed-mindedness.