Leave Your Mark: Afterlife Belief Strength’s Effect on Durability Focus in Creative Consumption

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Drawing from existential psychology and creativity research, we propose that creative endeavors are complementary to beliefs in a literal afterlife in coping with mortality anxiety. Four experiments showed that an experimentally induced weaker belief in an afterlife directed respondents’ interest toward creative consumption that can leave a durable material trace (e.g., photography) and away from those that cannot (e.g., cooking). This suggests durable creative consumption’s power in coping with existential threat. Interestingly, afterlife belief induction has no impact on respondents’ intention to improve their creative skills.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers participate in various types of creative consumption. Some types of creative consumption leave long-lasting products (e.g., photography) whereas others do not (e.g., cooking and karaoke improvisation). When do consumers place more emphasis on producing tangible, durable creative outcomes and when are they content with short-lived creative experiences? In this research, we conceptualize creative consumption as a way of coping with threats to the self’s very existence and identify afterlife belief strength as a driver of the durability focus placed on creative outcomes. Terror Management Theory posits that unconscious anxiety over one’s mortality is a basic driver of human behavior. To manage such anxiety, humans have developed a number of coping strategies including belief in an afterlife (Dechesne et al. 2003) and engagement in creative pursuits for self-esteem enhancement. Rank (1932) argues that creative pursuit is essentially the externalization and preservation of personality and soul. By lending concrete, presumably indestructible existence to the abstract ideas of the soul, creative work imbues the creator with a sense of immortality. To render the creator’s ideas truly immortal, however, the creative product must also be durable. Thus, individuals who are existentially threatened prefer creative activities that leave durable outcomes. To the extent that afterlife belief and creative activities both relieve existential anxiety, they may be negatively related. Rank (1932) states that “Art was at first, and for a long time to come, the handmaid of religion” and observes that art rises in the wane of religious faith.

We explore the link between durability focus in creative consumption and afterlife belief in four experimental studies. We hypothesize that experimentally weakened afterlife belief should increase durability focus in creative consumption while experimentally strengthened afterlife belief should reduce it.

In experiment 1, we induced mortality salience in all respondents. Afterwards respondents read either an article that argued for the validity of afterlife (i.e., the “stronger” condition) or an article that argued against it (i.e., the “weaker” condition). From a list of pre-tested durable creative activities, respondents selected an activity and indicated their current interest in engaging in it. Respondents also noted their interest in participating in a non-durable creative activity: ice sculpting. We found that while weakened afterlife belief increased interest in the chosen durable creative activity, it had no effect on interest in the non-durable creative activity. Using the difference between interest in the durable and non-durable activities as a measure of durability focus, we found a marginally higher level of durability focus in the weakened belief condition. Interestingly, the afterlife belief manipulation had no effect on intention to attend a workshop to improve creative skills.

In experiment 2, we induced prevention focus by having respondents allocate points among three creative activities (e.g., photography), non-durable creative activities (e.g., cooking), and non-creative activities (e.g., watching TV). After the two manipulations, respondents allocated 100 points among the three activities based on their current levels of interest. Durability focus was operationalized as the ratio of points allocated to the durable creative activity relative to the total points allocated to both durable and non-durable creative activities combined. Results showed that strengthened afterlife belief reduced durability focus and that this effect was not moderated by mortality salience—that is, the baseline level of existential anxiety was sufficient for the hypothesized effect to hold. Again, the afterlife belief manipulation had no effect on interest in improving creative skills.

The first two studies were conducted in the U.S. where a large population strongly believes in an afterlife and where an individualistic culture promotes leaving a personal mark. We ran experiment 3 in China to test whether the effects are particular to certain cultures or reflect a more pervasive motive. We chose China because it is a largely secular, collectivist society. The 2 x 2 between-subjects design and dependent measure of experiment 3 are similar to that of experiment 2. Again, our hypothesis was supported and the effect was not moderated by mortality salience. Interestingly, whereas the U.S. respondents in the previous two studies reacted to a weaker afterlife belief by beefing up interest in durable creative consumption, the Chinese respondents coped by curbing interest in non-durable creative consumption. Research has suggested that individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to be more prevention-focused whereas individuals in more individualistic cultures tend to be more promotion-focused. To explore whether the cross-cultural differences observed in experiment 3 arose from differences in self-regulatory focus, experiment 4, conducted in the U.S., used a 2 (weaker vs. stronger afterlife belief manipulation) x 2 (promotion vs. prevention regulatory focus manipulation) between-subjects design. When prevention focus was primed, we found a greater loss of interest in non-durable creativity as affected by a weaker afterlife belief relative to when promotion focus was primed. As in the previous studies, strengthened afterlife belief again reduced durability focus and the belief manipulation did not have an effect on interest in improving creative skills.

Overall, our research identifies a hydraulic relation between creative consumption and a basic belief system component—afterlife belief—in coping with existential threat. Apart from its business implications, our findings more importantly point out one particular attribute of creative consumption that can render this seemingly ordinary activity more potent at ameliorating a fundamental source of anxiety: a threat to the self’s very existence.

REFERENCES
