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Should I Keep Or Should I Give: the Effects of Mortality Salience on Disposing

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Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al.1997) explains that Mortality Salience (MS), an inevitable notion in our lives, triggers a need to establish self-control, to create meaning through committing to a unified cultural worldview, and to enhance self-esteem (Pyszczynski et. al. 2003). It is known that MS induces excessive spending and consumption of high status products, and increased expression of materialistic values (Arndt et al.2004, Kasser and Sheldon 2000, Mandel and Heine 1999). Current study explains how consumers dispose their products under MS. Results from an experiment are reported. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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Methodology

A multi-measurement approach was developed combining a discrete choice-test in the laboratory with unobtrusive video-recording and a subsequent face-to-face-interview. The task was designed as realistically as possible, in reaction to the frequently expressed critique that previous studies on such claims might lack external validity (e.g. Keller et al. 1997; Garretson and Burton 2000; Van Trijp and van der Lans 2007), as well as consumer research (Liefeld 2000). We used three-dimensional, authentic products with brand names and inconspicuously added the claims with professionally designed adhesive stickers. The test persons were not forcefully exposed to the claims, were allowed a no-choice option (Dhar and Simonson 2003) and acted under budget constraints as well as increased relevance due to the non-hypothetical choice (Lusk and Schroeder 2004). Each of the 210 regular buyers of the products invited to the laboratory experiment was asked to imagine that they had strawberry-yoghurt, fruit-muesli and spaghetti on the shopping-list. They could choose one out of five alternatives each. The claims were present on two alternatives at a time (expected frequency of random choice of a product with claim therefore being 40%) and its appearance rotated between the brands in order to minimise the brand influence. Furthermore, the claim phrasing alternated between a nutrition claim, a health claim and a health risk reduction claim. We did not manipulate the products with further positive information in order to control for a mere-label-effect (Van Trijp and van der Lans 2007), because the authentic layout of the products already included other positive information (for example “with honey”, “deliciously creamy”, etc.).

Results

The sample size consisted of 630 cases, with the no-choice-option selected in 5% of all. 50.5% of the respondents were 45 years or older and 71.4% female. The proportion of choice for products with a claim was significantly different from the expected with 44.4% ($n=599$, $\chi^2=4.848^*$; with $p \leq .001=***$; $p \leq .05=*$). Hence, the subjects preferred the products with a claim, even though only 52.4% of the respondents stated that they had actually noticed the claim during the experiment and 38.7% said they had selected the habitually chosen brand. Additionally, the mean duration of information search for all three choice decisions was very short, 1.81 minutes only, and, on average, subjects touched 1.2 products per product category.

Binary logistic regression was applied for each of the three food categories in order to determine which of the independent variables contributed to the explanation of choice behaviour. Age, sex, credibility of the claim, knowing the nutrition-health-relationship and a positive attitude to functional food were insignificant influencing factors in all three models. Only perception of healthiness of the product with a claim had a significant and positive influence on choice for each food category. Choosing the habitual brand has a negative influence on choice of a product with a claim for pasta and yoghurt, scepticism towards texts on food packages has a positive influence for muesli but a negative for yoghurt and the fact that the claim is presented on the cheapest of the alternatives has a positive influence for pasta but a negative for yoghurt. Further variables are only significant for one of the food categories. All three models (yoghurt; muesli; pasta) are significant (Likelihood-Ratio Test: $\chi^2=76.511$; $df=11$; $p=.000$; : $\chi^2=22.224$; $df=11$; $p=.023$; $\chi^2=32.131$; $df=11$; $p=.001$) but differently satisfying (Nagelkerke $R^2=.464$; .168; .218).

Conclusions

The study shows that products with claims are preferred. We conclude that the probability of preference for a product with a claim is higher when the person regards the product alternative as relatively healthy and does not choose the habitually chosen brand. Which are the determinants of choice as well as the direction of its influence depends very much on the food category and, related to that, the content of the claim. We deduce from the participants' behaviour and statements that we might have been successful in meeting the premise of a realistically designed choice decision context. It can therefore be assumed that claims on food products increase the likelihood of purchase by consumers, even under the impact of the various influences at the point of sale.

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Should I Keep or Should I Give: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Disposing

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Reminders of human mortality, mortality salience (MS) are inevitable in consumers' everyday lives. Terror Management Research (TMT; Greenberg et al.1997), explains how individuals deal with MS. TMT has shown that MS induces excessive spending and greed (Kasser and Sheldon 2000), preference for high status products and increased expression of materialistic values (Arndt et al. 2004, Mandel and Heine 1999). We extend this research by investigating how consumers dispose their possessions after acquiring new ones.

When mortality is salient, individuals try to establish a sense of control by reinforcing their belief in a cultural worldview (CWV), and enhancing their self-esteem (Pyszczynski et al. 2003). Self-esteem which mitigates the effects of MS, is enhanced by being a valuable member of a valuable culture (Arndt et al. 2002). A CWV also helps reduce anxiety by providing literal, and symbolic immortality (Pyszczynski et al. 1998).

Disposing is an important consumption phenomenon. By disposing possessions, one can create, maintain or negotiate an identity (Belk 1988; Price et al. 2000), and can deal with aging and death (Marcoux 2001; Kates 2001; Price et al. 2000). As such, that it is important to understand how disposing shapes up under MS. The relationship between MS and disposition has not yet been investigated. Disposition of possessions may be both physical and psychological 'therapy' for consumers (Scwebke 2006) as it induces symbolic immortality, and presents a way to create a certain type of self. It helps an individual preserve a certain identity or construct and communicate a desired one (McAlexander 1991, Wallendorf and Young 1989).

From a TMT perspective we study how consumers dispose their possessions when mortality is salient. We hypothesize:

H1a: When mortality is salient individuals will dispose their possessions in ways that will help them create a sense of symbolic immortality.

H1b: When mortality is salient individuals will dispose their possessions in ways that will allow them to form a socially valued identity.

Study 1

Study 1, an experiment conducted with 41 undergraduates, tested how MS impacts disposing. MS was manipulated and its effect on disposing was measured.

Manipulation. In the MS condition, participants responded to two open-ended questions about death: 1) "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you."; 2) "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead." Participants in the control condition responded to a neutral topic: 1) "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of going to the dentist arouses in you."; 2) "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you the next time you get a painful procedure done at the dentist's office." Standard distracter tasks followed to ensure that MS was present at a non-conscious level (Greenberg et al. 1990; Harmon-Jones et al. 1997).

Disposing. After the manipulation, participants reviewed a scenario which asked them to imagine that their family gave them an upgraded version of their existing camera. Participants were asked to indicate what they would do with their existing camera.

Results. In the MS condition, 68% indicated they would give their camera to someone else, while in the control condition 33% indicated they would give their camera to someone else. The remaining 34% of the participants in the MS condition indicated they would keep their old camera, while 67% of participants in the control condition indicated they would keep their old camera.

A binary logistic regression, with disposition type as the dependent variable (choice of giving the old camera coded as 1) and MS as the independent variable, showed a significant effect of MS on disposition type ($b=1.5$, Wald $\chi^2=4.4$, $p<.05$) indicating individuals in the MS condition preferred to give their old cameras to someone else more than those participants in the control condition.

In explaining their motivations, the MS participants reported that they would give their camera to someone else to prevent waste, achieve symbolic immortality and because giving is the "right thing to do". Individuals in the MS condition who chose to keep their camera reported an emotional connection with the item. Participants in the control condition who chose to keep their cameras did so because they might need the item. They stated that they might give it to someone they knew, which allows them to still have access to it.

To make sure that the effect of MS on disposition choice was not driven by a mood induced by MS, the Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1998) was administered. The ANOVAs on positive and negative affect indicated no differences ($p>.64$ and $p>.40$, respectively) between the experimental groups.

Personality measures; Self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965), Desirability of Control (Burger and Cooper 1979), and Materialism (Richins 1989) indicated no differences between the groups ($p>.32$, $p>.50$ and $p>.60$, respectively).

Discussion. As predicted, MS caused individuals to dispose their item in ways that provide them a socially accepted identity and symbolic immortality. MS induces a striving for symbolic immortality and self-esteem. Disposing literature suggests that giving away one's belongings can help one achieve a desired identity and symbolic immortality. Hence, giving away possessions help individuals mitigate the effects of MS.

Future Studies

This work investigated the effects of the needs for self-esteem and symbolic immortality induced by MS on disposing. In the studies that follow it will be important to understand the effects of the other needs induced by MS on disposing namely; need for control and materialism.

General Discussion

MS is widely experienced, thus it is important to understand its effects on all phases of consumption. This research helps us understand how consumers evaluate their possessions and detach themselves from them under MS which in turn have implications for charitable donations, waste management, increasing recycling and sustainable consumption.

So, what will you do with your old item the next time you replace a possession?

References

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