



Research Report

Death of a salesman: Webpage-based manipulations of mortality salience



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 1 November 2013

Keywords:

Terror management
Advertisement
Consumer behavior
Internet methods

ABSTRACT

Most people are accustomed to ignoring the advertisements that they encounter while surfing the Internet, despite the profound effects such advertisements can have on behavior. We showed that webpage advertisements can remind people of their mortality (Study 1) and lead them to invest in culturally valued behavior (Studies 2–4). Specifically, individuals in the “mortality salience” condition reported greater worldview defense (Study 2) and spent more money on luxury items (Studies 3 and 4) than those in the control condition, consistent with proposals set forth by terror management theory. In Study 4, death-related thoughts mediated the relationship between mortality salience and willingness to spend money on luxury items. Findings are discussed in the context of online consumer behavior.

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1. Introduction

Any individual surfing the web is likely to encounter advertisements for a wide variety of products, events, and services. Most of us have been conditioned to ignore these pesky annoyances and to go on clicking and attending to the space between the ads on the webpage. However, there is some evidence that individuals do in fact process these advertisements and that such advertisements can increase preferences for the content featured in them (Yoo, 2009). These effects are found regardless of whether or not people actively attend to the advertisements (Yoo, 2008). With the transition of much of our behavior online (e.g., communication, networking, purchasing goods and services), it is particularly important to examine the characteristics of an online environment. The purpose of the current studies was to examine the effects that banner advertisements have on consumers using predictions made by terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986).

TMT posits that individuals are motivated to alleviate the thoughts and concerns that arise from the knowledge that death is inevitable (Greenberg et al., 1986). To deal with this anxiety, people often cling to cultural worldviews in an effort to connect with something that extends beyond their physical death (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). As a result, inducing death-related thoughts (i.e., mortality salience) leads participants to react more negatively to those who threaten and criticize their

cultural worldviews (this defensive reaction is termed “worldview defense”; Greenberg et al., 1990). Also, people seek to enhance their self-esteem by achieving standards of value that are defined by a particular culture. For instance, research suggests that maintaining high status and engaging in materialistic consumer behavior can buffer mortality salience among United States citizens (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Mandel & Heine, 1999). Further, mortality salience has been shown to increase people’s financial expectations for themselves 15 years in the future and to elevate greedy behavior in a resource consumption scenario (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). In this study, participants were told to imagine that they were in competition with three other companies harvesting timber in an ever-dwindling national forest. Participants made bids (ranging from small to large) on how many acres they would be willing to harvest in a given year (out of an available 100 acres) and how much they would like to profit more than the other companies (a measure of greed). Participants in the mortality salience condition reported higher levels of greed and noted that they were willing to harvest 12–13 more acres of forest than participants in the control condition. The results from this study suggest that mortality salience can motivate individuals to alleviate mortality concerns by increasing greed and consumption behavior. However, the effects of mortality salience should be limited to the acquisition of possessions that are high-status and tied to self-esteem, such as luxury items (Mandel & Heine, 1999). Luxury products are considered expensive and reflect high status, so willingness to spend more money on these items represents an effort to obtain greater status through possessions or, put another way, materialism.

Mortality salience is most often induced by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions about the thought of one’s

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own death (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). However, other effective manipulations have also been used: exposure to subliminal death-related stimuli (i.e., the word “dead”; Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997), reading death-related facts (i.e., “In 1997, 3,599 people were killed...in road traffic accidents.”; Jessop, Albery, Rutter, & Garrod, 2008), completing a fear of death survey (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), handing out fliers with reminders of death to pedestrians (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Almakias, 2008), and even being interviewed outside of a funeral home (Pyszczynski, Wicklund, Floresku, & Koch, 1996). The wide breadth of manipulations demonstrates that both overt and incidental reminders of mortality affect human behavior.

Despite the variety of past manipulations, researchers have not yet investigated how mortality salience can affect human behavior in an online environment. The current studies were implemented to test the ability of webpage advertisements to elicit mortality salience. We examined whether this manipulation led to higher accessibility of death-related thoughts in one’s consciousness (i.e., “death-thought accessibility”; Study 1) and greater cultural worldview defense (Study 2). Because webpage advertisements have been shown to influence people unknowingly (Yoo, 2008), and mortality salience has been shown to increase materialistic behavior (Arndt et al., 2004), we also examined whether banner advertisements influence consumer behavior (Study 3) and whether this relationship was mediated by death-related thoughts (Study 4). With the online purchasing of products becoming more common, there are important implications of advertisements that unobtrusively affect consumer behavior.

2. Study 1

In this first study, we developed a subtle mortality salience manipulation administered through webpage advertisements and tested whether it increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts. Death-thought accessibility was operationalized as the number of word-fragments that were completed with a death-related word. If participants complete a possible word-fragment (i.e., de_ _) with a death-related word (i.e., dead) instead of a neutral word (i.e., deed, debt, deal), it is hypothesized that death-related thoughts are more consciously accessible (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 1864 online respondents (74.5% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.95$, $SD = 13.65$) recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Mturk is a web service that matches requesters (often companies or researchers) with members willing to complete web-based tasks for a specified reward. Several evaluations of Mturk have shown that it is a reliable and valid source of psychological data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Participation was limited to those in the United States, and participants were compensated \$.05, which is similar to other short studies implemented on MTurk (Buhrmester et al., 2011). The majority of participants were recruited from May through November 2010. All respondents finished in less than 5 min.

2.1.2. Procedure and materials

Participants responded to a request to participate in a study on word-fragment completions. They were first directed to an informed consent page, which provided the cover story that the University of Michigan was sponsoring the webpage. The banner

advertisements at the top and bottom of the first page read, “UM Events & Services 2010” and had a University of Michigan logo. These banner advertisements were included to reduce suspicion about the nature of the study by introducing advertisements early on in the study (on the consent page). On the next page, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The mortality salience condition featured banner ads that read, “Join Us for UM’s Day of the Dead Celebration on Nov. 2nd!!!” with a picture of a skull; the control condition featured banner ads that read, “Join Us for UM’s Cherry Picking Outing on Aug. 5th!!!” with a picture of cherries. The advertisements were created in consultation with research suggesting that exposure to certain words and images makes that content more accessible to influence future behavior and judgments (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Hirschberger et al., 2008). No references to the content of the advertisements were made in the survey. See the Appendix for illustrations of these banner ads.

Death-thought accessibility was measured by a word-fragment completion task similar to those used in previous terror management research (Greenberg et al., 1994). Out of the 25 word fragments, 6 could be completed with a death-related word (e.g., coff _ _; which could be completed as coffin or coffee). Death-thought accessibility was operationalized as the average number of death-related word completions. This completion task was placed in between the banner ads on the main part of the webpage. On the following page, the cover story University advertisements resumed, and demographic characteristics were collected. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide feedback or comments about the experiment, which were later coded for any suspicion that the advertisements had an effect on their responses.

2.2. Results and discussion

In Study 1, we tested whether mortality-based webpage advertisements increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts. As seen in Fig. 1, participants in the mortality salience condition completed more death-related words ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.08$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .98$), $t(1862) = -4.75$, $d = .22$, $p < .001$. That is, death-thought accessibility was higher in the mortality salience condition than in the control condition. The pattern of findings for Study 1 remained significant after controlling for age and gender. No participants reported any suspicion about the advertisements. In sum, this study demonstrated that mortality-related banner ads lead to higher death-thought accessibility.

3. Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to test whether our mortality salience manipulation elicited increases in worldview defense, a common consequence of mortality salience in the TMT literature. We presented participants with two essays about the United States ostensibly written by two foreigners (one pro-U.S., one anti-U.S.). Worldview defense is operationalized as the difference between approval of the pro-U.S. author and essay and disapproval of the anti-U.S. author and essay. A larger discrepancy between how much people like someone who validates their worldview and how much people dislike someone who challenges their worldview serves as a proxy for the defense of their cultural worldview.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Two hundred and ninety-eight participants (68.8% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.81$, $SD = 13.38$) were recruited through Amazon’s Mturk

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