



# Do internals speed less and externals speed more to cope with the death anxiety?



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## ABSTRACT

Past research has showed that mortality salience (MS) increases reckless driving and speeding when the individual perceives driving to be relevant to his or her self-esteem. We claimed that drivers' control orientations also play a significant role in the relationship between MS and speeding. We hypothesized that both a general desirability of control and traffic locus of control (T-LOC) would moderate the effect of MS on speeding. We tested our hypothesis using an online experiment on a sample of 208 young male drivers. Participants were exposed to either mortality or dental pain salience, and they filled out desirability of control, T-LOC, and self-report speeding measures. The results showed that, for individuals with low desirability of control, MS increased preferred speed and decreased intention to comply with speed limit and the percentage of time complied with the speed limit on urban roads with 50 km/h speed limit. For individuals with high desirability of control, on the other hand, MS increased intention to comply with the speed limit on rural roads and percentage of the time complied with the speed limit on both urban and rural roads. In contrast, the interaction between MS and T-LOC showed that an external T-LOC is positively associated with both intention to comply and the percentage of the time complied with the speed limits only on rural roads with 90 km/h.

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## 1. Introduction

Speeding is one of the most crucial problems in traffic safety (Yannis, Louca, Vardaki, & Kanellaidis, 2013) and there are certain demographic groups that are relatively more inclined to speed in traffic. For example, young male drivers tend to be more reckless drivers and they are more likely to violate speed limits (e.g., Cestac, Paran, & Delhomme, 2011; Møller & Haustein, 2014; Williams, Kyrychenko, & Retting, 2006). A recent report, on the other hand, demonstrated that if all drivers in Great Britain complied with the speed limits, then there would be a 29% decrease in injury accidents and a 50% decrease in fatal crashes (Carsten et al., 2008).

For encouraging compliance with speed limits, the persuasion messages used in anti-speeding campaigns mostly make use of negative, fear-based approaches, like illustrating the deathly consequences of speed driving (e.g., Lewis, Watson, & White, 2010; Lewis, Watson, White, & Tay, 2007; Sibley & Harré, 2009). However, target audience of these messages often resist being persuaded despite the apparent bloody consequences (Sibley & Harré, 2009), and young male drivers may even turn out to be also the most reluctant to be persuaded (Lewis, Watson, Tay, & White, 2007).

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### 1.1. *Terror Management Theory (TMT)*

TMT is one of the theories that can help to understand how young male drivers can maintain engaging in a behavior that is clearly a threat to their life and why young male drivers do insist on speeding in traffic although they are reminded that doing so can kill them. It should be pointed out that TMT is a prominent social psychological theory on how people deal with their own mortality and overcome the anxiety triggered by mortality awareness (see Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986).

TMT posits that human beings are unique in their capacity to recognize their own mortality (Greenberg et al., 1986). Such awareness also leads to an existential crisis as everything seems meaningless in the face of inevitable death. In order to avoid being paralyzed by perceived meaninglessness, people ascribe meaning to their universe by adopting worldviews. Furthermore, people's self-esteem is based on how much they are living up to the standards of their respective worldviews. Individuals' worldview and self-esteem are buffering mechanisms that mitigate the death anxiety that is constantly provoked by mortality awareness. People bolster their worldviews and enhance their self-esteem in order to cope with the death anxiety when they are reminded of their mortality, namely mortality salience (MS) (see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).

### 1.2. *MS and driving behavior*

It has been showed that MS manipulation increased risky driving, but only for those who perceived driving as relevant to their self-esteem (Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2000; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler, 2003; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999, 2000). As people are reminded of their own mortality, they need to enhance their self-esteem and by doing so, their positive thoughts and feelings about the pleasantness of driving become elevated. They enhance their self-esteem which is heavily invested in how much they feel good about themselves when driving. They also become more likely to disregard safety concerns and engage in risky driving. Thus, for drivers who perceive driving as relevant to their self-esteem, death reminders are likely to backfire and lead those drivers to risky driving and speeding. It should be noted that such effect is exactly the opposite of what is being intended by anti-speeding messages which remind drivers of their mortality.

### 1.3. *Driving and desirability of control orientation*

Individuals possess varying degrees of desire for personal control over their lives (Burger & Cooper, 1979). According to Burger and Cooper (1979), those with low desirability of control are nonassertive and they have little interest in personally being in control of the events. Those with high desirability of control, on the other hand, are assertive and they are willing to actively participate in shaping the course of events in their lives. It can be assumed that desirability of control can play a role of moderation on the effect of MS on speeding behavior, since driving is accepted as a self-paced task (i.e., a driver usually decides himself/herself how to act and/or behave in traffic) and driving and its components (i.e., speeding) require the driver to assess the extent to which he or she can personally control the outcome of such risky behavior and avoid the potential negative consequences. Only one study investigated the interactive effect of MS and desirability of control on risky behaviors including speeding: Miller and Mulligan (2002) showed that MS increased risk taking for individuals with external locus of control whereas it decreased risk taking for individuals with internal locus of control. In their study, it should be noted that, Miller and Mulligan (2002) created a composite risky behavior variable as a dependent measure which included speeding among other risky behaviors. They took the average of scores on different types of risky behaviors and used that as a dependent variable, but they did not separately investigate the effect of MS and desirability of personal control on the speeding behavior alone.

### 1.4. *Driving and locus of control*

The role of locus of control in reckless driving attracted attention of past researchers, although these studies produced mixed results. Some researchers found that internal locus of control is related to low traffic accident involvement, highly cautious driving (Arthur, Barrett, & Alexander, 1991; Montag & Comrey, 1987), and alertness (Lajunen & Summala, 1995). On the other hand, some other studies showed that internal locus of control leads to more dangerous driving and it is positively associated with speeding behavior (Hammond & Horswill, 2002; Horswill & McKenna, 1999). In addition, there are also certain studies that had found no relationship between personal control and reckless driving (Arthur & Doverspike, 1992; Guastello & Guastello, 1986; Iversen & Rundmo, 2002). It has been claimed that such mixed results might be due to the usage of two-dimensional (i.e., internality versus externality) and non-traffic-targeted scales (e.g., a general locus of control scale) that are too simplistic for covering the complex reasons behind traffic accidents and offences (Warner, Özkan, & Lajunen, 2010; Özkan & Lajunen, 2005) and specific driving components (i.e., speeding). Based on this, Özkan and Lajunen (2005) developed a multidimensional traffic locus of control (T-LOC) scale and found that an internal locus of control is positively related to accidents, offences, and speeding behavior (Özkan & Lajunen, 2005; Warner et al., 2010). It was argued that such results implicated that drivers with an internal locus might be overconfident regarding their driving skills and thus more reluctant to be cautious and utilize safety technologies (Özkan & Lajunen, 2005; Warner et al., 2010).

T-LOC scale basically measures how possible a person believes that a certain factor would cause a traffic accident. So if, for example, a driver has an internal T-LOC, it means that he/she believes that his/her own behaviors and shortcomings in driving skills largely contribute to the possibility of engaging in an accident. If, on the other hand, the driver has an external T-LOC, it means that he/she attributes greater responsibility to external factors (e.g., other drivers, problems with the road,

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