The Urge to Splurge Revisited: Further Reflections on Applying Terror Management Theory to Materialism and Consumer Behavior

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We respond to commentaries by Maheswaran and Agrawal (2004) and Rindfleisch and Burroughs (2004) on the application of terror management theory to understanding conspicuous consumption and consumer behavior. Specifically, we consider individual differences in terror management research; the possibility of cultural variation (or lack thereof) in terror management processes; the viability of materialism as a pathway to securing existential meaning; and the different and, at times possibly conflicting, motivations that may be evoked by the awareness of death.

We would like to first express our appreciation to Maheswaran and Agrawal (2004) and Rindfleisch and Burroughs (2004) for their thoughtful consideration of how terror management theory (TMT) applies to consumerism and materialism. When we wrote the original article, we suspected that we were just starting to scratch the surface of how TMT might enhance our understanding of consumer behavior, and after reading the commentaries, we see that this was indeed just a nict in the veneer. Both commentaries outline enough future research to keep an army of investigators busy for at least the next decade. Space limitations ontrain us from even a brief consideration of all the many fascinating points raised by the commentators, thus our response focuses on highlighting relevant previous TMT research, some clarification of points we do not feel were accurately represented, and finally, questions inspired by the commentaries.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN CONSUMPTION-ORIENTED TERROR MANAGEMENT

In somewhat different ways, both commentaries emphasize the importance of considering individual differences in the connection between the awareness of death and materialistic consumption. We agree that the systematic investigation of such differences is a vital direction for future research, and as Rindfleisch and Burroughs propose, an important aspect of such research is to examine how mortality concerns affect materialism across the lifespan. However, Rindfleisch and Burroughs maintain that our analysis suggests elderly people should be more materialistic because death is more salient and that the negative association between materialism and age is therefore discrepant with TMT. Yet as Rindfleisch and Burroughs earlier acknowledged, people manage concerns about death in a variety of ways and there is in fact nothing in TMT to suggest that the increasing salience of death, as may occur with aging, will inherently make people more materialistic.

Indeed, as we tried to point out throughout the article, the nature of mortality salience (MS) effects depends on the

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1We would also like to take issue here with Rindfleisch and Burroughs’s (p. 222) suggestion that we define “materialism as the placement of value on the acquisition of luxury products” and that this “seems at best unsatisfying and at worst conceptually deficient.” Our point is that certain items confer value and significance to those who possess them above and beyond their utilitarian worth and these are the ones that mortality salience will enhance affection for given corresponding personal values. It doesn’t just have to be a Lexus—lots of current luxury items started out as cheap goods (e.g., jeans) or are otherwise cherished for their prestige-enhancing effects (e.g., Goldschmidt’s, 1990, example of having a bevy of yams).
individual's dispositionally and situationally relevant values. The main effects of MS on greed and materialism documented in the target article can thus be taken as a reflection of the pervasiveness of materialistic values; however, this need not always be the case. In fact, the empirical data suggest a trend away from materialism over the life-span (e.g., Sheldon & Kasser, 2001); or in other words, a shift in the values from which people derive meaning. We are reminded here of the old adage whereby few people say on their deathbed that they wished they had spent more time at the office.

Maheswaran and Agrawal outline what we see as some fascinating directions for using (the construct of) self-monitoring to understand when mortality concerns may be more or less likely to prompt image-conscious consumption. However, the authors' prelude to this suggestion that "there is relatively little insight relating individual differences to MS" (p. 214, 2004) does not accurately reflect the existing corpus of terror management research. Space and topical constraints of the target article did not allow us to offer a comprehensive review, but TMT has examined not just specific investments, or contingencies of self-worth, as we presented in the target article, but also other, less domain-specific differences. These include but are not limited to: self-esteem (e.g., Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), depression (e.g., Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1998), neuroticism (e.g., Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999) and how neuroticism relates to desire for control (Arndt & Solomon, 2003), authoritarianism (e.g., Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), need for structure (Dechense, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000), and attachment style (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Thus, although we agree with Maheswaran and Agrawal that there is certainly more work to be done (and they present stimulating suggestions in this regard), we don't believe it is accurate to say that TMT research has been inattentive to individual differences.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CONSUMPTION-ORIENTED TERROR MANAGEMENT

Both commentaries also stress the importance of studying cultural differences. We have no doubt this is one of the more vital directions that TMT should take to enrich our understanding of materialism (as well as other domains). However, when Rindfleisch and Burroughs suggest that death fears may be absent for people such as the Asante of Ghana and Tibetan Buddhists, we feel it is important to consider the content of the belief systems, and some motivational explanation thereof, that allow these people to function with the apparent absence of death-related anxieties. As our discussion of Bonsu and Belk (2003) suggests, for the Asante, it appears the death ritual and the consumption behavior that results are built around the prestige acquisition of the bereaved. Although these pursuits operate under the auspice of furthering the positive identity of the deceased, they serve what we see as a critical function in facilitating symbolic and literal transcendence over death for the bereaved. From this perspective, it is much easier not to fear death if one does not view death as an end—a view that underscores much of the Asante ritual. In this light, we also part company with Rindfleisch and Burroughs when they posit (in their footnote) that the death-denying function of rituals such as the Asante's is extremely difficult to establish empirically. In principle at least, it would be quite a simple study. Following previous terror management research that has found undermining cultural meanings (e.g., about sex, relationships: Goldenberg et al., 1999; Mikulincer, Florian, Birnbaum, & Malishkevich, 2002) increases death thought accessibility, we would advance the fairly straightforward prediction that if one was to undermine or threaten the meaning and legitimacy of the Asante ritual, one should expect to see increases in unconscious death thought accessibility. Of course, the challenges here would then be to determine how to appropriately threaten the Asante's belief in the ritual and also how to measure death thought accessibility in this culture.

THE HAPPY MATERIALIST: FUNCTIONAL BUT WITH CONSEQUENCES?

The commentators also raise a number of interesting points about the complexity of materialism, and it is clear that re-

2Of course, one of the primary influences on people's values is their socialization experiences. Thus, we are a bit unclear as to how Rindfleisch and Burroughs could maintain that terror management theory has little to say about the role of social interaction. As we tried to explain in our original article, parenting and social interactions are the medium through which children learn the cultural standards of value that ultimately provide the means to manage existential anxiety.
searchers need to expand the portfolio of questions about the various facets of materialistic and consumption behavior. With this in mind, we feel there are a few additional ideas to consider. First, as a matter of clarification, we don’t believe that at any point in the article we claim that all materialism is bad or that all monetary acquisition beyond basic sustenance yields unhappiness. Certainly each of us has enjoyed a fine glass of wine, a trip to an exotic location, or the clarity of music through high-quality stereo speakers—all experiences that are, to say the least, facilitated by having money. In a different vein, there is likely no shortage of beneficial technological advancements (e.g., agricultural, medical) that have been obtained in large part because of a relentless pursuit of capitalistic achievement. Viewed another way and more explicitly from a terror management perspective, one might also hold that to the extent that an individual buffers existential anxiety by living up to cultural standards, and to the extent that pursuit of the “almighty dollar” is one such cultural value, then doing so should be a functional means of protecting oneself. However, just because such behavior has functional value does not mean it is the optimal or most productive solution.

In this regard, when Rindfleisch and Burroughs discuss the “happy materialist,” we wonder: Is materialism a coping strategy that frees one from existential angst and helps one adapt better to reality, or is it, like getting drunk or cutting oneself, a strategy that does little more than to temporarily distract one from the underlying existential dynamics? The latter possibility is one that Becker (1973) seemed to suggest, “Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing” (p. 284). Perhaps such bandage solutions are all that one can hope for, but given the standard negative correlation between well-being and materialism, it is important to consider that materialistic coping may not be all that adaptive, even though it is widely sanctioned by consumer culture.

We would also like to comment on Rindfleisch and Burroughs’s characterization of “happy materialists” as placing “significantly more importance on power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, and security and less importance on universalism than the rest of our sample” (p. 221). Although most research to date on materialism (including our own) has focused on personal well-being correlates, there is a wider lens that may be informatively employed. A growing body of literature finds that materialistic values have societal and environmental costs as well (Kasser, 2002). That is, materialistic values are associated with less empathy and cooperation and with more Machiavellianism, competition, and environmentally destructive behavior. These social and environmental problems of materialism are quite predictable from the value priorities of Rindfleisch and Burroughs’s “happy materialists.” We therefore agree with Rindfleisch and Burroughs that materialism re-

search will benefit from considering that other important correlates of this value system still remain to be identified and understood.

**INFORMATION PROCESSING AND MOTIVATIONAL CONSEQUENCES**

In addition to further study of these issues, we also agree that there is much to be learned about the variety of motivational consequences and how they may be influenced by the different processing systems that Maheswaran and Agrawal describe. Notably, there has been some TMT research that has examined MS effects when people are in different information-processing modes. Simon et al. (1997) drew from Epstein’s (1985) cognitive-experiential self-theory and found that symbolic (or distal) MS effects emerge when participants are in an experiential (i.e., intuitive) processing mode, whereas these effects are reduced when participants are in a rational processing mode. There is thus at least an initial foundation on which to explore Maheswaran and Agrawal’s very interesting ideas about how such processing could impact consumer behavior when mortality is salient.

Although we feel that the theory and research is fairly clear about the motivational underpinnings of the awareness of death, as Maheswaran and Agrawal point out, there is also much to be learned about the different motivational consequences that MS can engender. To date, most of the TMT research paradigms are not unlike other defense-oriented research paradigms in the sense that they involve the manipulation of theoretically specified antecedents of behavior (e.g., MS) and then examine the effect of those antecedents on a particular response that the investigators present to participants. However, such procedures necessarily preclude a consideration of how participants would respond had other options been presented (perhaps options that reflect different processing motivations); that is, we need to examine what is the preferred or naturally occurring response. Some initial insight into such questions was provided by Arndt, Greenburg, & Cook (2002) who explored the spontaneous activation of different belief structures as a result of mortality thoughts outside of conscious awareness. To the extent that such spontaneous activation reflects a signal for the preferred mode of response, it may provide insights for uncovering how different information-processing modes interact with MS to affect the activation of, and predisposition toward, the

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4Maheswaran and Agrawal also raise the issue that mortality salience may render consumers resistant to counter-attitudinal information. We think this is a fascinating direction and the foundation for such exploration has been laid in recent articles by Schimel et al. (1999; on reactions to counter-stereotypic behavior) and also in Jonas, Greenberg, and Frey (2003; on search for belief confirming vs. disconfirming information).

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different types of responses that Maheswaran and Agrawal propose.

We also think that Maheswaran and Agrawal bring attention to an important point when they note possible differences between defense and impression management concerns. Though we think that impression management behaviors are very often directed by defensive concerns, there are certainly domains in which needs for self-esteem may call for a different response than is implicated by defending certain elements of one's worldview. Indeed, Arndt, Greenburg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon (2002); Dechesne, Greenberg, et al. (2000a); and Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, and Schimel (2000) each examined conditions under which people will distance themselves from versus defend certain belief structures or group affiliations (see also Wisman & Koole, 2003). Following Maheswaran and Agrawal, researchers might also consider that certain elements of one's beliefs may lead down divergent consumer roads. Research by Lieberman, Arndt, Personius, and Cook (2001) is relevant to this point. Their study examined how, in a legal context, MS can engender both punitive (reflecting bias against outgroups) and lenient (reflecting a desire to uphold equitable treatment under the law) case judgments as a result of disparate motivational pressures to defend different elements of one's worldview. Future research may thus build from these and other findings to explore how consumer-judgment domains can involve disparate motivational pressures.

CONCLUSION

We close by again thanking the commentators for their thought-provoking ideas. Clearly, there is much to be learned about the interface between terror management and consumer behavior and we hope that this dialogue provides a useful sketch of some of the research trajectories worthy of development. Such efforts have the potential to extend our basic understanding of how people cope with existential fears and also to foster a wider understanding of the causes and consequences of materialistic behavior.

REFERENCES


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