
Understanding Materialistic Consumption: A Terror Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study adopted terror management theory (TMT) to explore how people's materialistic consumption behaviors can be influenced by social events, such as September 11, i.e., mortality salience effects on materialistic consumption. By using survey data from a representative sample of the U.S. adult population, the influence of mortality salience on two consumption behaviors—brand name consumption and compulsive consumption—was examined. The results showed that people with a greater fear of becoming a terrorism victim showed a greater tendency for brand name consumption and compulsive consumption. Further, the relationship between mortality salience and materialistic consumption depended on the extent to which possession of materials becomes a source of one's self-esteem. Implications for academic researchers, advertisers, and consumer educators are discussed.

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Introduction

At the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks, business communities worried, because of the magnitude and impact of the terror attack, that the incident would initiate a recession in the United States. American consumers, however, boosted the economy by buying homes, cars, appliances, and luxury products (e.g., RVs, ATVs, and Jet Skis) in record quantities in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack (Hallinan, 2002; Zuckerman, 2002). An interesting question to pursue is what drove the excessive pursuit of consumer goods after September 11.

Insight regarding possible factors that fueled the post-September 11 rise in consumption can be drawn from recent discussions of terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986). Terror Management Theory (TMT) posits that events reminding people of the prospect of their own deaths can create potentially overwhelming anxiety, often called *existential anxiety*. TMT further posits that, when reminded of their mortality, people use dual coping strategies—the defense of cultural worldviews and the enhancement of self-esteem—to alleviate existential anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1997). Based on the notion of TMT, researchers (Arndt et al., 2004a, 2004b; Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004) argued that awareness of death engendered by external, uncontrollable

events should intensify materialistic consumption among consumers, given that: 1) materialism is a pervasive cultural characteristic in western societies (Arndt et al., 2004b) and 2) acquisition and possession of material objects confer self-esteem in such materialistic societies (Mandel & Heine, 1999). These TMT dialogues are timely, given that realizations of their own mortality have become prevalent among American consumers in recent years, especially in light of the September 11 attack and the hurricane Katrina disaster.

Adopting the accounts of TMT, this study explored how people's materialistic consumption behaviors can be influenced by social events, such as terrorism. By using survey data from the 2003 Life Style Study conducted by DDB, we examined how consumers' existential anxiety aroused by terrorism (i.e., mortality salience) influences two consumption behaviors—brand name consumption and compulsive consumption. Further, this study examined two key factors that influence the relationship between mortality salience and materialistic consumption—global self-esteem and ego involvement in materials (i.e., contingency of self-esteem).

Methods

We employed data from the 2003 Life Style Study conducted by DDB, an international marketing communications firm. The survey was sent to adult members of the Market Facts Consumer Mail Panel in 2002, chosen using an annual standing-panel quota sample similar to the U.S. adult population in terms of age, gender, income, geography, and other demographics. Of 5,000 questionnaires, usable responses were received from 1,440 males (48%) and 1,581 females (52%), for a response rate of 60.4%. The data set included a wide range of questions encompassing attitudes, interests, opinions, activities, and mass media use. The DDB Life Style Study data have been used in diverse research areas including communication studies and consumer psychology (Holbert et al., 2004; Shah et al., 2002).

Results

Our analysis revealed that mortality salience indeed has an impact on materialistic consumption, controlling the effects of income and trait anxiety. People with a greater fear of becoming a terrorism victim showed a greater tendency for brand name consumption and compulsive consumption. As mortality salience exacerbates existential anxiety, people can use materialistic consumption as a means to buffer such anxiety. People seem to find comfort in material goods, probably because these goods confer symbolic meaning and allow individuals to transcend their mortal lives through a seemingly enduring cultural artifact. The results evidenced that external, uncontrollable events—such as the September 11 terrorist attack—can have a great impact on materialistic consumption by delivering mortality salience cues.

This study also found that ego involvement in materials moderated the mortality salience effect on brand name consumption and compulsive consumption. People who perceive a threat of terrorism and who see acquisition and possession of material objects in relation to self-concept tended to report greater preference for brand name products and were also more likely to engage in compulsive consumption. On the other hand, the effect of mortality salience on consumption behaviors did not differ by level of global self-esteem. Ego involvement in materials has greater explanatory power in predicting mortality salience effects on materialistic consumption than does global self-esteem.

Implications

This study provides an understanding of the post-September 11 consumption patterns in the U. S. and provides several practical implications. The study poses ethical challenges to marketers and advertisers. In a speech responding to the September 11 terrorist attack, President Bush encouraged Americans to go shopping, and it appears that Americans complied with his call: The consumption rate outpaced the annual average for several months after the attack (Arndt et al., 2004a). Encouraging consumption might benefit the economy. However, our findings indicate that when people are reminded of their mortality, they engage in consumption more compulsively and conspicuously. These consumption behaviors could be accompanied by negative side effects; for instance, after September 11 people tended to increase discretionary spending and consumer debt climbed to the highest level since 1987 (Hallinan, 2002). Although such a reaction might be necessary to a certain degree to maintain psychological well-being, it is not productive and serves merely as a symbolic defense rather than a fundamental solution to anxiety.

The potential negative consequences of mortality salience on consumption behavior challenge the responsibility of advertisers and consumer educators. To guide consumers to behave in a more rational way, consumer educators should make an effort to provide consumers a balanced view of consumption. By educating consumers regarding the relationships between behavior and mortality salience cues, consumers should be better equipped to critically reflect upon their consumption behaviors. Another preventive action might be to launch public service announcement (PSA) campaigns to encourage consumer perception of pro-social behaviors as self-esteem-enhancing behaviors. For example, during a national crisis—such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters—PSAs linking pro-social behaviors, such as donations and helping others in need, with the image of being good citizens could be aired on television, on radio, and online venues. If such campaigns successfully help consumers perceive pro-social behaviors relevant to self-esteem, pro-social behavior could be promoted. In fact, previous research found that by priming the importance of certain cultural worldviews to self-esteem, mortality salience can increase the behaviors reflecting the primed cultural worldview (Routledge et al., 2004). Therefore, PSAs which prime pro-social behaviors in conjunction with self-esteem may induce more desirable behaviors in response to mortality salience.

Conclusion

This study is one of few studies which have empirically tested the impact of mortality salience on materialistic consumption, especially out of experimental settings. The result of this study indicated that mortality salience effects do exist beyond a laboratory and that in real-life situations materialistic consumption is a way of dealing with existential anxiety. By acknowledging the potential negative effect of mortality salience effect on consumer behavior, we call for further attention to the mortality salience effect on other consumption behaviors. For example, as mortality salience cues increase ethnocentrism and prejudice toward other social groups (McGregor et al., 1998), events such as terrorist attacks could intensify ethnocentrism among consumers. In fact, September 11 stimulated a climate of “buy American” among consumers (McKegney, 2001), and advertisers took advantage of this mood with patriotic advertising campaigns (Lee et al., 2003). The academia, consumer educators, and advertisers should delve into the potential effects of the social events (e.g., terrorism) on consumers and preventive solutions.

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