

**CONSUMER ATTRACTION TO LUXURY BRAND PRODUCTS: SOCIAL  
AFFILIATION IN TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Terror Management Theory is a well-established theory and framework that has been recently linked to consumer behavior. The theory has often been applied to situations where persons have chosen to disengage from social affiliation with individuals who did not share the same cultural worldviews as themselves. However, it has had limited application in positive social affiliation in settings where others share the same worldview and may serve as a protective device from the fears associated with mortality salience.

It is the aim of this study to strengthen the link between social affiliation and Terror Management Theory as protective devices that may act together in helping to create an anxiety buffer against thoughts of one's finite existence. Furthermore, the actions of these two buffers will be studied in a consumer behavior context where a luxury product has been introduced into a social affiliation setting. It is expected that this luxury product, and the ability of its owner to show important similarities in age and image to participants of the study, will serve as a comparison target for participants, who will subsequently show an increased desire to affiliate with the person wearing the luxury brand when reminded of their mortality.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Terror Management Theory in Social Proximity*

An irresolvable paradox is created by the inherent human desire to preserve life and the simultaneous realization that this is an impossible task, because mortality is finite. This inevitability of mortality, when combined with the inherently human desire to remain alive, creates a fear within us that is fought by pushing away thoughts of death from our consciousness. When mortality is made salient to us, several interactions occur between the affective and cognitive behavioral systems in our brains to battle against this realization of impending mortality, thus emotionally distancing our thoughts and fears from the impending nature of death (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1991; Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1999). In 1986, a groundbreaking study in terror management began to put these pieces together into a conceptual explanation of how individuals could learn to cope with thoughts of their mortality, and resulted in a new theoretical framework, known as the Terror Management Theory (TMT). Terror Management Theory explains that our awareness of our vulnerabilities and mortality creates a potential for paralyzing terror, which can be managed by closely adhering to the views and standards found in an individually adopted cultural view. One's cultural view then serves as a symbolic protector from mortality by acting as an anxiety-buffer against the fear of death, as one lives up to the standards held by this cultural view (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, and Breus 1994).

The ability of one to rely upon the buffering effects provided in a cultural worldview largely depends upon an individual's ability and desire to live up to the standards founded in their worldview. It is this social behavior attempting to protect one's cultural worldview, and therefore provide for one's sense of symbolic immortality, that leads us to study the phenomenon in a social situation where mortality has been made salient. The present study seeks to further explain

the social interaction by positing that the fear involved with mortality related thoughts, and the resulting desire to protect oneself from this fear, may lead a person to unconsciously affiliate with others in a social setting in order to avoid isolation. Previous studies on the topic have suggested that there exists a distinct anxiety-buffering value in affiliation (Mikulincer and Florian 2000; Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, and Updegraff 2000), and that the affiliation with persons who display the same values found in one's cultural context may serve as a terror management protection from thoughts of mortality (Wisman and Koole 2003).

In an effort to test the robustness of TMT in social interaction, I examine the effect of social affiliation on consumer behavior through the study of individuals' responses toward luxury brand products in a mortality salient and social situation. Thus far, consumer behavior, like affiliation, has been shown to be positively affected under mortality salience as consumers have been known to reaffirm their cultural worldviews with luxury brand products when thoughts of their own deaths are aroused (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon 2004). Therefore, I propose that persons who have been placed in a mortality salient condition will exhibit a more favorable response toward social affiliation with an individual wearing a luxury brand product, by choosing to sit in closer proximity to that individual, than will those who have not been reminded of their death.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***The Use of Cultural Worldviews and Social Affiliation as Means of Terror Management***

According to research gleaned from Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), the intellectual ability to recognize one's vulnerability in mortality creates the potential for tremendous terror, as it seemingly renders one helpless to preserve him/herself from impending mortality. As human intellectual abilities have emerged, individuals have sought to create an anxiety buffer against

this terror, and cultural worldviews have been adapted to create an anxiety buffer from thoughts of one's own death. This uniquely human defense mechanism serves to protect the individuals of any given culture from mortality-induced anxiety, and has been adapted into Terror Management Theory (TMT), as mentioned previously. TMT explains culture as a providing security through the introduction of two concepts: (a) the idea that the world is a just and equitable place, and (b) the promise that symbolic immortality can be found by adopting a regional culture (Greenberg et al. 1994). The promise of security found in the symbolic immortality of a terror-reducing cultural worldview, however, is only held for those who live up the culture's standards of value, as these standards are what provide the stability individuals seek when thoughts of death are aroused. This security is not permanently fixed and must be continually reaffirmed against frequent threats. With constant reminders of mortality seen daily in the media and life experiences, individuals must continuously bolster their worldview in order to provide the needed protection from thoughts of mortality (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). The groundwork for TMT lies in its explanation of the cognitive ability of the individual to recognize the inevitability of death and simultaneously possess the human instinct of self-preservation, thereby motivating one to seek protection from mortality salience through bolstering the threatened cultural worldview and by implementing a variety of social-symbolic defenses (Wisman and Koole 2003; Greenberg et al. 1997; Pyszczynski et al. 1999).

In TMT, the instinctive desire for self-preservation provides not only for the need to continuously associate oneself with a cultural worldview, but the requirement to belong to a cultural view which enjoys "a shared conception of reality that imbues life with meaning, order, and permanence, and the promise of safety and death transcendence to those who meet the prescribed standards of value" (Greenberg et al. 1997, p. 71). This promise of "death transcendence" acts as a temporary freedom for the members of given cultural worldview, from

the inevitability of mortality. Unfortunately, as was mentioned earlier, the cultural worldview only provides provisional protection from death, and must be regularly and daily reinforced (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). Ironically, it is this characteristic of the cultural worldview, and its ability to be applied in an everyday setting, that make it possible to study the actions of individuals who have experienced a condition of mortality salience, and to then prescribe ideas to explain the ways in which those persons can successfully reinforce their cultural worldview.

Not surprisingly, it has been shown that the acceptance of others who support one's cultural worldview effectively reinstates a person's faith in their own cultural standpoint, and thereby creates a successful anxiety buffer (Greenberg et al. 1990). On the other hand, persons who threaten one's cultural worldview have been found to be viewed in a negative light and will often be symbolically punished by the promoters of a cultural worldview through the provision of harsher punishment in every-day situations (Arndt and Greenberg 1999; Florian and Mikulincer 1997; Rosenblatt et al. 1989). In fact, recent studies have also shown a tendency of aggression toward individuals who threaten one's cultural worldview (McGregor, Lieberman, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, Simon, and Pyszczynski 1998), and it is for this reason that I examine the role of Terror Management Theory in situations of affiliation and consumer behavior. In this discussion, I likewise focus on reinforcing the cultural worldview, as it is closely related to the functions of social affiliation and consumer behavior as positive buffers in terror management. It is expected that the proposed forces of terror management and social affiliation should work together as a protective device in a social situation where an individual under mortality salience is prompted to protect his/her cultural worldview through either associating or disassociating with an individual who displays consumer status by wearing a luxury brand product.

To begin, I first explore the function of social association as a protective measure, as it has been largely associated with TMT in group situations (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and

Simon 1996; Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, and Sacchi 2002). In one study conducted by the aforementioned authors, a classical minimal group setting was prepared, in which participants were subjectively separated into groups based on their preferences for a type of painting. [See Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament (1971) for further discussion.] Under mortality salient conditions, participants who shared a liking for the same type of painting tended to find more favor toward the members of their particular group, in contrast to those who were not a part of their assembly, for not sharing the same liking for the painting. This study suggests that the application of mortality salient conditions tended to create biases among persons involved in a group setting, which were favorable toward the social affiliation of like-minded persons, and unfavorable to those who dissimilar from oneself. Also notable, are the actions of individuals involved in a separate, but similar, study where participants engaged in a creativity task were found to express a larger interest with social projection under mortality salient conditions. This desire to move more closely to a perceived social connectedness was suggested to have occurred because “maintaining a sense of social connection serves the vital function of protecting individuals from concerns associated with mortality” (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Schimel 1999, p. 21).

Research expressed thus far in this discussion has indicated that Terror Management Theory and interpersonal affiliation can both occur as methods of reinforcement for one’s cultural worldview, but it is important to note that the affiliation and cultural worldview defenses differ in their cognitive and psychological processes. The defense of one’s worldview is thought to be a subconscious or affective response to attacks on one’s worldview (Wisman and Koole 2003), while affiliation is deeply rooted in an almost primitive response toward the evolutionary process of gathering food, increasing the likelihood of mating, and providing greater protection against the environment (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Buss 1991; Sedikides and Skowronski 1997). The



actions of individuals seeking to increase their level of sustainability and protection through affiliation with others, as evidenced in the research cited above, seem to encourage persons to maximize their associations with a group to lower danger, and to avoid the threat of expulsion from that group (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Mikulincer and Florian 2000; Taylor et al. 2000). Recent studies on affiliation suggest that affiliation is a method of protection that is sub-cognitively distinct from the activities of worldview-buffering in TMT (e.g., Francis, Diorio, Liu, and Meaney 1999), thus suggesting a different role of affiliation from world-view association.

While the processes of affiliation and worldview-buffering have been shown to act as separate processes of protection against an existential threat, there is a lack of substantive research that shows how these two forms of protection act together, due largely in part to the purpose of past TMT studies. Terror Management Theory was not originally intended to pit the protective role of affiliation against TMT, but was instead designed to show that individuals are inclined to negatively associate with persons who oppose their worldview under mortality-salient conditions (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, and Breus 1994; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Chatel 1992; Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and Simon 1996). In other words, these studies have focused on out-group members, as opposed to in-group members, who have attacked a person's cultural worldview. In effect, mortality salient participants were motivated to distance themselves from out-group members and toward social isolation (Baumeister and Leary 1995), rather than to associate with in-group members, or persons who reaffirmed one's cultural worldview. However, recent research has shown that when mortality salient conditions are applied to in-group members, the tendency for participants to engage in social affiliation was greatly enhanced as a reaction to death-related thoughts (Wisman and Koole 2003). Thus, attention now turns toward the effects that a mortality salient social condition can have upon a

person's desire to affiliate with someone who reinforces their cultural worldview through a consumer perspective; i.e., the impact that associating with an individual wearing a luxury brand will have upon participants' desire for social affiliation in a mortality salient condition.

### ***The Use of Luxury Products in Consumer Behavior as a Means of Terror Management***

Media influences have been shown to help define consumer's worlds by sketching an image in their mind that the consumer will want to relate to and attain for him/her (Lippman 1992). It has been suggested that since the mainstream introduction of television, Americans have been frequently bombarded with images of success and wealth, and the purchase of luxury products may in fact be purchased simply to improve one's status (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006). Further studies suggest that products may be used to communicate information about their owner's identity (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Shavitt 1990; Shavitt and Nelson 1999), and that luxury products are frequently bought just because they cost more, without adding any additional benefits (Dubois and Duquesne 1993).

Individuals evaluate their own opinions, beliefs, and so forth based upon a comparison between themselves and others (Festinger 1954), and in response, researchers have effectively demonstrated that contrast and assimilation effects can result from this kind of social comparison (Salovey and Rodin 1984; Richins 1991). Empirical evidence of assimilation and social contrast demonstrate that participants have been led to bask in a reflected glory (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan 1976), women have been shown to improve their testing abilities when an exam was administered by a competent female (Marx and Roman 2002), and dieters who have viewed pictures of thin models have enjoyed a self-enhancing "thin fantasy" (Mills, Polivy, Herman, and Tiggemann 2002). In addition to the vast literature dealing with the social comparison effects, there are also a variety of other factors that have been shown to influence the way in which a person associates or dissociates him/herself from another

individual: e.g., the salience of group identity (Brewer and Weber 1994), the likelihood of the comparison target's success (Lockwood and Kunda 1997), the impact of perceived vulnerability (Lockwood 2002), and the actual level of similarity to the comparison target (Brown, Novick, Lord, and Richards 1982). In addition, research has presented the idea that upward social comparisons of intimate relationships can enhance assimilation effects (McFarland, Buehler, and McKay 2001).

Based on the intimate assimilations found in these upward social comparisons, it has been proposed that a comparison target's similarity to the participant on an important dimension or construct, will affect the participant's depictions of success for those involved who find a similar important characteristic with the comparison target (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006). Thus, it is especially important that the participants in a given study identify themselves with the comparison target, as it has been shown in product studies that difficulty in relating a consumption experience to oneself and one's lifestyle will decrease the likelihood that the product will be purchased or evaluated positively (Petrova and Cialdini 2005). This characteristic of assimilation due to identification between oneself and the comparison target is also critical in the most recent investigations of social comparisons in purchase contexts, as it is proposed that a comparison between oneself and comparison target who is considered successful can cause an individual to imagine that he/she is capable of achieving a similar level of success (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006). This last stream of research is of particular interest to the present study, as I seek to show that the social affiliation with an individual wearing a consumer luxury brand in a mortality salient condition has to do with the participant's attempt to reinforce his/her cultural worldview of success. This is accomplished by assimilating the luxury brand-wearer's success, evidenced in the ability of the luxury brand individual to purchase an expensive product,

with his/her own capability to achieve success; thereby providing reinforcement for the participant's cultural worldview.

In summary:

H1A: In a mortality salient condition, affiliation with a successful individual should increase participants' ability to see themselves as capable of achieving such success, effectively reinforcing the participants' cultural world view. This will be evidenced by an intention to socially affiliate with (i.e., sit in close proximity to) a comparison target wearing the luxury brand.

H1B: Participants under a control condition will not share the same strength in social affiliation, as their cultural worldview has not been threatened. Therefore, they have no anxiety needing to be buffered through affiliation. As a result, they will sit less close to a comparison target wearing the luxury brand.

### ***The Impact of Materialism and Self-Esteem***

In the current research, the two methods of Terror Management Theory and social affiliation will be examined under the premise that in contemporary America, a cultural worldview that is largely associated with materialistic success, defined in this study by an individual who is capable of purchasing luxury brand goods, persons will seek to buffer the anxiety brought about by mortality salience by adhering to the American cultural worldview, which values materialistic success. It is therefore proposed that a person who is visibly wearing a luxury product in a social affiliation situation will connote a highly successful profile, and therefore have the opportunity to act as a comparison target to those in close proximity, as seen in a participant's desire to associate with the luxury product wearer when reminded of their mortality. In particular, as luxury products have been shown to be capable of communicating information about the identity (e.g., success, status) of their owners (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1992; Shavitt 1990; and Shavitt and Nelson 1999), we should see this characteristic of luxury imbue further strength to the anxiety-buffering capabilities of a person's cultural worldview, when that worldview is based upon the materialistic success found in contemporary American culture. In other words, those

persons who are more materialistic should be found to experience mortality salience to a higher degree when reminded of their death than would a person who is less materialistic. This is based on the notion that materialism is an important characteristic of contemporary American culture, and that individuals therefore have a stronger propensity to socially affiliate to alleviate the anxiety associated with the thoughts of their own death. Along the same line, if the comparison target is able to express a similar image (created via similar age and status) to those who are close in proximity, he/she ought to be able to increase the likelihood of assimilation and facilitate the ability of those in proximal distance to view themselves as achieving a similar level of success (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006).

Thus, I propose that:

H2: Those who place a high value on materialism, will be more affected by a mortality salient condition than those who value materialism to a lesser degree. Thus, under mortality salience, more materialistic individuals will choose a seat closer to the comparison target compared to individuals who are less materialistic.

Furthermore, in seeking to attain the level or standard necessary within one's cultural view to provide the requisite anxiety-buffering results in a mortality salient condition; the individual must achieve a sense of value or self-esteem within the cultural context through the belief in the validity of the culture's worldview, and the conviction that he/she is meeting and/or exceeding those standards and values (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1989). This value of self-esteem is brought about by the adherence to all aspects of the cultural worldview, as explained earlier in discussing the propensity of individuals who experience a high regard for materialism to be more readily affected by mortality salience, as materialism is considered to be a cultural value. Like the effects expressed in explaining materialism then, an individual's self-esteem should be found to affect the level of terror management experienced by the person in a mortality salient condition. Specifically, those who are found to have a higher self-esteem will

find less need to buffer anxiety and therefore will be found less likely to socially affiliate under mortality salient conditions. Their high self-esteem should provide the standards of value and anxiety-buffering qualities necessary to provide the “symbolic immortality” needed to the face of fear associated with their own death. Those with lower self-esteem however, will find a greater need to adhere more closely with the dependent measure at hand, as the act of social affiliation under mortality salience should provide security from the fear brought about by the reminder of their finite mortality. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H3: Those with high self-esteem will be less affected by mortality salience as their high esteem already serves to protect against fear associated with mortality salience. Thus, under mortality salience, high self-esteem individuals will choose a seat farther away from the comparison target compared to individuals who have lower self-esteem.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Overview of Subjects and Procedural Design***

The above hypotheses were tested via a 1 x 2 factorial design, which tested the propensity for participants to engage in social affiliation in both a mortality salient condition and a non-mortality salient (controlled) condition. Data was gathered in an observational setting from 41 undergraduate students from a Western University, where 21 students were female and 20 students were male. Questionnaires were distributed randomly, with approximately half ( $N=20$ ) being in the mortality salient manipulation group and half in the control group ( $N=21$ ).

### ***Experimental Procedure***

Each participant received a seven page questionnaire in a classroom setting and was allowed to proceed at a self-paced speed. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were informed that they would fill out the first two pages of the questionnaire and then proceed to the room which was noted on the bottom of the second page where they would finish their survey. They were also informed that there would be a proctor present in each room, and that this proctor would not

be able to answer any questions concerning the survey, as he was simply present to assist in the study. Participants from each group, both mortality salience and the control section, proceeded to fill out the first page, which consisted of statements of reflection about their own personal worth, measured using the 10 items (4-point scales) of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965). Each individual was then asked to answer two open-ended questions on the second page, relating to the details of their future mortality (mortality salience group), or to taking an important exam (control group).

Following completion of this second page, participants were directed to wait in front of the room which had been assigned to their questionnaire, so that they could enter one at a time to complete the experiment. Participants were then ushered one-at-a-time into the second room where they had the option to choose a seat from a five-chair seating arrangement, set up in a U-shape. A male proctor was seated in the middle of the U-shaped chair arrangement, wearing a black Armani Exchange shirt that clearly displayed the brand's name in red print. The Armani Exchange shirt therefore represented the luxury brand to be tested, and students who chose to sit on the immediate right or left-hand side of the male proctor were counted as choosing to sit by a luxury brand wearer. Those who chose a chair that placed one full seat between themselves and the proctor, which occurred if they chose a chair at the edge of the U-shaped arrangement, were counted as not choosing to sit by the luxury brand wearer. Both proctors (blind to the hypotheses and treatment assignment) were asked to keep track of which participants chose to sit next to them during the study.

### ***Dependent Measures***

Aside from the initial questions designed to induce either mortality salience or the control emotions dealing with an exam and the self-esteem instrument (10 items,  $\alpha = .82$ ), participants also rated their desire to socially affiliate with a luxury brand-wearing individual. This part of the

study took place in a closed setting where participants were divided into two groups based upon whether they were under the mortality salient or controlled condition. Upon entering either of the two rooms involved in the experiment, participants were able to choose where they wanted to sit relative to the proctor, or luxury brand wearing individual. The U-shaped arrangement was set up right in front of the door, to avoid confusion as far as where the remaining portion of the questionnaire would be completed, and participants were not given any explanation of where they were permitted to sit, so that the choice was entirely their own.

After choosing a seat, participants then proceeded to fill out the rest of the survey, which inquired about the different emotions and feelings they were experiencing at the time of the study, along with the materialism items. The scale used to cover these emotions is known as a PANAS scale (20 items), which measures respondents' positive and negative affectivity (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988;  $\alpha = .86$  for the positive affect scale and  $\alpha = .84$  for the negative affect scale). This instrument is particularly important in studies testing mortality salience when specified as a covariate to control for any discrepancies among the emotions and feelings of those who had been introduced to mortality salience, versus those in the control group. The final part of the questionnaire required participants to rate their level of agreement with 18 statements that assessed their tendencies toward materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992;  $\alpha = .67$ ). Upon completing these questions, participants left the room to allow for the next person to enter.

## RESULTS

### *Logistic Regression Analysis - Overall Model*

To test the research hypotheses, four construct scales were first computed that summated the relevant items; namely, positive and negative affectivity (*pfeel* and *nfeel*, respectively), materialism (*material*), and self-esteem (*self*). Median-split dummy variables were then created



to test H2-H3: i.e., low versus high materialism and low versus high self-esteem (coded as 0=low and 1=high). The treatment dummy variable was coded as 0 = control and 1 = mortality salience.

(See Table 1.)

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary Statistics of Construct Scales**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Positive Feelings</b>			
<b>Control</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3.5000</b>	<b>.15213</b>
<b>Manipulation</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>3.8900</b>	<b>.12395</b>
<b>Negative Feelings</b>			
<b>Control</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>2.1619</b>	<b>.12021</b>
<b>Manipulation</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>1.9750</b>	<b>.15991</b>
<b>Materialism</b>			
<b>Control</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>5.3783</b>	<b>.15879</b>
<b>Manipulation</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>5.0778</b>	<b>.22040</b>
<b>Self-Esteem</b>			
<b>Control</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3.4762</b>	<b>.09878</b>
<b>Manipulation</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>3.5450</b>	<b>.10399</b>

All hypotheses were tested via logistic regression, where social affiliation was the dependent variable, defined as “close proximity” if the participant chose to affiliate (coded as 1), or “no affiliation” (coded as 0), if they did not. The independent variables (mortality salience, materialism (median split), and self-esteem (median split)) were designated as “categorical” variables, and positive and negative feelings (*pfeel* and *nfeel*) were treated as covariates in all models.

The first model included the single treatment variable and two affect covariates ( $\chi^2(3) = 7.09$ ,  $p < .10$ , 73.2% correct classification). The treatment term was significant ( $p < .025$ ) (H1A and H1B), indicating that participants under mortality salient conditions chose a close proximity to

the luxury brand comparison target with a consistently higher frequency than individuals who experienced the controlled condition, after controlling for positive and negative affectivity.

### ***Interactions with Materialism and Self-Esteem (H2 and H3)***

Having found the basic premise for the study significant, we move onto the interactions predicted in H2 and H3. As noted above, the materialism scale was reduced to a dummy variable via a median split procedure (low materialism coded as 0 and high coded as 1). This categorical variable was added to the logistic model used to test H1A and H1B, along with the treatment x materialism interaction term. This model ( $\chi^2(5) = 9.26, p < .10, 73.2\%$  correct classification) did not yield additional insight: i.e., the predicted interaction and materialism main effect were insignificant. In summary, the data do not support H2.

Similarly, the self-esteem scale was reduced to a dummy variable via a median split procedure (low self-esteem coded as 0 and high coded as 1). This categorical variable was added to the first logistic model with the treatment x self-esteem interaction term. The model ( $\chi^2(5) = 7.36, ns, 70.7\%$  correct classification) was less meaningful: i.e., the expected interaction was insignificant, thus the data do not support H3. In this study, self-esteem was not a significant factor in determining the predisposition of a participant to choose a terror-managing situation in mortality salient conditions. However, as past research in TMT has largely shown that self-esteem is an important part of the cultural worldview (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1989), the results found here may very well be caused by the relatively small sample.

## DISCUSSION

The overall results from the analysis of the study are positive: the basic premise of the study, that individuals who have been reminded of their mortality will choose to socially affiliate with a comparison target wearing a luxury brand product and similar to themselves in the constructs of image and age, is statistically significant. H1A and H1B were supported: i.e., persons faced with mortality salience were shown to have a higher tendency overall to affiliate with a luxury brand wearer when reminded of their death than those in the control group (who had been asked questions about taking a difficult exam). The results (1) show that social affiliation and the Terror Management Theory can successfully work together as a combined protection device for those who have been reminded of their mortality, and (2) also help explain individual consumer behavior in a mortality salient condition.

Though H2 and H3 were not supported in this study, there is a large body of evidence from past research that suggests that materialism and self-esteem respectively, are influential on the degree to which mortality salience is experienced and dealt with. The majority of the evidence demonstrating the importance of self-esteem comes from the 1989 study on the effects of mortality salience on reactions to those who violate or uphold cultural values (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1989). That study suggests that those who violate cultural values are looked upon with a lower degree of regard than those who follow or uphold the same cultural values as the participant tested. As noted by the authors, this suggests that the level of self-esteem that an individual possesses is important in adhering to the cultural worldview. Therefore, as TMT is largely explained by the adhering of an individual to a cultural worldview in order to protect him/her self from fear of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, and Breus 1994), this factor should have a significant effect upon the impact of mortality

salience. In addition, TMT posits that a significant amount of social behavior is directed at preserving one's cultural worldview and associated self-esteem (Greenberg et al. 1994), which suggests that self-esteem is essential in explaining the process of terror management and in accounting for the reactions of those who have experienced a mortality salient condition.

Unfortunately, my study was only able to test a small number of individuals, owed largely to the complicated procedure and limit of available subjects.

It is also possible that the purchase of luxury products in American culture may in fact be done simply to improve wealth and status (Mandel, Petrova, and Cialdini 2006), making the obtainment of material items a potential cultural value, particularly as the attainment of these items can be linked to an individual's being able to see him/her-self as being successful (Mandel et al. 2006). It seems highly likely that in an individualistic culture such as the one found in America, that success, as determined by the obtainment of luxury items, may be seen as a cultural value; and that materialism, which measures a person's propensity to attain those items of values, may therefore be seen as leading to the obtainment of success and thus be esteemed as a value as well.

Overall, the present research implies that Terror Management Theory is given significant strength by the application of social affiliation, and that this information can be used to better understand purchase behavior. While past research has glanced over the application of social situations in strengthening one's cultural worldview, my study suggests that a comparison target can further support the anxiety-buffering capabilities of the individual's worldview. Furthermore, the findings of this study can be directly related to the current struggle of luxury brand marketers in understanding the rationale and motivations that underlie consumer purchases. As understanding consumer behavior is a major goal of market research today, this added information should be increasingly important to the luxury product industry.

In fact, much of the contemporary advertising for luxury products is already gearing toward a focus on the finite nature of mortality, as consumers today are persuaded to view luxury products, and the models that promote them, as a method to preserve youthfulness and beauty. This focus on the luxury brand as a means to preserve oneself from the inevitable process of aging, allows the luxury product to serve as an anxiety-buffer for the consumer. Essentially, this places the consumer in the hands of a youthful and beautiful model/comparison target, to which he/she can look toward to escape from the fear associated with the thoughts of his/her mortality. Interestingly enough, several of the major luxury retail brands in particular have already employed this tactic quite successfully; *Gucci*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Channel* and *Dolce and Gabbana*, to name a few, use exotic and beautiful young models to promote the high status quality of their brands. Their models bring human form to the idealistic qualities of the product, helping to infer that the brand being advertised can transfer the wealth and beauty of the model onto the purchaser of the product. The model therefore, acts as a comparison target, in conveying these desirable qualities to the public, reinforcing them as sustainable cultural traits. In turn, those who come in contact with the advertisements on a regular basis are likely to be persuaded that the product and its wearer are successful examples of their cultural worldview and thus, the individual will have an increased desire to affiliate with the product and its wearer when reminded of their death. In particular, if one experiences frequent reminders of his or her mortality, then the effectiveness of the advertisement can be quite extensive, as the recurrent application of mortality salience will likely cause an individual to experience a greater need to protect him/herself from the fear associated with those thoughts.

This heightened level of mortality salience experienced by the individual can also be applied to induce a “safety” product purchase to help ameliorate the fear associated with one’s death. This type of marketing can be seen in current advertisements by several car companies that focus

on simulated car crashes aimed to promote the safety of their vehicles. By detailing extensive damage with the use of “car-crash dummies”, companies demonstrate the ability of the featured vehicle to protect its passengers in the event of an accident. *Volkswagon* in particular has recently released very realistic television commercials that reinforce the safety of their popular *Jetta* model, focusing on several passengers inside a *Jetta* as it is involved in an extensive side-impact car crash. The actors who play passengers in the commercial are shown to be visibly upset following the impact, as the screen then cuts to the four-star rating earned by the *Jetta* in side impact tests. This simulated car accident may induce the mortality salient conditions necessary to cause one to look toward a *Volkswagon* product to help buffer the anxiety brought about by the events seen in the commercial, particularly since the four-star rating is also shown to reinforce the application of safety in the face of a real incident. Furthermore, the use of “real passengers” as opposed to dummies creates the opportunity for the actors to stand as comparison targets to the public, further increasing the effect of mortality salience and the need for viewers to find protection. Understanding Terror Management Theory as it relates to this type of promotional strategy is critical if marketers are to optimally benefit from such tactics.

### ***Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study***

Considering the type of data that must be collected in order to establish the connection between luxury products in social affiliation and their effect in mortality salience, pursuing this kind of research can be difficult. The primary limitations in this study include the relatively small sample size, and the fact that only college students were sampled. In addition, the sampled students were insufficiently diverse in terms of materialism tendencies and self-esteem.

Future research should expand the demographic segment of study to include persons outside a college environment, and should increase the sample size. Additional research is needed before forming conclusions regarding the relationship between a person’s degree of materialism and

their propensity to prefer a luxury product in a social affiliation and mortality salient condition. A different type of study may also demonstrate a greater propensity toward self-esteem in TMT and social affiliation by introducing a religious standpoint, in testing participants' belief in an afterlife under mortality salient conditions. I would expect that in such a case, persons who believe strongly in an afterlife may well have an increased buffer against the fear associated with thoughts of their death. These of course are only suppositions, but the inclusion of more tacit studies of materialism and self-esteem may well provide stronger, more insightful findings.

For marketing, future research could benefit by further testing the extent to which an advertisement that promotes the extension of youth through the acquisition of a luxury product affects the strength of mortality salience, and the purchase intentions of the consumers being studied. The application of the Terror Management Theory as it relates to consumer behavior and social affiliation appears to have several relevant marketing applications that should be explored more extensively, for both theoretical and practical insight.

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