

The Role of Mortality Salience in Consumer Persuasion

Javier Horcajo, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Ya Hui Michelle See, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Pablo Briñol, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Richard Petty, Ohio State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of humans' most basic instincts is the drive toward self-preservation. According to Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986), this instinct, coupled with the knowledge of inevitable death, leads people to counter their fear of death by creating and maintaining a cultural worldview, which gives meaning and order to the world. In line with this idea, laboratory research has shown that reminders of death lead to more favorable evaluations of people who personify cultural values and to more negative evaluations of people who defy those values (e.g., see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, 1997; for a review).

Recent research conducted in the consumer domain has suggested that mortality salience (MS) can play an important role in polarizing consumer judgments (e.g., see Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon, 2004; Ferraro, Shiv, and Bettman, 2005). For example, Mandel and Heine (1999) showed that high-status products (e.g., a Lexus automobile, and a Rolex watch) are evaluated *more favorably* by consumers who were subtly reminded of their own impending mortality than by control participants. In contrast, low-status and low-status products and brands (e.g., a Chevrolet Metro automobile, and Pringles potato chips) were rated slightly less favourably by MS participants than by their control counterparts. The authors argued that MS participants were more interested in purchasing high-status products than control participants because these products make them feel more valuable within the culture.

The present research examines why MS might lead to such polarized judgments. Based on the self-validation hypothesis (Petty, Briñol, and Tormala, 2002), which states that thoughts held with greater confidence are more impactful in consumer judgments (Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2004), we argue that MS can influence judgments by affecting the confidence with which consumers hold their thoughts. Thus, we test self-validation as a metacognitive mechanism through which MS influences judgments (see, e.g., Alba and Hutchinson, 2000; Petty, Briñol, Tormala, and Wegener, 2007; for a review in metacognition).

Specifically, we predicted that MS will increase the confidence with which people hold their cognitive responses, and the increased thought confidence, in turn, will lead to attitude polarization, a typical effect in MS research. We expected to show the typical polarization effect for MS, with the novel prediction that MS-induced polarization occurs via self-validation. This finding would be important because it would introduce an additional antecedent for self-validation effects, and suggest a mechanism for MS effects in consumer persuasion.

Experiment 1

One hundred and thirty-two participants were first exposed to a printed vita of a job candidate containing either strong or weak attributes in support of the candidate. Attribute cogency was varied in this study to lead participants to generate mostly positive or negative thoughts toward the job candidate. After participants read the vita and wrote their cognitive responses about it, MS was experimentally manipulated. Participants were asked to write about dying in a terrorist attack (MS condition) or to write about being cold (control condition). Finally, all participants reported their attitudes toward the candidate.

In line with the self-validation hypothesis, we found that the effect of attribute cogency on attitudes toward the job candidate was greater under the MS condition rather than control condition. Thus, MS participants relied on their thoughts in forming attitudes, but control participants did not use their thoughts to judge the candidate.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 aimed to replicate the previous findings using a more conventional MS induction. In this experiment, one hundred and sixty participants received the same attribute cogency manipulation used in Experiment 1 in order to manipulate the direction of participants' thoughts. After listing their thoughts about the candidate, we induced MS by asking participants to describe what they thought will happen when they die, or to write about being cold (control).

We replicated the effects of Experiment 1 showing more attribute cogency effects for MS than control participants. Importantly, combining the data from Experiments 1 and 2, we established that the mortality salience effects on attitudes were mediated by thought confidence.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 examined whether the effects obtained so far could be generalized to important worldviews such as about one's country. Furthermore, Experiment 3 examined whether extent of elaboration, which has been found in past research to moderate self-validation effects (Petty et al., 2002), also moderates the effects of mortality salience on attitudes.

Seventy undergraduate students from a public university in Spain were first exposed to a message written by a foreign exchange student arguing either in favor of or against Spain. After participants read the pro- or anti-Spain message and wrote their thoughts about it, they were asked to write about their own death (MS condition) or about felling anxiety toward exams (control group). Following the MS manipulation, all participants reported the confidence they had in the thoughts they wrote about that message, and also reported their attitudes toward the exchange student who wrote the essay. Finally, participants completed a self-report elaboration measure.

As predicted, the confidence induced by the MS manipulation led those participants to use their thoughts more when judging the source of the message than control participants. In line with the self-validation hypothesis, the effects of MS on attitudes were mediated by changes in thought-confidence. Importantly, this finding occurred only among participants who reported greater elaboration.

Discussion

Across different manipulations of all the variables, we predicted and found that MS can influence attitude change by increasing the confidence with which consumers hold their own thoughts. As in past research, MS led to attitude polarization in impression formation toward a job candidate (Experiments 1 and 2) and toward the source of an essay about one's country (Experiment 3). Of most importance, we demonstrated for the first time that the effects of MS on judgment can be mediated by changes in thought confidence.

Furthermore, in accord with the self-validation hypothesis, thought confidence induced by MS influenced attitudes only among high elaboration individuals. Taken together, these findings are important because they provide an entirely unexplored mechanism for MS effects that may also apply in consumer persuasion.

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