Mortality Salience and Brand Attitudes: the Moderating Role of Social Presence

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Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986) suggests that reminders of death intensify the desire to express cultural norms leading to culturally prescribed behavior. Living up to these norms provides high levels of self-esteem serving as a buffer against existential anxiety. In the present paper we argue that people can experience an extra self-esteem boost when they act in accordance with cultural norms while others can observe this behavior. More specifically, it is hypothesized and found that the presence of others (i.e., social presence) moderates mortality salience effects on consumption-related behavior. Study 1 demonstrated that consumers, under conditions of mortality salience, express more favorable attitudes towards a luxury brand (valued in Western cultures) when they know that other can observe their behavior. In Study 2 these results were extended to non-luxury brands. Under conditions of mortality salience, consumers expressed less favorable evaluations of non-luxury (non-valued brands) when they were aware of the presence of others. These results imply that consumers derive self-esteem indirectly from the knowledge that others observe their appropriate behavior rather than directly from following the cultural values or norms of ones society.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The fear of death is so fundamental to human beings that it pervades all aspects of life. People tend to cope with the aversive thought of one’s own death in various ways. Several coping strategies have been identified and investigated, including self-esteem striving, in-group affiliations, and self-serving biases (see Pyszczynski et al. 2004 for a review). More recently another domain of human behavior has been added to this list, that of consumer behavior. Several studies have already provided empirical evidence for a relationship between mortality salience and consumer behavior. For example, it has been shown that individuals are more attracted to high status products (Heine, Harirahara, and Niyia 2002; Mandel and Heine 1999), show a preference for domestic over foreign products (Fransen, Pruyn, Fennis, and Das 2008; Liu & Smeesters in press), evaluate their financial future more positive (Kasser and Sheldon 2000), intend to purchase and actually eat higher quantities of food products (Mandel and Smeesters 2008), and become more materialistic (Arndt et al. 2004) when they are reminded of their mortality.

The explanation for the relationship between mortality salience and various forms of consumer behavior has mainly been sought in ‘distal’ defense mechanisms (Terror Management Theory -TMT-; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986). These defense mechanisms are aimed at increasing self-esteem levels. Self-esteem is subsequently expected to serve as a buffer against mortality-related anxiety. It has been argued that consumerism and materialism are important values intrinsic to our contemporary western worldview (Arndt et al. 2004). Our current society turned into a consumer society in which the defining activity of individuals is consuming; money and possessions can therefore be seen as measures of self-worth (Bauman 1995). It is argued therefore that people can derive self-esteem by living up to these ‘new’ culturally valued norms of being wealthy, spending loads of money and live exorbitantly. Living up to these norms provides people with high levels of self-esteem functioning as a buffer against existential threat.

But are these coping strategies invariant across different consumption situations? We argue that they are not. Rather, the present paper will present evidence showing that consumption related terror management strategies are especially likely to unfold when consumption is public, and can be witnessed by others, rather than when consumption is private. More specifically, the present paper investigates the role of social presence in consumer-related mortality salience effects. As mentioned before, TMT states that individuals derive self-esteem from living up to culturally prescribed values and norms because meeting these norms allows people to feel like valuable persons in a valuable society. However, it remains unclear whether one directly derives self-esteem from looking at oneself and knowing that one behaves according to valued norms or that self-esteem is derived more indirectly from the fact that other society members witness how ‘correctly’ one behaves?

From research on Social Impact Theory (Latané 1981) we know that individuals desire to be viewed in a positive light by others (Baumeister 1982; Frey 1978; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Riordan, James, and Dunaway 2001), and therefore have the tendency to engage in impression management strategies when other persons are present or only imagined to be present. For instance, consumers are more likely to purchase expensive luxury brands when others are present in a retail environment whereas consumers who are alone in a store opt more often for a cheaper brand (Argo et al. 2005). Consumers seem to be motivated to gain the approval of others, which can be achieved by behaving in ways that are approved within a situation or cultural worldview (Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini 2000). But why do individuals need social approval?

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