

## **The Divergent Effects of Mortality Salience of Self versus Mortality Salience of a Loved One on Materialistic Consumption**

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Marketing communications can prompt consumers to contemplate their own death, as well as the death of loved ones. For example, a TV ad of the Heart & Stroke Foundation may remind a viewer of his own mortality if he has a heart condition or of his father's mortality if the father has a heart disease. Past research has largely focused on thoughts about one's own death, which has been termed mortality salience (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). In this research, we extend past research by arguing that there are two distinct types of mortality salience, namely mortality salience of self (MSS) and mortality salience of a loved one (MSLO), and further test their effects on materialistic consumption.

Past terror management studies have mostly focused on MSS, with only a few studies having explored the effect of MSLO (Greenberg et al. 1994; Davis & McKearney, 2003; Bonsu and Belk 2003). In these latter studies, it was assumed that MSLO would serve as a reminder of an individual's own mortality, thus MSLO individuals' response might follow predictably from the perspective of Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, et al. 1997). Past research has shown that MSS can lead one to lean on materialism as a means of coping

with existential anxiety so MSS promotes pro-materialistic behaviour (e.g., Mandel & Heine, 1999; Arndt et al., 2004; Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Thus, it could be that MSS and MSLO have convergent effect on materialistic consumption. However, bereavement research implied that MSS and MSLO may have divergent effects. Bereavement studies have revealed that after losing a loved one, the bereaved are more inclined to pursue intrinsic goals, including a greater appreciation of life, better relationships with others and a more conscious development of personal strengths (Niederland & Sholevar 1981; Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996). It is possible that MSLO individuals may also focus more on pursuing intrinsic goals. Past research has revealed that intrinsic and extrinsic goal content forms a bi-polar dimension (Ryan & Deci 2000; Grouzet et al. 2005), so the lack of compatibility between intrinsic and extrinsic goals suggests that MSLO individuals may become less overt in materialistic consumption.

We conducted four empirical studies to test the convergent assumptions derived from terror management studies and divergent assumptions from bereavement studies. The four studies showed that MSS and MSLO have divergent effects on materialistic consumption. Through four studies, we have tested the robustness of the divergence across different measures of the dependent variable. Specifically, we found that MSS and MSLO had divergent effects on the product preference for high-status brands, the choice preference between a materialistic product and an experience, the level of desire for money and the choice preference between two magazines that highlights different levels of materialistic value. The present research contributes to the literature of morality salience by distinguishing for the first time between two types of mortality salience. Past research on mortality salience generally assumed that MSLO was equivalent to MSS, thus MSLO and MSS influence consumer behaviour in a similar manner (Greenberg et al. 1994; Bonsu and Belk 2003). We show in the present research that this assumption doesn't always hold, at least on materialistic consumption, MSS and MSLO can have distinguished effects. The findings of this research provide an effective self-control tactic for consumers tempted by materialistic

consumption in that thinking of the unavoidable loss of a loved one through death might weaken the urge to own a materialistic possession in order to manifest one's status and esteem. Meanwhile, this research shows that the thought of a loved one's death can also promote consumption of experiential goods rather than materialistic products, which may in turn lead people to view themselves in a more favourable light (Van Boden and Gilvich 2003).

In summary, our four empirical studies revealed the divergent effects of MSS and MSLO on materialistic consumption. Specifically, we found that MSS promotes materialistic consumption whereas MSLO prevents it. We further discuss the explanations of the divergence which may arise from two mechanisms, namely negative emotions and goal orientation. This discussion on the underlying mechanism may provide research opportunities for future studies.