

**On the Need to Distinguish the Mortality Salience of Loved Ones (MSLO) from the  
Mortality Salience of Self (MSS) in Consumer Studies**

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Every day we receive information that reminds us either of our own inevitable death, or of the death of a loved one. For example, while watching a television ad for the Heart & Stroke Foundation, an individual may become increasingly aware of his own mortality if he has a heart condition, or he may become increasingly aware of the possible death of a loved one if the person has chronic heart disease. Previous research has largely focused on thoughts about one's own death, which has been termed mortality salience (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). This paper extends past research by designating the awareness of one's own death as mortality salience of self (MSS), and the awareness of the death of a loved one as mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO). MSS has been researched extensively in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and to a lesser extent, in consumer behaviour (Burke, Marten and Faucher 2010). Among all the mortality salience studies, only a few have explored the effect of MSLO (Greenberg et al. 1994; Davis & McKearney 2003; Bonsu and Belk 2003). In these MSLO studies, it was assumed that MSLO would serve as a reminder of an individual's own mortality; therefore MSLO and MSS should function in a similar manner which will lead to convergent results.

However, the present research provides conceptual discussions and empirical evidence which show the divergent effects of MSS and MSLO on both self-concept and negative emotions. First, regarding self-concept, this study argues that, while one's own death brings about the termination of self, the death of a loved one radically alters the survivor's sense of self, since part of him no longer actively exists. Thus, based on Belk's (1988) notion of self, MSS will threaten one's core self, whereas MSLO will threaten one's extended self. Confirming this perspective on MSS, Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997) argues that with MSS an individual primarily deals with his existential

anxiety, as death means the termination of his core self. The current research argues that, in contrast, an individual experiencing MSLO has instead to deal with eternal-separation anxiety, which arises because the death of a loved one modifies his extended self. The fact that individuals experiencing MSS and MSLO may have to deal with distinct anxieties is cause for further investigation of MSLO. Second, regarding negative emotions, this study provides evidence for its argument that fear is the dominant emotion for MSS individuals, whereas sadness is the dominant emotion for MSLO individuals. Past terror management studies assumed that existential anxiety among MSS individuals leads to fear. However, in the case of MSLO individuals, this research demonstrates that they have to deal with sadness caused by their eternal-separation anxiety. Past studies have shown that the meaning structure underlying fear and sadness is different, which may lead to different motivations for their behaviors (Frijda, Kuipers, and Ter Shure 1989, Lazarus 1991). Specifically, fear is defined by high uncertainty over an outcome and low control over a situation. Raghunathan and Pham (1999) suggest that fear motivates individuals to reduce their sense of uncertainty and regain their sense of control. On the other hand, sadness is defined by the loss or absence of a cherished object or person (Lazarus 1991). Raghunathan and Pham (1999) assert that sadness motivates individuals to seek pleasurable stimuli as a suitable replacement or compensation for loss. As a result, MSS and MSLO may have divergent effects on consumer behaviors, which reinforce our call for distinguishing between MSS and MSLO.

Empirical evidence of the different impacts of MSS and MSLO on self-concept and negative emotions makes it clear that simply analogizing MSS with MSLO may not be sufficient. Therefore, future studies can complement existing mortality salience studies in three ways. First, researchers can conduct experiments to compare the effects of MSS and MSLO on certain consumer behaviours, such as brand preference and product choice. Second, if the empirical evidence shows divergent effects, researchers can further explore the underlying mechanisms that explain the divergence in the context of consumption. Third, researchers can further examine variables such as relationship intensity that may moderate the effects of MSLO. In effect, the present research opens promising new directions in the incorporation of MSLO within the existing mortality salience studies.

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