

Research Article

Distinct threats, common remedies: How consumers cope with psychological threat

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Abstract

Research has consistently demonstrated that psychological threats to the self have a wide variety of consequences for consumer behavior. The present research introduces a novel perspective to this topic by proposing that psychologically distinct domains of threat have a common underpinning in the coping strategies they evoke. Specifically, this paper presents the argument that distinct domains of threat can be linked to either approach motivations that foster more problem-focused coping or avoidance motivations that foster more emotion-focused coping. Multiple experiments offer systematic support for these propositions. Implications for both the psychological self-threat literature and the coping literature are discussed.

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Introduction

Consumers encounter diverse threats to the self that range from challenges to, or deficits in, one's intelligence, personal control, need for social inclusion, and mortality. One consequence of these distinct forms of psychological threat is that each has the potential to direct consumption towards products that signal success on the threatened aspect of the self. Consider the following examples. When consumers' intelligence was threatened they selected products that signaled intelligence (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). Consumers whose sense of personal control was threatened expressed a greater preference for products with clear boundaries (Cutright, 2012).

Consumers who felt rejected were willing to pay more for items that built social connections (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). And, when consumers' mortality was threatened, they responded more favorably to status brands that signaled their relative worth to society as a whole (Mandel & Heine, 1999).

Collectively, such "compensatory consumption" behaviors can be understood based on the proposition that products and brands provide and signal information about the self (Belk, 1988; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009). Individuals' intelligence, for example, is not represented solely by scholastic achievements, but by the products and brands that people associate with. Because of the relationship between products and the self, consumers can assuage a threatened perception of the self by acquiring products that signal that one possesses a desired self-identity. Indeed, this logic is a core tenet of symbolic-self completion theory, which acknowledges that the brands and products consumers acquire and display can complete a threatened part of the self (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982; for recent reviews

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see Lee & Shrum, 2013; Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) brought this perspective to life when they found that MBA students who lacked objective markers of success (e.g., high grades, multiple job offers) were more likely to possess symbolic representations of success (e.g., expensive watches and briefcases).

As alluded to in the opening paragraph, a common approach to studying compensatory consumption is to focus on a particular threat and link it to a specific compensatory response (see Galinsky, Whitson, Huang, & Rucker, 2012). For example, Mandel and Heine (1999) examined how a threat to one's mortality specifically affected status consumption. This threat-specific approach has produced a better understanding of how different domains of threat (e.g., intelligence, mortality, personal control, social rejection) operate and influence consumers' reactions to specific brands or product features. However, with individual efforts emphasizing how consumers respond to a specific domain of threat in isolation, possible commonalities among distinct threats have received less attention (c.f. Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006).

In the present paper, we put forth a new perspective on self-threats. We propose that distinct domains of threat might share a commonality in the type of coping strategies they evoke. The foundation for this argument rests in the idea that self-threats can activate more general motivations with regard to either approach or avoidance that, in turn, have implications for the coping strategies people utilize. Although consumers might often prefer products that alleviate a specific aspect of the threatened self, we introduce the hypothesis that commonalities in coping strategies may affect general preferences across different threats. As a consequence, this conceptualization contributes to broadening our understanding of psychological threat by emphasizing similarities among distinct threats whereas extant research has focused primarily on studying individual threats in isolation.

Literature review: threat, motivation, and coping

In this section we review the threat, motivation, and coping literatures. To date, these three literatures have progressed largely in isolation from one another. In the course of our theory building, we identify commonalities across these literatures that serve as a base for a framework that integrates these literatures at a new theoretical level of abstraction.

Psychological threat to the self

We define the experience of psychological threat as an uncomfortable and aversive state that results from an actual or perceived discrepancy between one's current state and an end state (Kim & Rucker, 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our definition dovetails with that of self-discrepancy theory (SDT; Higgins, 1987), which posits that self-threats arise from discrepancies between actual–ought or actual–ideal selves. SDT further suggests that the nature of the discrepancy can produce distinct emotional outcomes (Higgins, 1999). Actual–ought based inconsistencies can lead to more agitation-related

emotions (e.g., anxiety), whereas actual–ideal based inconsistencies can lead to more dejection-related emotions (e.g., sadness).

In the present research, we embrace the general idea that self-threats arise from discrepancies. However, unlike SDT our interest is not in contrasting actual–ought and actual–ideal discrepancies. Rather, we are interested in how distinct domains of self-threat (e.g., intelligence, mortality, personal control, social rejection) produce similar versus dissimilar approaches to resolving self-discrepancies. An individual may experience an actual–ought threat to his intelligence (e.g., *I ought to* have done better on that math test), personal control (e.g., *I ought to* have had more control in that situation), mortality (e.g., *I ought to* accomplish more before I die), or social rejection (e.g., *I ought to* have more social connections). All of these reflect actual–ought discrepancies, and thus might elicit similar emotional reactions according to SDT. Our interest is whether these distinct domains of threat elicit similar or dissimilar coping responses, not based on whether the discrepancy is ideal or ought based, but based on potential differences in the motivations they activate. We present the idea that different domains of threat may activate distinct motivations—approach and avoidance—that have implications for subsequent coping behavior.

Approach and avoidance motivations

Research on motivation suggests that people have two distinct motivational systems that govern behavior: approach and avoidance (e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1982, 1990; Higgins, 1997). The approach motivational system—also referred to as the behavioral activation system (Carver & White, 1994)—is posited to regulate behavior associated with positive outcomes, such as success, rewards, and achievement. Carver and Scheier (1981, 1990) suggest that the approach motivational system activates when individuals have a desired end-state accompanied by a focus on pursuing positive outcomes. For example, an individual with an approach orientation towards studying for an exam is likely to be more inclined to focus on the positive outcome of obtaining an A. Individuals with approach motivations are sensitive to, and focused on, bringing about positive outcomes (Carver & White, 1994; Higgins, 2000).

In contrast to the approach system, the avoidance system—also called the behavioral inhibition system (Carver & White, 1994)—restrains behavior that may lead to negative outcomes such as failure and punishments. Carver and Scheier (1981, 1990) suggest that the avoidance motivational system activates when individuals focus on an undesired end-state (i.e., a negative value or outcome). Thus, individuals with avoidance motivations are sensitive to and emphasize circumventing negative outcomes (Carver & White, 1994; Higgins, 2000). For example, an individual with an avoidance orientation towards studying for an exam is likely to be more inclined to focus on the negative consequences of receiving an F.

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