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## **How Mortality Salience Shapes Consumer Evaluations of Brands**

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# How Mortality Salience Shapes Consumer Evaluations of Brands

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Four experimental and field studies show that the onset of mortality salience decreases consumers' evaluations of brands with exciting vs. other personalities. This occurs because (a) mortality salience makes consumers more sensitive to aspects of brands related to perpetuity, and (b) exciting (vs. other) brands are perceived as less perpetual.

Consumers are frequently exposed to death-related information (e.g., news about terrorist attacks, natural disasters), which makes their mortality salient (MS). Yet, the understanding of how MS influences everyday consumption is still limited (Ferraro et al. 2005). Adding to this literature, we propose and show how MS can systematically impact consumers' responses to brands with different personalities (Aaker 1997). In six studies we demonstrate that MS dampens consumers' responses to brands with an exciting but not with other personalities. This occurs because (a) exciting (vs. other) brands are associated with the lack of perpetuity, and (b) MS sensitizes consumers to perpetuity-related aspects of brands.

Consumers "manage" the fear of death by seeking to arrive at a form of perpetual existence (Lifton 1973). Accordingly, we propose that MS is likely to increase weighting of perpetuity in consumers' judgements. We study this proposition in the context of branding. Brands possess five personalities - excitement, sincerity, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker 1997). We suggest that these personalities are associated with perpetuity to a different extent. Specifically, many of the traits forming an exciting brand personality are fleeting in nature (e.g., young, trendy). Moreover, *exciting* states are also short-lasting (Eysenck 2012). Thus, brands with an exciting (vs. other) personality are likely to be associated with lack of perpetuity. Overall, MS can systematically alter consumers' responses to brands with exciting (vs. other) personalities, because (a) MS sensitizes consumers to perpetuity-related brand aspects, and (b) exciting (vs. other) brands are perceived as non-perpetual.

Six studies test this theorizing. A pilot study showed that exciting (vs. other) brands are perceived as non-perpetual. 120 participants evaluated the perpetuity of the 42 brand traits forming brand personalities (Aaker 1997). Validating our assumption, exciting brands were associated with lack of perpetuity, compared to sincere ( $t(1,59)=-10.485, p<.001$ ), competent ( $t(1,59)=-10.033, p<.001$ ), sophisticated ( $t(1,59)=-4.238, p<.001$ ), and rugged ( $t(1,59)=-6.302, p<.001$ ) brands.

Study 1 established the effect of MS on brand evaluations. 462 participants were assigned to a 2 (MS vs. control)  $\times$  2 (exciting vs. control brand) between-participants experiment. Participants in the MS (vs. control) condition described their own death (vs. watching TV; Ferraro et al. 2005). Subsequently, participants evaluated an exciting (vs. control-sincere) brand (Aaker 1997). A significant two-way interaction ( $F(1,458)=5.668, p=.018$ ) supported our predictions: exciting brand was evaluated lower in the MS compared to the control condition ( $F(1,458)=4.416, p=.036$ ). Accordingly, in the MS (but not the control) condition, exciting brand had lower evaluations than sincere brand ( $F(1,458)=14.527, p<.001$ ).

Study 2 tested the mediating role of brand's perceived perpetuity. 374 participants were assigned to a 2 (MS vs. control)  $\times$  2 (exciting vs. control brand) between-participants experiment, with identical manipulations to Study 1. We used a different brand and

dependent variable (purchase intention), and measured brand's perceived perpetuity. We found a significant two-way interaction on purchase intention ( $F(1,359)=10.651, p=.001$ ). Purchase intention for exciting brand dropped under MS compared to the control condition ( $F(1,359)=5.285, p=.022$ ). Thus, under MS, purchase intention for exciting brand was lower than that of sincere brand ( $F(1,359)=23.015, p<.001$ ).

A moderated mediation analysis showed that, as predicted, the MS  $\times$  brand personality interaction on perceived perpetuity was significant ( $\beta=-.75, p=.022$ ). The latter had a significant effect on purchase intention ( $\beta=.57, p<.001$ ). Moderated mediation index excluded zero (95%CI = [-.81, -.07]). The indirect effect of MS was significant for the exciting ( $\beta=-.26, 95\%CI=[-.53, -.04]$ ), but not for the control brand (95%CI=[-.10, .46]).

Study 3 directly manipulated perceived perpetuity of exciting brands. 240 participants were assigned to a 2 (MS vs. control)  $\times$  2 (perpetual exciting vs. non-perpetual exciting brand) between-participants experiment. We manipulated MS as in Study 1. Participants evaluated pretested descriptions of a perpetual vs. non-perpetual exciting brand. We found a significant two-way interaction on brand evaluation ( $F(1,235)=4.406, p=.037$ ). As predicted, non-perpetual exciting brand was evaluated lower in the MS compared to the control condition ( $F(1,235)=4.213, p=.041$ ), while evaluations of perpetual exciting brand did not change ( $F(1,235)=.803, p=.371$ ). Accordingly, non-perpetual exciting brand was evaluated lower than perpetual exciting brand under MS ( $F(1,235)=38.904, p<.001$ ). Analysis similar to that of study 3 showed a significant moderated mediation with perceived perpetuity (95%CI=[.20, .86]).

Studies 4a-4b explored implications of MS on brand equity of real brands, following two death-reminding tragedies: 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. We utilized a large-scale dataset collected quarterly by a leading consulting firm (Mizik and Jacobson 2008). For each quarter of each year, the dataset contained a representative U.S. sample of, approximately, 6,000 consumers evaluating 2,000 brands.

We used a difference-in-differences method. Brand equity was the dependent variable, and ratings for exciting brand personality and a dummy variable for MS (0=Quarters before, and 1=Quarters after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, respectively for each study) were independent variables.

Study 4a showed a significant exciting personality  $\times$  MS interaction on brand equity ( $\beta=-.055, p=.002$ ). The positive impact of exciting personality on brand equity significantly decreased after 9/11 by about 6%. A spotlight analysis showed that equity of very exciting brands (1 SD above the mean) decreased following 9/11 ( $\beta=-.130, p<.001$ ), while brands low in excitement (1 SD below the mean) were not affected ( $p=.367$ ).

Study 4b revealed a similar significant exciting personality  $\times$  MS interaction ( $\beta=-.043, p=.008$ ). Again, the positive effect of exciting personality on brand equity significantly decreased after Hurricane Katrina by about 4%. A spotlight analysis showed that equity of very exciting brands (1 SD above the mean) significantly decreased after Hurricane Katrina ( $\beta=-.069, p<.001$ ), while brands low in excitement (1 SD below the mean) were not affected ( $p=.383$ ).

In summary, four experimental and two field studies converged on the idea that MS dampens consumers' responses to exciting brands because the latter are associated with the lack of perpetuity.

This research contributes to literature on MS by showing that MS sensitizes consumers to perpetuity, affecting their judgments. We add to branding literature by demonstrating that MS can systematically influence consumers' responses to brands with different personalities. We also document a novel distinction among brand personalities – brand's perceived perpetuity.

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