

***Creative Consumption after Mortality Salience:
Compared to What, for Whom, What Tasks? And a Time Horizon Issue***

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Every day, amateur consumers buy art and craft supplies from stores like Michael's Arts & Crafts, collect camera accessories to help demonstrate their originality in photography, or get software to facilitate the production of their own musical compositions or video collages. Consumer resources (e.g., time, effort and money) committed to such purposefully creative consumption are often considerable. So it leads to the question: why do consumers engage in proactive creativity? Drawing on Terror Management Theory, this research seeks to understand one unconscious driver of creative consumption: existential thoughts which ebb and flow with an individual's life changes, societal events, and media portrayals. In particular, we investigate under what circumstances mortality salience does and does not stimulate creative consumption.

Conceptual Background

Mortality Salience and Creative Consumption

Terror Management Theory seems to suggest mortality salience's boost on interest in creative consumption. This theory deems unconscious mortality fear as a driving force of various human behaviours and proposes a dual-component model of attaining self-esteem and bringing mortality fear under control. First, an individual needs to subscribe to a worldview. Second, he/she needs to ascertain the belief that he/she lives up to the cultural standards prescribed by that particular

worldview. A higher level of self-esteem, whether dispositional or experimentally induced, has been shown to buffer mortality anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1993). Terror Management Theory contends that due to its protective function, when reminded of their mortality, people strive to enhance self-esteem. Experimental data over two decades repeatedly show that mortality salience leads to various forms of self-esteem striving (for a review, see Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

Being creative is a source of self-esteem in many cultures, especially valued in current American society. Because mortality salience stimulates self-esteem striving, and because expressing one's creativity may help enhance one's self-esteem, it follows that mortality salience would amplify one's interest in being creative. With consumption as the focus, this research represents the first attempt to experimentally test the causal link between mortality and creativity:

H1: Mortality salience increases individuals' interest in creative consumption.

Note that H1 focuses on mortality salience's effect at a very basic level. Competition for consumers' attention, time and energy is not considered.

The Moderating Effects of Creative Tendency and Levels of Creative Challenge

Some research in existential psychology imply that in the repertoire of mortality anxiety buffers, to some individuals, being creative may not have the same appeal as some other coping mechanisms. Before the audience announces acceptance (if any), the creator stays isolated and cannot connect to them through his/her creative acts. It means that bringing up the prospect of death, the fundamental isolation, may make some people less attracted to creative acts that constitute another form of isolation. Lay epistemic theory cites a different mechanism in leading to the same inference. For people with elevated need for nonspecific closure that is induced by mortality salience, creative activities would not have much appeal compared to non-creative routine activities. Creativity is characterized by infrequency, originality, and deviation from the norm, which is inherently riddled

with uncertainty. When mortality is salient, for individuals who are not accustomed to embracing creative challenges, creative activities may aggravate those feelings of uncertainty elicited by death.

Does mortality salience spur or suppress creativity? There may be room for both perspectives, given the right conditions. More creatively prepared individuals have more skills and experiences to utilize, which may offset the downside of creativity. In a similar vein, task complexity moderates the focal relationship. Creative tasks that are perceived as easy and manageable would have a similar effect, because even the less creative individuals can feel a sense of mastery when engaging in less-challenging creative activities. In either of these two situations, an individual would anticipate the creative outcome to be worthy and self-esteem bolstering, which would redeem the inhibiting aspects of creative expeditions.

H2: When alternative non-creative activities are provided, the effect of mortality salience on interest in creative consumption is moderated by a pre-existing creative tendency. Specifically, mortality salience is more likely to boost interest in creative consumption among individuals with a stronger pre-existing creative tendency.

H3: When alternative non-creative activities are provided, the effect of mortality salience on interest in creative consumption is moderated by levels of creative challenge. Specifically, mortality salience is more likely to boost interest in creative consumption when the creative tasks are less challenging.

Method and Results

Experiment 1 examined mortality salience's effect on creative interest when no competing activities are provided for consideration (H1). It showed that subliminally primed mortality increased creative interest. Experiment 2 supported H2. Specifically, at two standard deviations above the mean of

pre-existing creative tendency, mortality salience marginally bolstered creative interest. However, at two standard deviations below the mean of pre-existing creative tendency, mortality salience exhibited a trend of dampening creative interest. We did not find mortality salience's main effect on creative interest of either direction. Experiment 3 requested art majors to consider artistic tasks of varying levels of difficulties. Mortality salience stimulated interest in casual and simple creative consumption among art undergraduates. For the more challenging creative tasks, mortality salience marginally reduced creative interest. H3 was supported.

Experiment 4 examined creative consumption from a different angle, i.e., in retrospect. Reactions toward a stimulus in prospect are not necessarily the same as those in retrospect. A creative experience, even if challenging and uncertain for some individuals in the beginning, can still generate some rewarding moments when difficulties are overcome and ultimately result in a creative outcome. Here we compare creative pursuits with shopping, a largely non-creative activity. We conjecture that creative consumption in retrospect elicits a more positive global evaluation than shopping does.

H4: Contemplating one's past creative consumption reduces existential thoughts more effectively than contemplating one's past shopping experiences.

To assess which of these two activities (creative consumption vs. routine shopping) better reduced existential thoughts, Experiment 4 looked at their respective effects on reducing death-thought accessibility. Reaction time was recorded to gauge accessibility. Compared to writing about one's past spending, writing about one's past creative endeavours better suppressed death-words accessibility, thus supporting H4. We also found that a stronger pre-existing creative tendency desensitized death thoughts, which demonstrated creativity's long-term effect on psychological equanimity.

Combined, these experiments showed that: at a very basic level, mortality salience spurs interest in creative consumption; when juxtaposed with non-creative activities such as watching TV, only among the highly creatively inclined individuals did mortality salience arouse creative interest above the easy, non-creative activities; mortality salience directed interest toward creative tasks away from uncreative ones when the creative tasks were within one's skill mastery; creative pursuits are able to proffer psychological equanimity in an extended horizon. The fear that arises from the knowledge of an inevitable death needs to be kept at bay for humans to remain calm and functional in everyday life. Providing the right creative outlets for some individuals and reminding people of their past creative achievements may help them overcome existential anxiety particularly in difficult times. Thus, our inquiry into the relation between death and creativity points out an accessible way of terror management that is more socially advantageous in a diverse cultural world.

References

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