When Your World Must Be Defended: Consuming to Justify the System

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Consumers are motivated to view themselves as part of a legitimate and fair external system (System Justification Theory; Jost & Banaji 1994). Our research focuses on how consumption changes when that view is threatened. We find that when the threatening consequences of living in an unjust system are made salient, individuals who are the least confident in the legitimacy of the system are the most likely to defend it through consumption (by embracing traditional versus nontraditional consumption options). Conversely, individuals who are highly confident in the system are able to withstand such threats and do not turn to consumption to defend the system.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

“The self-defence is nature’s eldest law.”
—John Dryden, poet and playwright

As living beings, we have a fundamental need to protect ourselves when we come under threat. Thus, we bristle with indignation when someone insults us, we come out with fists flying when someone physically attacks us and we invest in insurance policies to guard against unpredictable events that may threaten our wellbeing. This need for self-protection underlies every aspect of human existence and influences every aspect of human behavior, including consumption behaviors. The three papers in this session all focus on how the need to defend against threats to the self influence the way consumers think, feel and make decisions. More specifically, each of the three papers examines how a threat to the self may cause consumers to engage in very different consumption behavior than they might otherwise have. Broadly construed, this symposium aims to examine how consumer behavior is affected when consumers are focusing on self-protective needs.

The self is a multi-faceted entity where each facet may become threatened and in need of protection at one point or another. The papers in this session examine threat to two particular aspects of self: threat to the self’s sense of its place in the world and threat to the self’s very existence. To offer a fuller understanding of how self threats may impact consumption behavior, each paper examines a distinct type of behavior that is affected by self threat and provides a unique perspective. First, Cutright, Wu, Kay and Fitzsimons (2009) examine the extent to which product choices and ad attitudes change when consumers’ sense of the self as part of a legitimate and just external system (e.g., government organizations, etc.) is threatened. Second, Schmid and Argo (2009) explore how self threat in the form of mortality salience causes individuals to adopt previously extraneous possessions to form a new self identity. Finally, Fernandes, Mandel and Smeesters (2009) focus on how existential self threat can lead individuals to engage in increased variety seeking behavior as a way to experience unrestrained freedom. Together, these papers suggest that when a given aspect of the self is threatened, consumers will alter their consumption patterns in order to cope with and defend against that threat. Importantly, each of these papers also suggests important boundary conditions for the role of threat on consumption, particularly with respect to individual differences.

Though consumer behavior clearly takes place within the context of self-threat, consumer research has generally treated such threats as unacknowledged background factors rather than as interesting topics in their own right. In the increasingly competitive and rapidly changing environment that we live in today however, aspects of the self may be frequently threatened, leading to significant changes in the way individuals feel, think and behave. This symposium aims to contribute to consumer research by bridging the gap between research on consumer behavior and on protecting against self-threats.

We hope that this symposium will attract a wide ACR audience, from researchers interested in self-threat specifically to the broad range of researchers who examine the role of situational influence in consumer psychology. This symposium is also relevant for marketers interested in identity and emotional coping. Of note, these papers are all in advanced stages of completion.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“When Your World Must Be Defended: Consuming to Justify the System”
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In this age of unceasing social, political and economic turmoil, individuals are increasingly likely to be faced with threatening information about the legitimacy of their socio-political systems. How do they deal with such information? System justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994) suggests that individuals are generally motivated to maintain the view that the external system that they interact with (i.e. overarching institutions, organizations and social norms) is fair, legitimate, and justifiable (Kay & Zanna, in press). This tendency has been shown to have a variety of important consequences including support for inequality (Laurin & Kay 2008) and decreased interest in social change (Kay et al. 2008). The present research is designed to explore how this tendency to defend the status quo against threat might also have important consequences for consumption-related behavior. Additionally, this research aims to further enhance system justification theory by introducing important individual difference moderators.

The system justification motive is assumed to help people avoid the psychological threat of perceiving that the system in which they live is illegitimate, unfair, and undesirable (Jost & Hunyady 2002). Consequently, the system justification motive is especially active in contexts which exacerbate this threat (Kay & Zanna, in press). Such contexts include situations where one feels that the legitimacy of the system is being directly attacked (“system threat”; Jost & Hunyady 2002; Kay, Jost & Young 2005), when one feels a high sense of dependence on the system (“system dependence”; Laurin & Kay 2008) and when one seeks a sense of control in the system to compensate for a lack of personal control (“personal control”; Kay et al. 2008).

We leverage these three contexts across a series of four studies to demonstrate the effects of the system justification motive on consumption-related choices. We predict that the enhanced need for system justification will lead participants to prefer consumption alternatives that represent traditional and well-accepted norms in society over those that do not. Importantly, we also suggest that there are key individual difference factors that will more precisely determine when the system justification motive will have the greatest impact on consumption preferences. We propose that one’s chronic level of confidence in the legitimacy of the system will be especially important. Perhaps counterintuitively, we expect to see the greatest effects of threat on people who have low levels of confidence in the system (“low system endorsers”). We reason that low system endorsers experience a significant gap between their current state and the need for system justification that is aroused as a result of certain threatening contexts. In other words, their fragile sense of confidence in the justness of the system is highly salient and threatening when the system justification motive is activated.
Thus, in line with classic principles of motivation, they are especially motivated to justify the system, and do so through means that provide immediate and concrete symbols of system endorsement such as consumption. By contrast, consumers that are highly confident in the system ("high system endorsers") maintain a strong sense that the system is just, regardless of threat, and therefore have no need to rely on consumption for justification.

In the first study, we examine the impact of system threat and chronic levels of system endorsement (as measured by Kay & Jost’s 2003 System Justification Scale) on preferences among pairs of national versus international brands. Participants are asked to read an article which describes a writer’s negative opinion of America or a neutral article. We find that low system endorsers prefer fewer international brands when threatened than when not threatened, while high system endorsers do not differ in their choices across conditions.

In study 2, we use a system dependence manipulation and examine its effects on attitudes towards sales people who represent traditional vs. nontraditional values. Participants are asked to read about the U.S. government having a significant impact on their future outcomes in life vs. a neutral paragraph. They are then asked to rate a series of print ads. Half of the ads reflect traditional American values, while the others reflect nontraditional values. We find that low system endorsers rate the nontraditional salespersons as significantly lower in attractiveness and likeability when threatened than when not threatened. As predicted, high system endorsers do not differ in their ratings across conditions.

In study 3, we again use a system dependence manipulation. Participants are then asked to rate a series of ads which we predicted would be more threatening and salient to men than women. Thus, we expected to see a pattern similar to studies 1 and 2, but only among men. Indeed, among men, we find that low system endorsers rate nontraditional ads lower in the high system dependence condition than the control. High system endorsers show no differences across conditions.

In study 4, we activate the system justification motive by manipulating participants’ sense of personal control, thereby generalizing our findings beyond contexts that involve direct threats to one’s system. Participants are asked to write about something positive that happened to them that was out of their control (threatening condition) versus something positive that happened which was in their control (neutral condition). After the writing exercise, participants are asked to review a list of movies and choose 10 that they feel would likely be threatening and salient to them. Our results indicate that low system endorsers choose fewer movies with a negative tone towards the United States when their sense of personal control is threatened versus the control condition.

In sum, we find that when the threatening consequences of living in an unjust system are made salient, individuals who are generally the least confident in the legitimacy of the system are the most likely to justify it through consumption (by embracing traditional versus nontraditional consumption options). Conversely, individuals who are highly confident in the system are able to withstand threats and do not turn to consumption to justify the system.

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“The Morphing Self: Changing Self-Concept as a Response to Threats”

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Consumers are ever increasingly exposed to news coverage about topics of crime, murder, and terrorism. During the period from 1990-1998 alone, while the total number of murders in the US decreased by 20 percent, media coverage on network newscasts about stories on the topic increased by an astonishing 600 percent (Glassner 2004). To date, the limited research that has studied the impact of fear has investigated the impact of reminders of mortality on consumers’ acquisition decisions (Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005, Mandel and Heine 1999, Mandel and Smeesters 2008). However, this is only one side of the consumption equation as according to Holbrook (1987) consumption entails more than just acquisition but also disposition. Given this in the present research, we seek to build on this initial work by investigating the influence of mortality salience on product disposition and do so using a new conceptual framework guided by research on the self and in particular self-affirmation theory (Aronson et al. 1999; Sherman and Cohen 2002, 2006; Steele 1988).

The basic premise of self-affirmation theory is that individuals are motivated to protect the perceived integrity and worth of the self (Steele 1988). One way people may cope with a threat to the self is to implement indirect psychological adaptations by affirming other elements of the self not threatened. In the present research we propose a novel mechanism through which one can self-affirm when faced with a threat: morphing the self through the possession with which one identifies. Given that possessions can serve as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988) it seems reasonable to conclude that consumers may use possessions within their extended self to protect the self through self-affirmation in the face of a threat. More specifically, similar to the notion that the acquisition of new products can signify a change in consumers’ extended self-concept when the self is threatened, we argue that the disposal of older possessions can complete this transition into a new self (i.e., morph) as such possessions are constant reminders of the old identity and until they are let go one cannot move on. Support for the expectation that once important possessions will decrease in importance when
faced with a mortality reminder is found in qualitative consumer research (e.g., Pavia and Mason 2004).

Our unification of previous work that has been conducted on acquisition in the time of threat with insights into disposal behaviors presents a more complete picture of consumers’ relationships with products. In addition, we qualify our findings by reporting materialism as a boundary condition. Indeed, the findings are especially likely to occur for those consumers who are highly invested with material objects but are attenuated for those lower in materialism. Three studies are reported that support the notion of a morphing self.

The first study examined the likelihood of consumers distancing themselves from possessions after they encounter a threat. We used a 2 (mortality salience threat: present vs. absent) x 2 (possession importance: important vs. unimportant) x (materialism) mixed design. We find that when mortality is salient, as consumers’ material values increase, they tend to be more likely to distance themselves from possessions as compared to consumers in the control condition who are less likely to distance themselves from material objects as material values increase. This is especially the case for possessions with lower importance to consumers’ self.

The second study had two primary objectives. First, the study sought to determine whether the type of threat to the self is critical to consumers’ disposition tendencies of possessions once included as a part of the extended self. Second, the study explored if a threat is powerful enough for consumers to actually separate the self completely from a once previously important possession when mortality is made salient. To achieve this second objective, participants completed a baseline assessment of their identity as defined by the possession they associated with in the absence of a threat and a second assessment of their identity after facing a threat, one week apart. We used a 2 (type of threat: mortality salience threat vs. social threat) x (possession importance) x (materialism) mixed design to examine whether the type of threat affects which possessions consumers include into their selves. We find in the mortality salience condition that the more materialistic consumers are the less likely they are to identify important possessions as part of their selves during both time periods. We find the opposite pattern in the social threat condition as participants who were more materialistic were increasingly more likely to identify important possessions at both points in time.

In study 3 we explored what happens within consumers’ selves for those possessions that are retained after consumers encounter a mortality salience threat (vs. no threat). If our main premises are correct, mortality salience should disrupt the self and as a result possessions that were formerly an important aspect of the self should become less important. At the same time, possessions that were an extraneous part of the immediate self should gain in importance. We used a 2 (mortality salience threat: present vs. absent) x (possession importance) x (materialism) mixed experimental design. Results reveal that in the presence of a high mortality salience threat participants distanced themselves from possessions that in the control condition they had considered closely related to their selves while possession deemed unrelated to the immediate self in the control condition became more strongly associated with the self in the face of a threat. This effect was qualified by material values. Participants who had high material values used possessions to a significantly greater extent to redefine their self-concept when MS was present (versus absent).

In three studies, we demonstrate that mortality salience threats have important effects on consumers’ selves. When a mortality salience threat is present, self-concept consistency is disrupted and a change in consumers’ extended self-concept as defined by the possessions that are part of their identity can be observed. The notion that reminders of mortality can disrupt the stability of the self-concept has important implications for consumers’ well-being.

References

“The Spice of Life: Effects of Mortality Anxiety on Preference for Variety”
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Terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1986) posits that people’s survival instincts, coupled with their knowledge of inevitable death, can trigger high levels of internal conflict and anxiety. When reminded of their mortality, people can mitigate this conflict by defending their cultural worldviews, bolstering their self-esteem, or both. Recently, several studies have shown the effects of mortality salience (MS) on consumer behavior. Priming death thoughts can lead consumers to choose products that bolster their self-esteem (Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman 2005), overconsume to escape self-awareness (Mandel and Smeesters 2008), or prefer domestic over foreign products (Liu and Smeesters in press).

Although research has shown how MS affects product preference and the quantities one wants to purchase, it is unclear how MS affects the variety in one’s choices (i.e., the number of switches between products or brands over a series of choices; Kahn and Isen 1993). Prior research suggests that MS might lead to either more...
variety-seeking or less variety-seeking. For example, variety seeking increases with mild positive mood, because novelty gained from experiencing nonthreatening stimuli provides pleasant stimulation and because positive mood heightens a person’s desire for such stimulation (Menon and Kahn 1995). This suggests that threatening stimuli, such as death thoughts, might decrease variety seeking. Furthermore, research by Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (in press) has shown that individuals form stronger connections with brands when death anxiety is high, because they perceive their brands as an important source of meaning in their lives. Again, this finding suggests that consumers might search for less variety when they are reminded of the inevitability of their death, due to stronger loyalty to their favorite brands.

On the other hand, there is reason to believe that MS may lead to increased variety-seeking behavior. Koole, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2006) argued that unrestrained freedom might be a way to buffer against death-thoughts. When mortality is salient, individuals might want to experience the feeling of freedom by seeking for excitement and novelty. Hence, consumers might be more willing to try other alternatives to experience unrestrained freedom when death-thoughts are accessible. Individuals in a liberal mindset should be particularly more open to new experiences than conservatives (Jost et al. 2003). Moreover, prior research on left-right wing differences related conservatism to mental rigidity, stimulus aversion, and close-mindedness (Wilson, 1973). Therefore, we hypothesize that the increasing effect of MS on variety-seeking should only occur for individuals with a liberal mindset, but not for those with a conservative mindset.

We conducted three experiments to examine the effects of MS on variety seeking behavior. In study 1, we examined the effect of MS on exploratory behavior. First, participants completed either the Fear of Death scale (Boyar 1964) in the mortality salient condition or the Depression scale (Zung 1965) in the control condition. Next, all participants completed Raju’s (1980) Exploratory Behavior Scale (a=.77; 7-point scale). Participants primed to think about their own eventual deaths exhibited a higher level of exploratory behavior (M=4.33) than did control participants (M=4.07; F (1, 301)=5.92, p<.01). This finding provides preliminary evidence that MS increases variety seeking.

Study 2 extended study 1 by testing the effect of mortality salience on actual behavior, rather than on responses on a scale. Participants were randomly assigned to either the MS or control condition. Next, participants chose ten jellybeans to eat while completing a presumably unrelated questionnaire. The number of flavors they chose served as the dependent measure of variety seeking. Mortality salient participants chose significantly more flavors than did control participants (M<sub>MS</sub>=7.49 vs. M<sub>control</sub>=6.81 out of 10 possible flavors; F (1, 227)=4.11, p<.05).

Study 3 extended the earlier studies by testing the effect of MS on the choices made in a sequential variety-seeking paradigm (whereas study 2 used a simultaneous variety-seeking paradigm). In addition, we also primed a liberal versus conservative mindset in participants, by using a scrambled sentences test. Hence, we used a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) x 2 (liberal vs. conservative) between-participants design. After the manipulations, participants were asked to imagine that they were doing their weekly grocery shopping at the nearby grocery store (cf. Menon and Kahn 1995, experiment 2). On each of four sequential shopping occasions, participants chose the brand of snack (among four brands) that they wanted to purchase. Variety seeking was coded in three ways (Mitchell, Kahn, and Knasko 1995): (1) the number of different choices participants made, ranging from 1 (same choice made across all weeks) to 5 (each week a different choice), (2) the number of switches in the choice history, ranging from zero (no switches) to six (no repetition), and (3) the number of switches between successive choices. The interaction effect of MS and primed mindset on the number of different choices made was significant (F(1, 64)=5.84, p=.01). Planned contrasts showed that MS led to more variety seeking behavior among those primed with a liberal mindset (M<sub>MS</sub>=2.76 vs. M<sub>control</sub>=1.58; F(1, 64)=2.51, p=.01) and not among those primed with a conservative mindset (M<sub>MS</sub>=2.52 vs. M<sub>control</sub>=2.15; F(1, 64)=0.85, p=.40). Similar effects were found for the two other measures of variety seeking.

Overall, in three studies, we show that mortality salience leads to enhanced variety seeking. Further, we demonstrated that the effect mainly occurs among those having a liberal mindset, but not among those with a conservative mindset. Future studies will explore the underlying process by which MS increases variety seeking behavior. Specifically, we will examine whether individuals (and especially those with a liberal mindset) have a higher need to experience freedom following a MS manipulation, and whether this mediates the MS effect on variety seeking. Furthermore, we will also examine whether MS leads consumers to make more unique choices, which is also a way to self-express and assert freedom (Kim and Drolet 2003).

References


