“REST IN PEACE?”
THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND-INDUCED MORTALITY SALIENCE ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

In three studies we investigated the effects of unintended brand associations on consumer behavior. We proposed that brands can automatically activate mortality-related thoughts and, in turn, affect consumer behavior. Based on Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, et al., 1986), we argued that brand-induced mortality salience would lead to increased spending and worldview defense. We found that explicit exposure to an insurance brand increased the accessibility of death-related thoughts, which, in turn, increased personal spending intentions (Experiment 1). Experiment 2 showed that (implicit) insurance brand exposure positively affected charity donations. Experiment 3 revealed that subliminal brand exposure affected worldview defense in such a way that individuals who were unconsciously exposed to an insurance brand rated domestic products more favorably and foreign products less favorably than individuals in the control condition. These results suggest that unintended brand associations can affect (unconscious) consumer behavior in various unanticipated ways.

Key Words: Brand Associations, Mortality Salience, Consumer Behavior, In-group Bias, Out-group Derogation

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1. Introduction

Imagine buying a new car. You are looking for a fast one that will augment your driving experience and impress all your friends. Two brands that automatically come to mind are “Porsche” and “Dodge Viper”. After some consideration you decide to purchase the “Porsche” and start looking in the yellow pages to find an insurance company that offers a car insurance that provides security and safety. Whilst scrutinizing the relevant pages and seeing the brand names and logos of all the different insurance companies, you find yourself thinking about the terrible things that could happen to you and your precious new car: theft, damage, vandalism and even a fatal accident.

This scenario shows that brands may automatically activate a plethora of heterogeneous associations, either intended or unintended by marketers. For example, “Porsche” and “Dodge Viper” may be associated with the pleasure of driving, speed and impression management, just as insurance brands can evoke associations involving security and belongingness. Such associations are often a result of enduring marketing strategies that have repeatedly stressed these positive brand characteristics, and they have often been the focus of consumer research (e.g., Kohli, et al., 2005; Punj and Moon, 2002).

However, as it appeared in our example, not all brand associations originate from intentional tactics by marketers. Brand associations can also arise spontaneously and unintentional as a consequence of a product’s attributes. For instance, insurance brands are likely to remind us of disaster, illness, and even mortality. Whereas the effects of intentionally designed marketing strategies and consciously created brand associations on consumer behavior have received much attention, (e.g., Brown and Dacin, 1997; Keller, 2003), the same cannot be said of the effects of brand associations that originate spontaneously and are not part of a well-designed marketing strategy (i.e., unintended brand associations). Do such unintended, and perhaps undesired, brand associations affect consumer behavior? In this paper we argue that they do. More specifically, we propose that brands may sometimes automatically trigger unconscious, hidden motives, desires, and fears that have a significant impact on consumer behavior. The present research focuses on one very powerful hidden motive: the fear of death (Greenberg et al, 1986). Although there is previous work arguing the relevance of the construct of mortality salience for the field of consumer behavior (e.g., Arndt et al., 2004), various important questions have been left unaddressed in the literature. One of the more salient issues that will be focal in the present series of studies is the notion that brand attributes may (unintentionally) induce the fear of death under various conditions. Moreover, the present research aims to extend earlier findings on the effects of death-related anxiety on various forms of consumer behavior.

2. Consumer Behavior as Terror Management

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT: Greenberg et al., 1986), much of our behavior emanates from our fear of death that becomes salient when we are confronted with our mortality. The will to survive and the knowledge that life is transient results in an insolvable conflict, often referred to as terror. Terror Management Theory postulates that individuals deal with this terror by endorsing a cultural worldview that gives meaning, order and permanence to the self. Living up to these standards provides high levels of self-esteem which functions as a buffer against existential anxiety. There are various studies that support the TMT proposition that reminders of mortality intensify the desire to express cultural values and engage in culturally prescribed behavior (see Greenberg et al., 2004 for a recent overview). For example, mortality salience has been shown to lead to overestimation of consensus for one’s attitudes on culturally relevant issues (Pyszczynski et al., 1996), more positive evaluations of charities (Jonas et al., 2002), and to more favorable attitudes of those who exemplify cultural values or praise the culture (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990). Moreover, research has shown that reminders of death not only intensify the desire to express and praise cultural values, but also the inclination to defend the values and norms of one’s cultural worldview (in-group bias) and, at the same time, the tendency to derogate values of other cultures (out-group derogation). For example, Germans who were reminded of their mortality reported less support for the European currency, the Euro, and greater support for the German mark (Jonas et al., 2005). Expressing cultural values and defending one’s cultural worldview seem to serve as mechanisms that regulate experienced existential terror.
Recent research has begun to explore TMT assumptions in the realm of consumer behavior (Arndt et al., 2004; Maheswaran and Agrawal, 2004). Specifically, in the current western society, consumerism and materialism can be seen as important values intrinsic to a western worldview. Accordingly, thoughts about death will intensify the desire to meet these values by acting in accordance with them. In line with these notions, research has shown that participants who were reminded of their mortality evaluated their financial future more positively, and expected to spend more money on luxury items in the next fifteen years than participants in the control condition (Kasser and Sheldon, 2000). Research on the effects of death reminders is still in its infancy, however, and little is known about other worldview defense strategies that may be directly relevant to the consumer domain. For instance, one may wonder how the previously discussed impact of mortality salience on in-group bias and out-group derogation may manifest itself in the consumer domain. One rather straightforward possibility would be a “translation” into a general preference for national (own-country) products and a devaluation of foreign products. The present paper will address this issue.

Furthermore, most research in the domain of Terror Management has activated mortality-related thoughts using non-marketing related stimuli, for instance by confronting participants with a threatening video about death or by instructing participants to write or think about (their) mortality (for an overview see: Pyszczynski et al., 2004). However, research has left unaddressed whether marketing stimuli themselves, such as brands, physical products, or advertisements can automatically activate mortality-related thoughts as well. The present series of studies will “zoom in” on one specific type of marketing stimulus and assess the role of brands in inducing consumer mortality salience.

In sum, the present research aims to establish the missing causal links between three constructs: brands, mortality salience and consumer behavior. The present study therefore adds to the literature in two ways. First, we investigate whether (mere) brand exposure can function as an unintended reminder of our mortality by triggering associations of disaster, fatal accidents and illnesses. Research on automatic construct activation (e.g., Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Macrae et al., 1994) supports the idea that subtle environmental cues can influence construct accessibility. For example, Kay, Wheeler, Bargh and Ross (2004) have shown that implicitly presented material business objects, like boardroom tables and briefcases, increased the cognitive accessibility of related constructs, in this case competition. Likewise, brands -considering their broad scope of (un)intended associations- may trigger various constructs related to unconscious consumer motives, such as a fear of death or a need to belong. To validly establish the specific relationship between brands and unconscious consumer motives, this study tests the effects of different priming procedures on the accessibility of mortality-related thoughts. Across studies, priming procedures are varied from extensive and explicit, i.e., supraliminal priming, to subtle and below the threshold level of conscious perception, i.e., subliminal priming (Bargh and Chartrand, 2000). This procedure allows us to learn more about the effects of brand associations that are not part of a well-designed marketing strategy, and are not controlled by marketers, but arise automatically by linking indirectly related constructs. This “unintended brand associations” approach extends previous research in the realm of terror management by providing a first test of the role of marketing stimuli as inducers of mortality perceptions.

The present research also extends previous TMT research by providing explicit tests of the various ways in which mortality concerns may affect consumer behavior. In western countries, where consumerism is deeply interwoven with cultural beliefs and money is a pervasive barometer of self-worth (Bauman, 1995), excessive spending could be a coping-strategy for dealing with existential anxiety (see also Arndt et al., 2004). In line with these notions, we expect increased personal spending and charity donations to be a function of brand-induced mortality salience. Moreover, the present studies take in-group favoritism and out-group derogation into the consumer domain by proposing that mortality salience should induce a more positive perception of products and goods that are produced in one’s own country and a more negative perception of products originating from abroad. In other words, we expect that individuals who are reminded of mortality, through brand exposure, will be motivated to defend their own culture by expressing greater appreciation for their “own” products and lower appreciation for other cultures’ (“their”) products.

3. Overview

The aim of this research is twofold, i.e., (1) to test whether priming participants with an insurance brand logo can automatically activate death-related thoughts, and (2) to replicate and extend research on consumption-related mechanisms to reduce existential anxiety. We report three studies that used different priming procedures: Experiments 1 and 2 used an explicit and implicit supraliminal brand priming method, respectively, to make mortality salient. In Experiment 3 we used a subliminal brand priming method to activate death-related thoughts. Using these different priming procedures, ranging from very explicit to very implicit, offers the possibility to validly establish the effectiveness of different forms of brand exposure manipulations.
Across studies, we measured four different types of worldview defense strategies relevant to the consumer domain: increased spending (Experiment 1), increased donations to charity (Experiment 2), increased appreciation for national products, and decreased appreciation of foreign consumer goods (Experiment 3). We hypothesized that exposure to an insurance brand would increase the accessibility of mortality-related thoughts, which, in turn, would increase various types of worldview defense strategies relevant to the consumer domain. Finally, we used mediation analysis (cf. Baron and Kenny, 1986) in Experiment 1 to establish the mediational role of mortality salience in the relation between brand exposure and consumer worldview defense strategies.

4. Experiment 1

Experiment 1 aimed to test three hypotheses. First, the effect of explicit -supraliminal- brand priming on mortality salience was examined. It was expected that extensive exposure to an insurance brand would increase the accessibility of mortality-related thoughts. Second, we hypothesized that this brand-induced mortality salience would affect personal spending on other items than the branded ones. Finally, we propose that mortality salience mediates the relation between brand exposure and spending intentions.

Method

Design and participants: The experiment employed a single factor between-subjects design (brand: insurance brand logo vs no brand logo). Forty-three participants (23 males and 20 females) with a mean age of 21.57 years ($SD = 2.69$) were randomly assigned to either the brand exposure condition or the control condition. Participants received €2, - for their participation.

Procedure: On arrival at the lab, each participant was placed in a separate room with a computer that gave all further instructions. After answering some demographic questions, participants in the experimental condition were exposed to a brand logo, whereas control participants were not. After brand exposure, participants were requested to complete several measures assessing mortality salience, mood and spending intentions. Finally, the “funneled debriefing” procedure (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000) was used to ascertain that nobody had identified the real purpose of the study. After completing the different parts of the experiment, participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked for their attendance.

Brand Exposure: Participants were randomly assigned to either a brand exposure or a control condition. In the brand manipulation condition, participants were exposed to the brand logo of a well-known insurance company, whereas participants in the control condition were not. To ascertain a thorough and extensive confrontation, the exposure lasted for five minutes and participants were asked to jot down all the thoughts that came to mind during the brand logo exposure (cf. Macrae et al., 1994).

Mood: As a confound check, to assess whether brand exposure would lead to unintended mood effects, participants responded to the 20-items Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clarke and Tellegen, 1988), which consisted of 10 positive items ($\alpha = .79$) and 10 negative items ($\alpha = .78$).

Mortality Salience: To measure the accessibility of death-related thoughts, the word fragment completion task was used (Greenberg et al., 1994). Participants were requested to complete a set of 15 incomplete words by filling in one or more syllables. Ten of these words could be completed as either neutral or death-related words, and the remaining 5 words were used as filler items. Examples included “De…”, which can be completed as either “Death” or “Dean”, and “…ave” which can be completed as “Grave” or “Wave”. An index of mortality salience was formed by summing the number of death-related words that participants completed ($M = .79, SD = .91$, range = 0–3).

Spending Intentions: The inclination for excessive spending was measured by asking participants how much money they were going to spend on entertainment and food in the upcoming month. These items were chosen because consumption and hedonism are currently seen as the most essential values in western countries (Baumann, 1995). It was expected that spending money on entertaining oneself and by consuming luxury food by going out to a restaurant is an adequate way of expressing these current western values. The scores on the items entertainment and food were taken together to form a measure of spending intentions.

Results and Discussion

The results of the debriefing procedure revealed that none of the participants had recognized the real purpose of the experiment. This enabled us to include all participants in the analyses.

Mood: Analysis of variance on the positive items of the PANAS, ($F(1, 41) = .83, ns$) and the negative items of the PANAS, ($F(1, 41) = 1.77, ns$) indicated that mood states were not affected by brand exposure. Hence, mood states cannot account for the difference in cognitive accessibility of death-related words and spending intentions.
Mortality salience: An ANOVA on the number of completed death-related words showed that participants in the brand manipulation condition completed more death-related words (M = 1.20, SD = 1.0) than participants in the control condition (M = .44, SD = .66; F(1, 41) = 8.9, p < .01). Participants who were explicitly exposed to an insurance brand logo indeed had more mortality-related thoughts than participants in the no-brand control condition.

Spending Intentions: In line with our predictions, an ANOVA on the measure of spending intentions revealed that participants in the experimental condition planned to spend more money on entertainment and food (M = 204, SD = 95.83), than participants in the control condition (M = 129.57, SD = 59.96; F(1, 41) = 9.58, p <.01). These results suggest that mortality salience is a significant mediator of the relation between brand exposure as such, regardless of the specific type of brand, may have been sufficient to activate associations such as spending and purchases, which could have led to increased spending. To rule out this possible alternative explanation, in Experiment 2 we used a neutral brand in the control condition. To further validate the results of Experiment 1, and mimic a more “real world” situation, Experiment 2 used a more implicit brand exposure by presenting the brand logo as a subtle and incidental environmental cue. Finally, Experiment 2 investigated whether mortality salience can have effects other than increased consumerism, by examining the relationship between mortality salience and actual donations to charity.

5. Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to extend the results of Experiment 1 in a more natural setting by using a more implicit, subtle exposure of the insurance brand logo. Furthermore, a control brand was used in the control condition to rule out the alternative explanation that exposure to any brand influences spending behavior. To guarantee the implicit presence of the brands, the brand logos were printed on a mouse pad that was used during the experiment yet was not the focus of attention during any part of the experiment. Hence, the logos were only accidentally present in the experimental setting. Moreover, the present experiment investigated whether mortality salience affects actual behavior by measuring the amount of money participants were prepared to donate to charity. Donating behavior can be seen as desirable behavior in our culture, which makes it a suitable strategy for expressing cultural values. We expected that individuals using the mouse pad with the printed insurance logo would donate more money to charity than participants using a mouse pad with a control brand.

Method

Design and Participants: In this experiment, a single factor between-subjects design was employed (brand manipulation: mouse pad with printed insurance logo vs mouse pad with printed control brand logo). A total of thirty-seven people (20 males and 17 females) with a mean age of 21.7 years (SD = 2.39) took part in this study. Participants were
randomly assigned to either the experimental mouse pad condition or the control mouse pad condition. They were paid €2,- for their participation.

**Procedure:** As in Experiment 1, the entire experiment took place on a computer and participants used either a mouse pad with the printed insurance logo or a mouse pad with the logo of a control brand (a brand for a personal care product). Similar to Experiment 1, participants responded to the Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) and were subsequently asked to donate money to charity. The funnelled debriefing procedure was used to uncover any suspicions about the real goal of the experiment. After the experiment, participants were debriefed, paid and thanked for their participation.

**Brand Manipulation:** During the entire experiment, participants in the experimental condition used the mouse pad with the printed insurance brand logo, whereas participants in the control condition used the mouse pad with the printed control brand logo. No reference to the mouse pad or logo was made during any part of the experiment.

**Mood:** Similar to Experiment 1, participants responded to the 20-item PANAS questionnaire to check for design confounds (alpha positive items = .77, alpha negative items = .79).

**Charity Donation:** At the end of the experiment participants were asked how much money they wanted to donate to charity. The charity concerned itself with environmental protection and climate issues. After reading some information about the charity, participants indicated how much money they were prepared to donate.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of the debriefing procedure revealed that nobody identified the true purpose of the experiment.

**Mood:** As in Experiment 1, analysis of variance on the positive items \(F(1, 35) = .22, \text{ns}\) and the negative items \(F(1, 35) = 1.56, \text{ns}\) of the PANAS showed there were no differences in mood states between the experimental condition and the control condition.

**Donations:** An ANOVA on the measure of donating to charity revealed that participants in the experimental condition indicated to give more money to charity \((M = 21.90, SD = 22.45)\) than participants in the control condition \((M = 8.56, SD = 9.17; F(1, 35) = 5.22, p < .05)\).

These findings extend the results of Experiment 1 by showing that brand-induced mortality salience leads to expressing cultural values by more generous donations to charity. This means that brands can function as subtle environmental cues that may affect consumer worldview defense strategies in ways that were unintended by the brand owner. Moreover, by using a control brand in the control condition, we ruled out that general brand associations such as consumption and spending caused the effects on spending behavior.

The findings of studies 1 and 2 imply that consumers may use spending, specifically on culturally valued items, as a coping mechanism to reduce experienced terror triggered by the subtle presence of brands. However, there may be more ways in which brand-related mortality reminders affect consumer behavior. Terror Management Theory predicts that support for one’s own culture and worldview and derogation of other cultures constitute general coping strategies (Greenberg et al., 1986). These mechanisms may translate to a consumer context, by affecting the evaluation of foreign and local products. Specifically, as a consumption-related worldview defense mechanism, we expect individuals exposed to the insurance brand to evaluate domestic products more favorably and foreign products less favorably. Additionally, Experiment 3 employs a subliminal brand priming procedure, in order to test the hypothesis that even brands presented on an unconscious level can affect mortality salience and corresponding consumer behavior.

**6. Experiment 3**

Experiment 3 applied a common worldview defense mechanism following a mortality salience manipulation to a consumer context: in-group bolstering and out-group derogation (Greenberg et al., 1986). We used subliminal brand exposure in order to establish that mortality-related associations may become active even when consumers are completely unaware of being exposed to any brand stimulus.

**Method**

**Design and Participants:** To test our hypotheses we used a 2 (subliminal exposure: insurance brand vs control brand) \(\times\) 2 (products: domestic vs foreign) design with repeated measures on the second factor. Seventy-seven participants (22 male and 55 female), with a mean age of 21.4 years \((SD = 2.38)\) were randomly assigned to either the subliminal insurance brand condition (experimental condition) or the subliminal control brand condition Participants were paid €2,- for their attendance.

**Procedure:** Participants were seated in a separate room at individual computer desks. After responding to the demographic questions, participants performed a lexical decision task in which they were subliminally primed with either the insurance brand
logo or a control brand logo. Subsequently, participants evaluated typical domestic products and typical foreign products. A debriefing procedure to assess whether participants had noticed the subliminal brand manipulation concluded the experiment.

**Brand Exposure:** We used a subliminal priming task based on a standard priming procedure (Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Strahan et al., 2002). Participants were requested to perform a masked lexical decision task in which they were asked to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible (by pressing the “a” or “z” key, respectively), whether a string of letters shown to them on a computer screen constituted an existing word or not. The string of letters appeared in the middle of the computer screen. Between the presentation of forty words and non-words, brand logo primes were flashed in the middle of the screen in half of the trials. The brand logos were flashed for a period of 10 milliseconds each. In the experimental condition, participants were subliminally exposed to the insurance brand logo whereas participants in the control condition were subliminally exposed to the logo of a soft drink brand. The logo of the control brand was chosen because the colors of this logo matched those of the insurance brand logo which facilitated the masking technique. The primes were “sandwich masked”. Before and after the primes, a mask, consisting of a series of X’s in the same colors as the brand logo primes, appeared on the screen in the exact same spot as the brand logo primes. Both masks were presented for 300 milliseconds each.

**Product Attitudes:** To measure participants’ attitudes towards typically domestic (i.e., Dutch) food products and typically foreign food products, participants rated -on a 5-point scale- how positive (versus negative) they evaluated each of the products concerned. The products were shown to the participants by presenting them with a picture of the product on which the product’s name was clearly visible. Participants rated a total of five typically domestic products (e.g., “Gouda Cheese” and “Grolsch Beer”) and five foreign products (e.g., “Carbonell olives” and “Corona beer”). The attitude scores were created by summing the scores on the domestic products and the foreign products separately.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of the debriefing procedure confirmed that none of the participants identified that they had been exposed to a subliminal brand manipulation.

**Product Attitudes:** We performed a 2 (brand: insurance brand vs soft drink brand) x 2 (product: domestic vs foreign) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor to measure whether participants in the insurance brand condition rated domestic products more positively than participants in the soft drink brand condition (in-group favoritism), and whether participants in the insurance brand condition rated the foreign products more negatively than participants in the soft drink brand condition (out-group derogation). The results yielded a significant main effect of product ($F(1, 75) = 4.05, p < .05$), indicating that the domestic products were generally evaluated more positively ($M = 17.19, SD = 2.83$) than the foreign products ($M = 16.23, SD = 3.22$). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction effect between brand and product ($F(1, 75) = 8.76, p < .01$). Simple main effect analyses showed that the domestic products were rated more positively by participants in the insurance brand condition ($M = 17.92, SD = 2.10$) than by participants in the control brand condition ($M = 16.49, SD = 3.28$, $F(1, 75) = 5.20, p < .05$). Conversely, the foreign products were rated less positively by participants in the insurance brand condition ($M = 15.50, SD = 3.34$) than by participants in the control brand condition ($M = 16.95, SD = 2.96$, $F(1, 75) = 4.05, p < .05$). These findings suggest that participants in the insurance brand condition showed in-group favoritism, by expressing a more positive attitude towards domestic products, as well as out-group derogation, by expressing a more negative attitude towards foreign products.

**7. General Discussion**

The present research investigated whether unintended brand associations can influence consumer behavior by triggering unconscious consumer motives. It was hypothesized that exposure to an insurance brand would activate mortality-related thoughts. Mortality-related thoughts, in turn, were hypothesized to increase consumer spending, increase consumer preference for domestic products, and decrease consumer preference for foreign products. The present findings support our hypotheses. First, the current research is the first to show that exposure to marketing stimuli, like brands, is sufficient to induce mortality salience. This is a clear extension of earlier research that has underscored the relevance of the mortality salience construct for understanding various forms of consumer behavior (e.g., Solomon et al., 2004; Arndt et al., 2004) but thus far has ignored the role of marketing stimuli as causal agents in this process. The present results align with earlier findings indicating that brand stimuli are capable of activating consumer associations. In this regard, it is noteworthy that something so subtle and perhaps trivial as a simple brand logo that is presented with (Experiment 1) or without (Experiment 2 & 3) any concomitant instructions and even nonconsciously (Experiment 3), can have these dramatic and far-
reaching effects on man’s ultimate fear: his or her death. Second, the present research shows that consumers have several response options to deal with induced existential terror. Experiments 1 and 2 revealed that exposure to an insurance brand enhanced spending on items that are valued positively in current western society. A mediation analysis confirmed that the relation between brand associations on the one hand, and spending on the other, was mediated by mortality salience. Hence, excessive spending on culturally valued items can be seen as a direct response to mortality salience. Experiment 3 showed that a subliminal brand prime increased preference of domestic over foreign products, thus demonstrating how worldview defense mechanisms, such as in-group favoritism and out-group derogation can pervade a consumer context.

**Terror Management Theory and Consumer Behavior**

Effects of mortality reminders have been under frequent investigation since Greenberg et al. (1986) formulated Terror Management Theory. The main focus of this research has been on the general consequences of mortality salience, such as self-esteem striving, group affiliations, and self-serving biases (for a review see Pyszczynski et al., 2004). More recently, mortality salience has also grasped the attention of consumer researchers, but work in this domain has remained on the conceptual level for a long time (e.g., Arndt et al., 2004; Maheswaran and Agrawal, 2004), and has only scarcely include empirical demonstrations of mortality salience directly pertaining to consumer behavior (Ferraro et al., 2005; Heine et al., 2002; Jonas et al., 2005). The present findings offer empirical support for the notion that mortality salience can lead to “the urge to splurge”, which was suggested, but not tested by Arndt et al. (2004). Mortality salience not only results in overestimating one’s financial position in the future (Kasser and Sheldon, 2002), but it also influences spending intentions on culturally prescribed items in the short term. Participants anticipated spending more money in the coming month when they were confronted with a mortality-related brand. These results suggest that mortality salience directly motivates individuals to reduce their experienced terror. Moreover, these findings empirically verify that reducing existential anxiety is conceivable through lavish consumption. Additionally, we demonstrated that mortality-related brand-priming influences consumer behavior in more ways than one. Although other studies in this domain have shown instances of in-group favoritism (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997), the current study presents evidence for **both** in-group favoritism as well as out-group derogation in a consumer context. Specifically, mortality salience influenced attitudes towards both domestic and foreign food products by boosting the evaluation of domestic products while simultaneously lowering the evaluation of foreign products. These findings demonstrate that our daily shopping behavior may be pervaded by motives and considerations that are hidden to the eye and the conscious mind. Accordingly, even subtle reminders of our own mortality may directly affect the amount of money we plan to spend, the extent to which we are keen to support charity, and the kinds of products we like and dislike. As such the present results provide empirical evidence for the notion that the fear of death can be **induced** and **managed** by entities that are commonly and even ubiquitously found in the consumer-behavior domain.

**Brand Associations and Consumer Behavior**

From the somewhat broader perspective of unconscious activation (i.e., priming) of perceptions and behavior (see Bargh, 2002), the present study is the first that directly measures mortality salience after brand priming. We show that mere brand logos can serve as primes in activating constructs. This means that brand associations, even without the physical presence of the accompanying product, can become active by exposing participants explicitly to the brand as well as by implicit, incidental brand exposure. Brand confrontation not only has an effect on construct accessibility but also on preferences and the tendency to spend more money. This finding offers support for a full causal chain of brand exposure, inducing unintended brand associations (mortality salience), which spur concomitant consumer behavior.

Marketers try to influence consumer behavior by creating positive brand associations on the assumption that this will increase both sales and brand loyalty. We found that unintended (even unknown) associations can direct our consumer decisions as well. Whether these kinds of unintended brand associations are always harmful or fruitful to a certain company will probably depend on the kind of associations that spontaneously arise around a brand or product. However, it seems wise for brand managers to bear in mind that brands may have a host of unknown (and possibly undesirable) associations that might facilitate or interfere unintentionally with their brand strategies, especially because these unintended brand associations become activated by very subtle and even subliminal exposure. Stretching this point results in the provocative notion that brand advertising for product A may directly benefit sales for brand B (either in or outside the product category of A) to the extent that buying brand B is perceived as an effective defense strategy to manage the mortality salience induced by brand A.

In sum, marketing-related stimuli can serve as primes that trigger unconscious consumer motives. In the present research, different worldview defense
strategies were activated by a seemingly trivial stimulus such as a brand logo. These results were observed when participants thought about a brand very thoroughly, when a brand was presented as an incidental part of the environment, and even when a brand was presented at a subliminal level. None of the participants in our studies made any connection between the brand exposure and their spending intentions or product evaluations. This might open a new way of looking at brand marketing strategies. Consumers are certainly not aware of all the effects that brand exposure might have on them, regardless of whether this exposure has been a conscious or unconscious experience for them. This may be a blessing in disguise, given the abundance of brands and the plethora of effects that they might unconsciously evoke.

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