

Motivational and Cultural Variations in Mortality Salience Effects: Contemplations on Terror Management Theory and Consumer Behavior

Durairaj Maheswaran and Nidhi Agrawal

New York University

Terror management theory provides a viable framework to examine the effects of mortality salience (MS) and related coping behaviors. We explore the utility of viewing MS effects from an information processing perspective and discuss the implications for understanding consumer behavior. We suggest that a better understanding of the motivational nature of MS and the underlying processes could provide additional insights on the persuasive impact of MS. We also anticipate effects of MS to differ across cultures and predict some novel outcomes. Finally, we outline several potential avenues for investigating MS effects in consumer domains such as branding and advertising.

The contemplation of the impermanence of life and the accompanying awareness of the inevitability of mortality induces existential terror. Individuals attempt to manage such terror-related anxiety by engaging in various coping behaviors. Examining the effects of death-related thinking is certainly relevant in the current times. The mass media has always exploited settings of war and death. It is not unreasonable to assume that images of death are part of consumers' daily life, either consciously or unconsciously. Coping with the salience of death is likely to impact consumer behavior; however, this array of effects has remained under-researched. Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon (2004) introduce us to the prospect that mortality-related thoughts have an impact on consumer behavior and present a theoretical framework for examining these mortality salience (MS) effects. They present a dual defense model that distinguishes between MS effects driven by conscious accessibility of death-related thoughts (i.e., proximal defenses) and those driven by nonconscious accessibility of death-related thoughts (i.e., distal defenses). The most interesting effects of MS, as posited by terror management theory (TMT), manifest as consequences of distal defenses, when MS affects human behavior outside the scope of consciousness. Distal defenses, driven by a desire to defend one's worldview as well as to bolster self-esteem, can at times lead to behaviors such as stereotyping, in-group favoritism, nationalism, materialism, and so forth.

We evaluate the relevance and applicability of TMT to the consumer behavior domain by examining the extent to which it provides unique insights on behavioral patterns observed among consumers. In addition, drawing from approaches related to information processing, we investigate a wider range of applications for TMT in the consumer context. These approaches and their related constructs include motivated reasoning and persuasion, ethnocentrism, foreign branding, and cross-cultural behavior. Three critical areas of interest to consumer behavior are identified. First, we highlight the need for a better understanding of the motivational basis of MS effects. Next, we outline the conditions under which worldview defense and striving for self-esteem are likely to converge as well as conflict. Finally, we examine individual differences in MS that are instrumental in predicting systematic variations in MS effects.

UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATIONAL BASIS OF MS

Arndt et al. (2004) suggest that MS motivates people to engage in worldview defense and in a striving for self-esteem. They present a wide array of evidence in support of these two coping mechanisms. The implications of these responses to MS are clearly relevant to consumer behavior. However, Arndt et al. (2004) provide little insight on the specific motivations that are driving these MS effects and the underlying processes that lead to the observed outcomes. For example, it is not clear under what motivational conditions worldview defense will be observed and under what motivational conditions self-esteem striving will be obtained. Is it likely that MS always triggers

Requests for reprints should be sent to Durairaj Maheswaran or Nidhi Agrawal, Stern School of Business, New York University, 44 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012. E-mail: dmaheswa@stern.nyu.edu or nagrawal@stern.nyu.edu

both coping mechanisms? These are important issues in the consumer behavior context because they considerably influence the predictive power of the theory.

We propose that two different motivations may be directing MS effects. MS appears to induce both defense and impression motivations (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). These distinct motivations are associated with unique processes and lead to specific outcomes. Defense motivation refers to the desire to hold attitudes that are compatible with one's perceived material interests and existing beliefs. It is associated with the strong support and defense of one's prior attitudes and, thus, may be responsible for worldview defense effects. In contrast, impression motivation refers to the desire to be socially acceptable and this motive may link to the striving for self-esteem. Although extant research on MS effects does not appear to differentiate between these motives, it is important to do so for reasons that will be described presently.

Knowing what type of motivation is being evoked by MS would help us understand how consumers process information when mortality is salient and what potential outcomes may be obtained. In addition, these insights will provide a theoretical basis for exploring the variables that are likely to moderate MS effects. We could also design intervention strategies that would counter some of the adverse effects generated by MS. Finally, investigating the implications of these distinct motivations may help marketers to frame their persuasive messages more effectively in different contexts. For example, if a foreign brand such as Chanel plans to advertise in an environment where mortality is salient, it is better off eliciting self-esteem enhancement motives that will benefit Chanel's image as a status symbol than world view defense motives that might highlight the "foreignness" of Chanel as a French brand. Similarly, when mortality is salient, BMW might benefit more by highlighting its yuppie image rather than its German engineering.

Dual process models of persuasion (Elaboration Likelihood Model, Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Heuristic Systematic Model, Chaiken, 1980) offer insights about multiple types of motivation and the corresponding processes that guide attitude change. In this section, we explore MS effects on persuasion based on these frameworks.

Defense Motivation

Research has shown that when mortality is made salient, even subtly, worldview defense emerges. Greenberg et al. (1990) documented that under MS, participants were more favorably inclined toward others of the same religious beliefs. These findings parallel the outcomes observed in the preference consistency literature. Jain and Maheswaran (2000) found that under defense motivation, preference consistent product descriptions were more favorably evaluated than preference inconsistent descriptions. Subsequent processing was characterized by counter-argumentation and the refutation of preference inconsistent information (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Jain & Maheswaran, 2000). If MS is invoked in

a defense motivation context, then counter-attitudinal messages might be refuted. Instead, consumers may form stronger preferences for products that might help to support their existing worldview. In this context, stronger commitments could be formed for their already preferred brands. Directed by a desire to defend their preferences, consumers may be more likely to buy products that relate to their existing preferences. For example, brand extensions may be preferred over competing brands. Brand loyalty could be fostered as well as reinforced by targeting current users with preference consistent appeals under conditions of MS.

Another outcome of defense-motivated processing could be resistance to persuasion (Ahluwalia, 2000; Tormala & Petty, 2002). Attempts at counter-persuasion may be seen as threats to one's worldview. Hence, consumers might resist any attempts to switch to new brands. For example, comparative advertising portraying a preferred brand as dominated by another brand might backfire by yielding stronger attitudes toward the preferred brand (Tormala & Petty, 2002). It would be useful to investigate strategies that could minimize resistance to persuasion when mortality is salient.

Yet another intriguing question is whether MS encourages selective application of heuristics. Most often, people use heuristics to save the effort of elaborate information processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). However, there are conditions under which heuristics might influence the judgments of highly motivated people (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). When mortality is salient, heuristics that promote an individual's desired conclusions are most likely to be invoked. For example, heuristics such as source credibility or consensus may be used only when they endorse the consumer's existing worldview.

Impression Motivation

According to TMT, coping with death anxiety leads individuals to attempt to validate their self-worth. In general, self-worth comes from seeing oneself as a valued part of social reality. Thus, the need to enhance self-worth is likely to motivate individuals to satisfy social goals and manage impressions. For example, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (2000) found that MS increases the persuasiveness of appeals that advocate physical attractiveness (see also, Routledge, Arndt, & Goldenberg, 2003). Given that attractiveness standards are derived from social norms (Arndt et al., 2004; Kasser & Ryan, 1996), Goldenberg et al.'s finding suggests that when mortality is salient, people are more willing to act in concert with the opinions of others. In this context, MS appears to have induced impression motivation. As noted earlier, impression-motivated individuals are more sensitive to the opinion of others and their subsequent attitudes reflect a bias toward social goals (Agrawal & Maheswaran, in press; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). For example, Ratner and Kahn (2002) found that consumers are more variety seeking when making choices in a public context because they expect people

to appreciate variety-seeking behavior. If MS triggers impression motivation, then, in the consumer behavior context, consumers are likely to follow socially desirable patterns of behavior such as variety seeking under MS.

MS may also lead to motivated use of heuristic information. When mortality is salient, individuals may be likely to respond in ways that satisfy impression motives and to apply heuristics that are compatible with impression goals. For example, "go along to get along" is a heuristic that people are more likely to use when they are impression motivated (Chen, Shechter, & Chaiken, 1996). "Outcome" is another novel heuristic relevant to consumer behavior that is likely to be encouraged when mortality is salient (Agrawal & Maheswaran, in press). People are more likely to draw inferences about products (e.g., movies) and persons based on the outcome of a process (e.g., Oscars or examination grade), regardless of whether the outcome was decided by an arbitrary rule (e.g., the personal motives of the critics watching nominated movies, the cutoff score for the grades) that might not be reflective of the performance. Outcomes carry a sense of social approval and represent a shared reality. Hence, we might expect that concurring with outcomes without questioning the process that led to the outcomes could provide a way to gain self-esteem. So, when mortality is salient, people may be more likely to associate with products that have had favorable outcomes (e.g., watching an Oscar-winning movie or buying an award-winning wine).

In sum, examining the motivational basis of MS within an information processing framework can considerably strengthen the contribution of TMT to the study of consumer behavior. When defense motives are induced, worldview defense appears to be a likely response. In contrast, when impression motivation is invoked, promoting social acceptance appears to be important. Thus, dual process models of persuasion (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979) provide a viable framework for understanding the motivations and processes linking MS to persuasion.

THE INTERACTION OF WORLDVIEW DEFENSE AND STRIVING FOR SELF-ESTEEM

The predictive power of TMT could be considerably improved by examining the interaction of the two major consequences of MS. Under some circumstances, worldview defense occurs and, in others, a striving for self-esteem is observed. Perhaps, in yet other circumstances, these two outcomes may co-occur or may be sequential. The implicit assumption in TMT research is that both worldview defense and striving for self-esteem always converge and lead to the preference for the same product. However, in certain circumstances, there may be a conflict between the two objectives. The consumer may be faced with a choice that promotes one of the outcomes at the expense of the other. For example, even if one might derive self-esteem from risky driving be-

havior (Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999), risky driving behavior might not necessarily promote one's worldview of a safe world. When the outcomes of worldview defense and self-esteem enhancement converge, it is obvious that the behavior would be highly predictable. However, when worldview defense and self-esteem striving conflict, the outcome is less predictable. Additional investigation should focus on the interaction of these mechanisms.

MS and Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism has been widely researched in consumer behavior (Klein & Ettenson, 1999; Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Ethnocentrism is the desire of the consumer to prefer domestic products based on patriotic considerations. This effect is similar to the worldview defense effects observed under MS. Research has shown that MS increases both the desire to favor in-groups as well as antagonism toward out-groups. Perceptions of domestic products are more favorable under MS (Nelson, Moore, Olivetti, & Scott, 1997). These findings suggest that MS could bolster ethnocentrism effects. For example, in an advertising context, patriotic appeals ("Made in the USA") may be more effective under MS.

Although this extension of TMT is appealing, there may be situations in which this effect would not be observed. Consider a situation in which the home country product is inferior to a foreign product. It is not clear whether MS would make consumers prefer the home product (driven by defense of worldview) or the superior foreign product (driven by self-esteem). Research on country of origin effects is relevant to addressing this issue (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000b; Maheswaran, 1994). A study examining country of origin effects among U.S. and Japanese consumers found that U.S. consumers evaluated the home product more favorably only when it was superior in quality to the product made in Japan (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000a). When the home product was inferior, U.S. consumers preferred the Japanese product. This effect was attributed to the cultural orientation of U.S. consumers. Specifically, it is suggested that U.S. consumers' vertical individualist orientation promotes the desire to be better than others in their social group (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Hence, they would hold favorable attitudes about a superior product regardless of its country of origin. In this situation, the vertical individualist value of "being the best" is more important than group membership (the home country). It would be interesting to examine whether MS would reverse this effect and lead U.S. consumers to evaluate the home (vs. foreign) product more favorably regardless of its quality. In sum, country of origin research presents a useful context in which to examine the conflict between defending worldview and deriving self-worth under MS.

The in-group favoritism effect of MS may also be relevant to foreign branding. When mortality is made salient, foreign brands are seen as less desirable (Nelson et al., 1997). However, as suggested earlier, certain foreign prod-

ucts, such as German cars or French perfumes, are considered status symbols and are often preferred over local brands (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000). If MS induces a desire to enhance one's self-esteem by achieving a higher status in society, it should increase the consumption of products that represent status. This effect is more likely to be prominent in vertical societies such as the United States (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Perhaps, then, when a brand represents a culturally accepted value, the "foreignness" of the product may not be considered a deterrent, even when mortality is salient. Several variables related to product characteristics, such as their utilitarian versus hedonic nature or their cultural compatibility, may moderate the effect of MS on the evaluation of foreign brands.

Another interesting issue concerns what MS effects would be observed with respect to foreign brands from a country that is considered antagonistic. Research on the animosity model may be relevant to addressing this possibility (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998). The animosity model suggests that, when consumers have animosity toward a country, even though they consider the products from that country to be superior, they may not buy products from the antagonistic country. Klein et al.'s (1998) study was conducted in Nanjing, China, where several atrocities were committed during the Japanese occupation, leading to animosity toward Japan. The respondents were favorable toward Japanese products, but were averse to buying them due to their anger toward Japan. Under MS, we may observe similar or even more extreme effects for foreign brands that are from a country toward which there is animosity. Perceptions of the product itself may be biased by the antagonism toward the country so that not only the country of origin but also a superior product from that country may be denigrated.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN MS EFFECTS

In this section, we discuss individual difference factors that may moderate MS effects both across as well as within cultures. Specifically, cultural orientation and religion are identified as moderators of MS effects across cultures. Self-monitoring and desire for control are presented as within-culture variables affecting MS effects across individuals.

Cultural Variations

Arndt et al. (2004) point out that to the extent that materialism and financial success are approved social norms in Western cultures, MS has been shown to increase the desire to achieve these ends. In cultures where materialism is not the dominant value, such consequents of MS might be mitigated in favor of the pursuit of alternate dominant values.

The individualism-collectivism framework may provide a useful starting point for exploring cross-cultural differences in MS effects (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989). This framework suggests that collectivists have strong ties to groups such as family or country. Their self is defined in terms of others and behavior is regulated by group norms. In contrast, individualists are motivated by a strong self-interest and are less likely to be motivated by group affiliations. Based on this framework, it could be argued that the responses to MS in a collectivist country (e.g., Thailand) might be different from those in an individualist country (e.g., United States). For example, Thailand is a predominantly collectivist culture in which connectedness to friends and the family are very important values, perhaps more desirable than material success. Inducing MS may increase the desirability of these values. Under MS, consumers may be more likely to think of the well being of their family and seek to protect them by buying life insurance or long-term investments. They may be less likely to engage in self-indulgent behaviors such as buying an expensive car or taking luxurious vacations. Also, self-esteem could be enhanced by helping others instead of by trying to be individually successful. Hence, socially relevant altruistic behaviors such as giving to charity may become more likely under MS. Finally, it may be of interest to examine the incidence of socially adverse behaviors in collectivist versus individualist cultures as a function of MS. Because the central value of collectivist cultures is the primacy of group well being, MS may be less likely to induce socially detrimental behaviors in such cultures.

Religion is a major culture-based individual difference variable that has received less attention in the persuasion literature. However, it may moderate how people respond to MS. Because religion offers prescriptions for dealing with mortality, critical differences are likely to emerge based on how different religions approach mortality. For example, most Western religions view life as a "once only" phenomenon and death is seen as the ultimate end of existence. Hence, MS induces terror and people work hard to mitigate this terror by engaging in behaviors that bind them to life more securely. However, Eastern religions take a different approach to conceptualizing mortality. For example, in Hinduism and Buddhism, death is not seen as an end of one's existence (Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004). Hinduism regards mortal life as only one of many stages in a cycle of birth and death. In fact, one of the critical tenets of Hinduism is that death destroys only one's mortal body, but one's soul lives on forever. Thus, mortality may not generate as much terror in such religious contexts. This fundamental difference between Eastern and Western religious philosophies may challenge the basic premise of TMT that mortality induces terror. Hence, MS effects documented in Western cultures or religious contexts may not be observed in Eastern religious contexts.

Self-Monitoring and Desire for Control

Are MS effects uniform across individuals within a culture? Do individuals' predispositions influence how they perceive mortality and react to it? There is relatively little insight relating individual differences to MS. Extant research has shown that women exhibit different behavioral responses to MS than men do (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). We discuss additional individual difference variables here that might systematically impact MS effects. Self-monitoring emerges as one likely starting point, as it has received considerable attention in the social psychology and marketing literatures (Shavitt, Lowrey, & Han, 1992; Snyder, 1987). High self-monitors are concerned about the opinion of others and are focused on fitting in and seeking social approval. Hence, MS is more likely to motivate them to strive toward achieving higher self-esteem. They should particularly strive to excel in social achievements. In contrast, low self-monitors are known to rely more on their internal values and focus on doing what they think is right. So, making mortality salient should make low self-monitors defend their worldview and perhaps become more committed to protecting their values.

Desire for control (DFC), a variable that hasn't received much attention in the consumer behavior literature, may also be of relevance in this context (Burger & Cooper, 1979). Individuals differing in their DFC may respond differently to an MS induction. People who are high in DFC may seek to control the inevitability of mortality by engaging in acts of prevention such as leading a healthy lifestyle. However, people who are low in DFC may accept the inevitability of morality and be more likely to engage in hedonistic pursuits such as going on a vacation or buying an expensive car.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, research driven by TMT highlights several insights and concerns about the impact of MS on consumer behavior. Although this stream of research underlines the importance of MS effects, established information processing approaches offer novel contributions to the study of these effects in the consumer-behavior domain and beyond. For example, although some moderators of MS effects have been explored, investigating the variables that mitigate MS effects remains a worthwhile direction to follow. We highlighted motivational mechanisms and individual differences as moderators, but other related phenomena may also be of interest. In sum, TMT introduces to consumer behavior the interesting and psychologically powerful variable of MS and a unique theoretical framework that can help scholars, marketers, and public policy makers understand the impact of MS on consumer behavior. Raising insightful issues about human awareness of the inevitability of death and the psychological, motivational, and cultural meaning of this

awareness broadens our understanding of human behavior driven by thinking "beyond life." This "after life" psychology should lead to new theoretical constructs and interesting behavioral insights that enrich our understanding of consumer psychology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank M. Gülden Ülkümen, Pragya Mathur, and Sherif Nasser for their helpful comments.

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Received: November 1, 2003