Embracing Experiential Over Material Consumption: Thinking About Death Increases Consumer Preferences For Experiences

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We examine the effect of mortality salience on preferences for experiential versus material purchases. We demonstrate that mortality salience leads people to prefer experiential over material consumption, and this tendency is driven by differences in perceived meaningfulness between experiential versus material purchases. We further demonstrate the moderating role of meaning-fulfillment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

And a moment came that stopped me on a dime,
I went sky diving,
I went rocky mountain climbing,
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull name Fumanchu.
And I loved deeper,
And I spoke sweeter,
And I gave forgiveness I’ve been denying,
And he said someday I hope you get the chance,
To live like you were dying.

In this song, which was the number one country song on Billboard in 2004, a man who is going to die soon, makes the most of his last days by engaging in various experiential pursuits such as sky diving and mountain climbing. He further advises that people take the opportunity to live like they were dying because, in the face of his own impending death, he was finally able to live life to the fullest. Similar insights were portrayed by the film, The Bucket List (2007), which depicts a story about two men who end up sharing a hospital room at a crossroads in their lives and set out on the adventure of a lifetime to spend the time they have left doing everything they ever wanted to experience before they die.

Although these anecdotal examples of embracing experiences in response to reminders of death may seem intuitive at first blush, past research on mortality salience finds that people in fact tend to be more materialistic in the face of thinking about their own death (Arndt et al. 2004; Kasser and Sheldon 2000; Mandel and Heine 1999). In contrast to the research suggesting that people will consume material goods under conditions of mortality salience, we argue that, when people are given the choice between material and experiential options, thinking about one’s own death will make people prefer experiential over material consumption. We propose that the mechanism underlying this effect is the tendency for experiential options because of a desire to pursue meaning. We argue that reminders of one’s own mortality will lead people to imbue their lives with a sense of meaning and this activated desire for meaning will make people prefer more experiential rather than material consumption e. To our knowledge, no work has looked at the comparative preferences for experiential versus material options in response to mortality salience.

Our conceptual framework extends previous work on TMT (Greenberg et al. 1986), which demonstrates that reminders of one’s own death creates existential anxiety, leading to responses that allow the individual to bolster their own cultural worldview in ways that increase perceptions of a life with meaning (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). Building upon this, we make a novel prediction that thinking about one’s own death leads individuals to prefer experiential purchases (i.e., those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience) over material purchases (i.e., those made with the primary intention of acquiring a tangible good or material possession; e.g., Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). We make this key prediction because experiential purchases are particularly associated with a person’s true self (Carter and Gilovich 2012; Schlegel et al. 2009), which serves as an important source of meaning in life (King et al. 2006). Thus, we suggest that the mechanism underlying the preference for experiential versus material options in response to mortality salience is the pursuit of meaningfulness. Specifically, we predict that people will perceive experiences (vs. material goods) as more meaningful following mortality salience threats and will demonstrate a preference for experiential options because of a desire to pursue meaning.

In five studies, we investigate whether mortality salience leads people to prefer experiential over material consumption, using multiple real-world field (Studies 1a and 1b) and experimental settings (Study 2). We further examine whether the observed tendency is mediated by differences in perceived meaningfulness of experiential and material purchases (Study 3). Finally, we test the moderating role of meaning-affirmation on the observed effect (Study 4).

Study 1a

In Study 1a, we sought to provide a preliminary test of our predictions in a field study. Borrowing a method from a global art project, Before I Die (www.beforeidie.cc), we examined whether people express greater desires for engaging in experiences than acquiring material goods when thinking about their own death. We created a chalkboard wall, stenciled with a grid of the sentence “Before I die, I want to ________.” on campus, and then asked people walking by to fill in the blank (n = 227) (see Figure 1). Once the wall was full, we photographed wall and transcribed the responses for coding purposes. Then, the responses were erased so that a new set of sentences could be written on the wall. All of the responses were classified into one of the two categories (experiential vs. material) by two trained coders. We calculated the proportion of responses that reflected experiences and the proportion of responses that reflected material goods.

As predicted, people expressed a greater desire for engaging in experiences (e.g., go skydiving, ski in the Alps) than for acquiring material goods (e.g., get a Ferrari, buy all Apple devices) in the face of their own death. We conducted a series of 5 studies, we investigated whether reminders of one’s own death leads individuals to prefer experiential purchases (i.e., those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience) over material purchases (i.e., those made with the primary intention of acquiring a tangible good or material possession; e.g., Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). We make this key prediction because experiential purchases are particularly associated with a person’s true self (Carter and Gilovich 2012; Schlegel et al. 2009), which serves as an important source of meaning in life (King et al. 2006). Thus, we suggest that the mechanism underlying the preference for experiential versus material options in response to mortality salience is the pursuit of meaningfulness. Specifically, we predict that people will perceive experiences (vs. material goods) as more meaningful following mortality salience threats and will demonstrate a preference for experiential options because of a desire to pursue meaning.

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Study 1b

In Study 1b, we adopted a different real-life approach and identified consumer preferences for experiences over material goods in response to thinking about one’s own death using a natural data source: Pinterest (www.pinterest.com). Pinterest is an online content sharing platform that allows members to pin images, videos, and other objects to their pin boards for others to view. To test our prediction in a real-world online setting, we explored what people have pinned on Pinterest by using a keyword phrase: “Before I die.” A research assistant used Pinterest Quick Search by typing in a keyword phrase “before I die” in the search box and randomly selected 200 pin boards, which displayed a total of 2964 pins. The pins were classified into one of the two categories (experiential vs. material) by two trained coders. We calculated the number of experiences or material goods out of the total number of pins.

As anticipated, people posting a pin listed under “before I die” expressed a greater desire for engaging in experiences (e.g., go zip lining, stay in an ice hotel) than acquiring material goods (e.g., own a pearl necklace, have a luxurious bathroom).
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Study 1
In Study 1, we sought more direct evidence regarding the causal effect of mortality salience on preferences for experiential over material consumption in a more controlled setting. Given that thoughts about death produce a unique type of anxiety (Greenberg et al. 1990), we predicted that participants who focus on thoughts about death only indicate higher WTP for experiential than material purchases, but this effect would not emerge for those who focus on thoughts about social rejection, physical pain, or a neutral topic.

Method and Procedure
We randomly assigned participants (n = 392) to one of four experimental conditions: 1) the mortality threat, 2) social rejection threat, 3) physical threat, and 4) grocery shopping (control) condition, and manipulated the conditions using a writing task (Arndt et al. 2002). After completing this task, participants were asked to list three experiential and material purchases and indicate their willingness to pay (WTP) for each of the purchases.

Results and Discussion
First, we calculated participants’ WTP for the experiential and material purchases by subtracting the average WTP of the three material purchases from the average WTP of the three experiential purchases. A one-way ANOVA on the index of WTP revealed a significant difference between the conditions (F(3,388) = 3.99, p < .01). As expected, participants who thought about their own death indicated higher WTP for experiential than material purchases (M_mortality = $178.37, SD = 1035.42), compared to those who thought about being socially excluded (M_social = -$131.65, SD = 592.77), dental pain (M_physical = -$154.75, SD = 794.06), and grocery shopping (M_control = -$108.83, SD = 514.34). Follow-up analysis revealed that those participants in the social rejection, the dental pain, and the control condition did not differ on the index of WTP for the experiential and material purchases (p > .97). Thus, Study 2 provided direct evidence in support of our prediction that reminding people of their own mortality leads them to prefer experiential over material purchases and this tendency is only caused by mortality salience (vs. social threats vs. physical threats vs. control).

Study 2
In Study 2, we sought more direct evidence regarding the causal effect of mortality salience on preferences for experiential over material consumption in a more controlled setting. Given that thoughts about death produce a unique type of anxiety (Greenberg et al. 1990), we predicted that participants who focus on thoughts about death only indicate higher WTP for experiential than material purchases, but this effect would not emerge for those who focus on thoughts about social rejection, physical pain, or a neutral topic.

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Study 3
In Study 3, we explored the underlying mechanism by predicting that people who think about their own mortality (vs. control) will perceive experiential (vs. material) purchases as more meaningful, and the difference in perceived meaningfulness will prompt people to spend more money on experiences than on material goods in response to mortality salience threats.

Method and Procedure
Participants (n = 158) were randomly assigned to either the mortality salience or the control condition. Participants in the mortality salience condition were presented a short documentary clip about bighorn sheep (Heatherton et al. 1993). Afterward, as in Study 2, participants were asked to list three of experiential and material purchases and indicate the WTP for each of the purchases. They were then asked to rate an item on each of the experiential and material purchases that they listed: “To what extent do you think this experiential (material) purchase would be meaningful to yourself?” (7-point scale: 1 = “not at all,” 7 = “very much so”).

Results and Discussion
A one-way ANOVA on the index of WTP revealed a significant difference between the conditions (F(1,156) = 4.85, p < .05). As predicted, participants who focused on thoughts about their own death indicated higher WTP for experiential than material purchases (M_mortality = $348.52, SD = 766.72), compared to those who thought about grocery shopping (M_control = $16.79, SD = 1101.02).

To test our proposed underlying mechanism, we first calculated an index of perceived meaningfulness by subtracting the average perceived meaningfulness of the three material purchases from the average perceived meaningfulness of the three experiential purchases. We then conducted a mediation analysis (model 4; Hayes 2013) with mortality as the independent variable, the index of WTP for experiential and material purchases as the dependent variable, and the index of perceived meaningfulness as the mediating variable. First, we found a marginally significant main effect of mortality salience (vs. control) on the index of WTP (b = 278.61, SE = 150.97, t = 1.85, p = .067), indicating that participants who thought about their own death (vs. control) indicated higher WTP for experiential than material purchases. Furthermore, there was a significant main effect of mortality salience (vs. control) on the index of perceived meaningfulness (b = .46, SE = .22, t = 2.08, p < .05), indicating that participants in the mortality salience condition perceived experiences (vs. material goods) as more meaningful (vs. control). Finally, the procedures generated a 95% confidence interval around the indirect effect with zero falling outside the confidence interval (b = .53, SE = 38.51, 95% CI = [7.9077 to 165.5168]), indicating that the mediating pathway is significant. Thus, Study 3 confirmed that the observed tendency to prefer experiential over material purchases in response to mortality salience was statistically mediated by differences in perceived meaningfulness between the experiential and the material purchases.

Study 4
In Study 4, we tested the effect of meaning-fulfillment following mortality salience threats on consumer preferences for experiential over material purchases. We theorized that engaging in an alternative task that allows the individual to recall a past meaningful experience (i.e. meaning-fulfillment) should mitigate the observed tendency for consumers to prefer experiences over material goods in response to mortality salience. Thus, we predicted that the observed tendency will not emerge when people are given an opportunity to fulfill their meaning by recalling their past meaningful experience.

Method and Procedure
This was a 2 (mortality: salient vs. control) x 2 (meaning-fulfillment: yes vs. no) between-participants design. Participants (n = 228) were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. As in Study 2, we manipulated mortality salience (vs. control) by using the writing task and asked participants in the meaning-fulfillment condition to describe a past experience that they felt was meaningful and to explain why the event was meaningful to them. Those participants in the no meaning-fulfillment condition were not asked to describe any of their past meaningful experiences. Afterward, participants were asked to list three of future experiential and material purchases and to indicate their WTP for each of purchases they listed.

Results and Discussion
We performed a mortality x meaning-fulfillment ANOVA with the index of WTP as a dependent variable. As expected, we found a significant interaction between the mortality salience and the meaning-fulfillment manipulation (F(1,226) = 4.90, p < .05). In the mortality salience condition, participants reported higher WTP for experiences...
experiential than material purchases when they were not given the opportunity to recall their past meaningful experience ($M_{no-fulfillment} = 72.41$, $SD = 79.66$). When they were given the opportunity to recall their past meaningful experience, however, the tendency was eliminated ($M_{fulfillment} = -166.61$, $SD = 83.14$; $F(1, 226) = 4.31, p < .05$). In the control condition, meaning-fulfillment had no influence on the observed effect ($M_{no-fulfillment} = -103.72$, $SD = 80.99$; $M_{fulfillment} = -14.05$, $SD = 84.66$; $F(1, 226) = .59, p > .44$). The results of Study 4 demonstrated recalling one’s past meaningful experience resolved the desires for meaning elicited by mortality salience and this, in turn, alleviated the tendency to bolster their meaningfulness in response to mortality salience threats.

**General Discussion**

The current research brings to light one of the key consumption domains in which mortality salience has a substantial influence: Experiential versus material purchases. From a managerial perspective, we provide insight for marketing practice, especially for experiential consumption, by emphasizing the need to remind consumers of the limited amount of time left to them to do everything they ever wanted to do. Thus, it would be key for marketers to understand the meaningful nature of experiences and develop promotion plans (e.g., using images, advertising slogans) which can remind people of thoughts about death to differentiate their products from competitors.

We hope that the current research spurs other work examining the nuances of experiential consumption. Further, we would like to summarize the takeaway from this research with a quote from Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho on his Twitter (@paulocoelho; 2012): “One day, you will wake up and there won’t be any more time to do the things you’ve always wanted. Do it now.”

**REFERENCES**


