The Effect of Mortality Salience on Consumer Preference for Experiential Consumption and Its Underlying Mechanism

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Abstract

Consumers inevitably encounter various death-related messages in daily life, particularly amid the current pandemic context. According to prior research, mortality salience triggers transformations in consumer psychology and consumption behavior. Grounded in terror management theory and the meaning maintenance model, this study investigates—through three experiments from the perspectives of contemplating one' s own death, contemplating others' death, and integrating pandemic-related mortality information—the impact of mortality salience on consumer preferences for experiential consumption and its underlying mechanism. The results reveal that mortality salience enhances consumers' preference for experiential consumption, with sense of meaning in life serving as a mediator and social support acting as a moderator.

Full Text

The Effect of Mortality Salience on Consumers' Preference for Experiential Purchases and Its Underlying Mechanism

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Introduction

In today' s information-rich society, consumers are frequently exposed to death-related information through news and social media, which forcibly evokes their awareness of mortality and triggers contemplation about death—a phenomenon known as mortality salience (Duan Jinyun et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 1994).

This exposure is particularly pronounced amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, where daily news reports and continuously updated death statistics constantly expose consumers to death-related threats and anxiety, either actively or passively.

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), when individuals are exposed to death-related information, they adopt distal defense strategies such as cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and intimate relationships to alleviate death anxiety and cope with mortality threats (Routledge et al., 2004). Moreover, consumer behavior itself is considered a psychological defense mechanism through which individuals satisfy specific psychological needs to counteract the threats and anxiety induced by mortality salience (Arndt et al., 2004). Previous research has found that mortality salience leads consumers to increase their consumption quantity and frequency (Mandel & Smeesters, 2008), prefer domestic over foreign products (Liu & Smeesters, 2010; Liu Wumei et al., 2014), purchase luxury goods (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000), choose prosocial products (Jonas et al., 2002), and favor familiar products (Huang & Wyer, 2015; Ke Xue, 2009).

During the current pandemic, real-time updates on COVID-19 fatalities and news reports about the severity of the outbreak have triggered mortality salience among consumers, significantly altering their consumption patterns (Pyszczynski et al., 2021). Industry reports corroborate this shift: textile and apparel exports in China dropped 22% year-over-year from January to April 2020 due to plummeting demand, while the gaming industry experienced relative prosperity, with China' s gaming market revenue reaching 278.687 billion yuan in 2020, a 20.71% increase from 2019.

These observations suggest that the pandemic differentially impacted material versus experiential consumption, with material consumption decreasing and experiential consumption increasing. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) classified consumption into experiential purchases—expenditures made to acquire life experiences (e.g., travel, concerts)—and material purchases—expenditures made to acquire physical goods (e.g., clothing, electronics). Extensive literature demonstrates that experiential purchases yield greater pleasure, satisfaction, and happiness than material purchases (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Jiang Jiang et al., 2014; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). However, most existing research has focused on the consequences of consumption types for well-being, with scant attention to the antecedents that drive consumers to choose between experiential and material consumption.

Given the normalization of pandemic conditions and the constant exposure to death-related information, we ask: Do consumers' preferences for experiential versus material consumption shift under different mortality salience conditions? Which consumption type better helps consumers cope with the fear and anxiety triggered by mortality salience? If consumers consistently prefer experiential consumption across different mortality salience contexts, what psychological mechanisms underlie this preference? Drawing on TMT, this research investigates the effect of mortality salience on consumers' preference for experiential

purchases and explores its mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions.

1.1 Mortality Salience and Preference for Different Consumption Types

Terror Management Theory posits that the fundamental source of human anxiety stems from the inevitability of death. To defend against this potential death anxiety, humans instinctively employ psychological structures and defense mechanisms—consciously or unconsciously—to resist and buffer death-related fear and anxiety, thereby maintaining equilibrium in daily life. When confronted with mortality threats, individuals can activate three defense mechanisms: worldview defense, self-esteem defense, and intimate relationship defense. Self-esteem refers to individuals' evaluations or attitudes toward themselves, with high self-esteem reflecting comprehensive positive self-evaluation (Rosenberg, 1965). The pursuit and maintenance of positive self-evaluation constitute important human motivations. When self-esteem is threatened, individuals exhibit defensive cognitive adjustments or behavioral responses. In TMT, self-esteem represents the sense of self-worth individuals derive from identifying with and adhering to worldview standards. Intimate relationship defense involves establishing and maintaining close relationships with others, seeking togetherness, intimacy, attachment, and connection to alleviate existential anxiety.

On one hand, when consumers employ self-esteem defense under mortality threats, they tend to choose consumption that enhances their self-esteem. Compared to material products, experiential products are considered closer to the core of consumers' self-identity and constitute an organic component of the self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), making them more representative of the self. Therefore, when consumers adopt self-esteem defense, they should prefer experiential products that provide greater self-identity. On the other hand, when consumers employ intimate relationship defense under mortality threats, they tend to choose consumption that enhances their relationships. Experiential products facilitate more interpersonal interaction and are more effective at building social connections and strengthening intimate relationships than material products (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Thus, when consumers adopt intimate relationship defense, they should prefer experiential products that provide more interpersonal interaction and social connection.

In summary, when confronted with mortality salience, consumers may choose different consumption behaviors through different defense mechanisms. Therefore, we propose:

H1: Mortality salience increases consumers' preference for experiential purchases.

1.2 The Mediating Role of Meaning in Life

According to TMT, the awareness of death's inevitability and uncertainty about when it will occur plunges individuals into fear and anxiety, which activates psychological defense mechanisms to counteract this fear (Greenberg et al., 1990). Meaning in life refers to the extent to which individuals comprehend, understand, or perceive meaning in their lives, accompanied by their sense of purpose, mission, and primary goals (Steger et al., 2006). Meaning in life is crucial to individuals, as research demonstrates it negatively correlates with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Lai Xuefen et al., 2016; Marco et al., 2016; Shiah et al., 2015) and positively correlates with self-esteem and overall well-being (Chang Baorui et al., 2017).

Heine et al. (2006) proposed the Meaning Maintenance Model, which suggests that individuals possess an intrinsic motivation to find meaning in life. When individuals' existing meaning frameworks are disrupted—that is, when meaning is threatened—they automatically attempt to reconstruct meaning and restore relationships among things to recover their sense of meaning. Since death represents finality, awareness of death poses a tremendous threat and disruption to all meaning and relationships. The various defensive reactions individuals display after mortality salience reflect their efforts to restore their meaning systems and frameworks (Arndt et al., 2002; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Furthermore, the Meaning Maintenance Model posits that one way individuals maintain and restore meaning is through fluid compensation: when individuals' sense of meaning is destroyed, they can obtain compensation from domains such as cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and intimate relationships.

Based on the Meaning Maintenance Model, mortality salience causes significant damage to consumers' meaning systems, thereby reducing their meaning in life. To restore meaning in life, individuals tend to choose consumption types that can compensate for this loss. Previous literature indicates that compared to material consumption, experiential consumption is more important for forming, defining, and expressing one' s true self and enhancing self-identity (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Guevarra & Howell, 2015), and is more conducive to promoting social connections (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Howell & Hill, 2009). Since social connection is a primary source of meaning in life (Hicks et al., 2010), when individuals experience mortality salience, they should prefer experiential consumption that can restore their meaning in life. Therefore, we propose:

H2: Meaning in life mediates the relationship between mortality salience and consumers' preference for experiential purchases.

1.3 The Moderating Role of Social Support

Social support refers to the spiritual or material care and assistance individuals perceive and receive from family, relatives, friends, and other social sources (Sarason, 1983). Previous research has found that social support influences individuals through both main effect and buffering effect models (Cohen & Wills,

1985). The main effect model suggests that social support is universally beneficial to individuals' physical and mental health—any social support necessarily produces positive effects (Tao Yuchun & Shen Yu, 2014). The buffering effect model addresses stressful events, positing that social support buffers the negative effects of stress and threats, protecting individuals from harm (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

According to TMT, anxiety related to death' s inevitability represents the most fundamental source of human anxiety. To defend against this potential anxiety, humans instinctively employ psychological structures and conscious or unconscious defense mechanisms to resist and buffer the death anxiety triggered by mortality salience. As a source of anxiety-inducing stress, mortality salience should, according to the buffering effect model of social support, be buffered by high levels of social support, which can mitigate the fear, anxiety, and other emotions it produces, thereby buffering its negative impact on meaning in life. Therefore, when social support is high, the relationship between mortality salience and meaning in life should be non-significant. When social support is low, its positive and buffering effects are absent, and mortality salience should be significantly negatively correlated with meaning in life.

H3: Social support moderates the effect of mortality salience on meaning in life: when social support is low, mortality salience is significantly negatively correlated with meaning in life; when social support is high, the correlation is non-significant.

Combining H2 and H3, we propose a moderated mediation model. When social support is low, consumers experiencing mortality salience perceive greater death threats and have less social support, leading to a greater reduction in meaning in life and a stronger tendency to choose experiential consumption that provides more meaning and self-identity. When social support is high, consumers perceive more social support, which weakens the negative impact of mortality salience on meaning in life, making them less reliant on experiential consumption for compensation and showing no significant preference for it compared to the control group.

H4: Social support moderates the mediating effect of meaning in life on the relationship between mortality salience and consumers' preference for experiential purchases: the mediating effect holds when social support is low but not when social support is high.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 aimed to test H1 by investigating whether the mortality salience group would show increased preference for experiential purchases compared to the non-mortality salience group.

2.1.1 Pretest

We first collected representative products for material and experiential consumption, then matched them in pairs based on value and attractiveness to create appropriate consumption scenarios.

The pretest consisted of three stages: (1) collecting representative products for material and experiential consumption; (2) pairing experiential and material products; (3) evaluating the attractiveness of successfully paired products to ensure no significant differences in attractiveness between options, thereby controlling for attractiveness effects.

We ultimately obtained three pairs of material versus experiential consumption options: (1) buying a pair of brand-name shoes vs. buying a concert ticket; (2) buying a new backpack vs. spending money on karaoke; (3) buying a professional book vs. spending money on a 3D movie.

2.1.2 Experimental Design

Experiment 1 employed a single-factor between-subjects design (mortality salience: mortality salience group vs. non-mortality salience group), with the dependent variable being the number of experiential products chosen.

The questionnaire was distributed and collected through Wenjuanxing platform, with participants receiving 3-5 RMB as compensation. A total of 158 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid responses (those with excessively short or long completion times, failed attention checks, or incomplete manipulation tasks), we obtained 140 valid questionnaires (88.61% valid response rate). The mortality salience group included 70 participants, and the non-mortality salience group included 70 participants. Ages ranged from 18 to 30 years (Mage = 21.72, SD = 2.69), with 33 males and 107 females.

2.1.3 Experimental Materials

Mortality Salience Manipulation: Following Fritsche and Jonas (2008), the mortality salience group imagined being diagnosed with an incurable infectious disease, while the non-mortality salience group imagined needing dental surgery. Both groups then answered two open-ended questions: (1) "What thoughts and emotional reactions do you have right now when thinking about your life ending (vs. upcoming dental surgery)?" (2) "What changes do you think will happen to your body when you die (vs. during and after dental surgery)?"

PANAS Emotion Scale: We used the Positive and Negative Affect Scale revised by Qiu Lin et al. (2008), which includes nine words describing positive emotions and nine describing negative emotions. Participants rated each emotion word based on their current feelings using a 5-point Likert scale. The overall scale had a Cronbach' s α of 0.82, with $\alpha = 0.95$ for positive affect and $\alpha = 0.89$ for negative affect.

Delayed Distraction Task: Following mortality reminders, a delay period is required until death-related thoughts move from conscious awareness to the unconscious before mortality salience effects can occur. We used a "number triangle" task: participants had to fill integers 1-6 into six circles on two triangles so that the sum of numbers on each side of the first triangle equaled 9 and the sum on each side of the second triangle equaled 10. The task lasted 5 minutes, after which participants automatically proceeded.

Consumption Type Choice: Using the three pairs of material and experiential products selected in the pretest, participants imagined having a sum of money to spend and chose one option from each pair: buying brand-name shoes vs. buying a concert ticket; buying a new backpack vs. spending money on karaoke; buying a professional book vs. spending money on a 3D movie.

Manipulation Check for Consumption Type: After providing definitions of experiential and material consumption, participants classified the three product pairs based on the definitions, rating the extent to which each represented material or experiential consumption on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely material consumption, 4 = ambiguous, 7 = completely experiential consumption).

Control Variables: These included demographic variables (gender, age, monthly disposable income, major) and materialism, which might influence choices between experiential and material consumption. Materialism was measured using Richins' (1994) scale on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), with $\alpha = 0.82$.

2.1.4 Results

Manipulation Checks. First, we examined whether the mortality salience manipulation was successful by testing for emotional differences between conditions. Independent samples t-tests on positive and negative affect scores revealed no significant differences between groups in positive affect ($t(138) = 0.22$, $p > 0.05$) or negative affect ($t(138) = -1.87$, $p > 0.05$), indicating that participants' emotions were not affected by the manipulation, consistent with the non-affective hypothesis of mortality salience. This suggests successful manipulation.

Second, we conducted manipulation checks for consumption type. Paired samples t-tests on the three product pairs showed that the concert ticket ($M = 6.46$, $SD = 0.56$) was rated significantly higher in experiential consumption than brand-name shoes ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(139) = -34.18$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 4.43$. Karaoke ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 0.91$) was rated significantly higher than a new backpack ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.89$), $t(139) = -34.78$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 5.02$. The 3D movie ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 0.90$) was rated significantly higher than the professional book ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(139) = -23.92$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.02$. These results confirm that participants correctly identified concert tickets, karaoke, and 3D movies as experiential consumption and brand-name shoes, backpacks, and books as material consumption. Thus, all three product pairs

were successfully manipulated.

Hypothesis Testing. Following Liu Wumei et al. (2014), material products were coded as 0 and experiential products as 1. The three product choices were summed to measure the dependent variable of experiential consumption preference (range: 0-3, M = 1.26, SD = 0.94). An independent samples t-test revealed that the mortality salience group (M = 1.50, SD = 0.94) chose significantly more experiential products than the non-mortality salience group (M = 1.01, SD = 0.88), t(138) = -3.16, p = 0.002, d = 0.53. Therefore, H1 was supported: mortality salience increased preference for experiential consumption, as evidenced by the mortality salience group selecting significantly more experiential products.

2.1.5 Summary and Discussion

Experiment 1 preliminarily explored the relationship between mortality salience and experiential consumption preference. By having participants answer two classic death-related questions to induce mortality salience and then make choices in three simulated consumption scenarios, we measured experiential consumption preference by summing experiential product choices. Results showed that the mortality salience group selected more experiential products than the non-mortality salience group, supporting H1.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that mortality salience increases experiential consumption preference by prompting thoughts about one's own death. Experiment 2 aimed to replicate H1 from the perspective of thinking about others' death and further explore the underlying mechanism by testing the mediating role of meaning in life (H2).

2.2.1 Experimental Design

Experiment 2 used a single-factor between-subjects design (mortality salience: mortality salience group vs. non-mortality salience group), with the dependent variable being preference for experiential consumption.

The questionnaire was distributed through Wenjuanxing platform, with participants receiving 3-5 RMB as compensation. A total of 246 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid responses, we obtained 219 valid questionnaires (89.02% valid response rate). The mortality salience group included 109 participants, and the non-mortality salience group included 110 participants. Ages ranged from 16 to 47 years (Mage = 24.68, SD = 5.13), with 67 males and 152 females.

2.2.2 Experimental Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to mortality salience or non-mortality salience conditions. They then completed a distraction task, the Meaning in

Life Questionnaire, the consumption choice task, manipulation checks for consumption type and mortality salience, and demographic measures.

2.2.3 Experimental Materials

Mortality Salience Manipulation: Following Zhou Shuang (2018), adapted from Liu and Smeesters (2010) and Ke Xue (2009), the experimental group read a news report about a traffic accident containing casualty numbers and scene descriptions, then answered: (1) "How many people died in this accident?" (2) "Briefly describe the accident scene and write down your emotions and feelings upon seeing this news." The control group read a news report about new dental surgery technology containing procedural details, then answered: (1) "How many steps does this dental surgery include?" (2) "Briefly describe the dental surgery procedure and write down your emotions and feelings upon seeing this news." Both reports were approximately 300 words to control for reading time and cognitive load.

Manipulation Check for Mortality Salience: Following Wang Peng et al. (2019), at the end of the questionnaire participants rated "To what extent did the first task trigger your thoughts about death?" on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = no thoughts at all, 7 = a great deal of thoughts).

Meaning in Life Questionnaire: We used the Chinese version revised by Chen Wei et al. (2015) based on Steger et al.' s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which includes two subscales: MLQ-search and MLQ-presence. The scale' s α coefficient in this experiment was 0.73.

The delayed distraction task, consumption type choice materials, and consumption type manipulation checks were identical to Experiment 1.

2.2.4 Results

Manipulation Checks. Independent samples t-tests showed that the mortality salience group (M = 5.87, SD = 1.26) reported significantly more death-related thoughts than the control group (M = 1.50, SD = 0.94), t(217) = -9.12, $p < 0.01$, d = 3.93, confirming successful manipulation.

For consumption type manipulation checks, paired samples t-tests showed that the concert ticket (M = 6.06, SD = 1.32) was rated significantly higher than brand-name shoes (M = 2.24, SD = 1.57), t(218) = -23.91, $p < 0.001$, d = 2.65. Karaoke (M = 6.09, SD = 1.24) was rated significantly higher than a new backpack (M = 1.87, SD = 1.40), t(218) = -27.33, $p < 0.001$, d = 3.19. The 3D movie (M = 6.06, SD = 1.25) was rated significantly higher than the professional book (M = 2.09, SD = 1.50), t(218) = -26.13, $p < 0.001$, d = 2.88. All three product pairs were successfully manipulated.

Hypothesis Testing. Following Liu Wumei et al. (2014), material products were coded as 0 and experiential products as 1. The three choices were summed to measure experiential consumption preference (range: 0-3, M = 1.20, SD =

0.90). An independent samples t-test revealed that the mortality salience group (M = 1.37, SD = 0.85) chose significantly more experiential products than the non-mortality salience group (M = 1.03, SD = 0.92), t(217) = -2.84, p = 0.005, d = 0.38, supporting H1.

We tested the mediating role of meaning in life using Baron and Kenny' s (1986) procedure. After controlling for gender, age, education, and monthly disposable income, mortality salience significantly affected experiential consumption preference (β = 0.22, p = 0.002) and meaning in life (β = -0.22, p = 0.001). When both mortality salience and meaning in life predicted experiential consumption preference, meaning in life had a significant effect (β = -0.15, p < 0.05), and the direct effect of mortality salience decreased (β = 0.18, p = 0.008). We then used Preacher et al.' s (2007) PROCESS macro (Model 4) to test the mediation.

A 5,000-bootstrap analysis showed a direct effect of 0.33 and an indirect effect of 0.06, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.012, 0.137] that did not include zero, confirming that meaning in life mediates the relationship between mortality salience and experiential consumption preference.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

Figure 1. The mediating role of meaning in life

2.2.5 Summary and Discussion

Experiment 2 further explored the relationship between mortality salience and experiential consumption preference and its underlying mechanism. By presenting participants with traffic accident news reports to induce mortality salience, measuring their meaning in life, and then having them make consumption choices, we replicated Experiment 1' s findings and demonstrated that meaning in life mediates the relationship. When mortality salience threatens the existence of meaning, individuals' meaning in life decreases. Driven by the strong motivation to restore meaning, consumers prefer experiential consumption that can compensate for this loss. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported.

Experiment 3

Experiment 1 examined mortality salience through thoughts about one' s own death, while Experiment 2 replicated H1 from the perspective of others' death and identified meaning in life as a mediator. Experiment 3 adopts a societal perspective, using the COVID-19 pandemic as the mortality salience context, and introduces social support as a moderator to explore how to intervene in the trend of reduced meaning in life and increased experiential consumption preference under mortality salience, testing H3 and H4.

2.3.1 Experimental Design

Experiment 3 used a 2 (mortality salience: mortality salience vs. non-mortality salience) × 2 (social support: low vs. high) between-subjects design, with experiential consumption preference as the dependent variable.

The questionnaire was distributed through Wenjuanxing platform to working consumers, with participants receiving 2-3 RMB as compensation. A total of 200 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid responses, we obtained 166 valid questionnaires (83.00% valid response rate). The sample included 72 males and 94 females, with ages ranging from 22 to 60 years (Mage = 29.49, SD = 5.57).

2.3.2 Experimental Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to mortality salience or non-mortality salience conditions, then to high or low social support conditions, and completed manipulation checks for social support. Subsequently, they completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, the consumption decision task, demographic measures, and a manipulation check for mortality salience.

2.3.3 Experimental Materials

Mortality Salience Manipulation: Following Cui et al. (2020), the experimental group read a news report about global COVID-19 fatalities, including cumulative confirmed cases, deaths, and future death trend analysis, then answered: (1) "How many COVID-19 deaths were mentioned in the report?" (2) "Write down your thoughts and feelings upon seeing this news." The control group read a news report about global tourism industry losses during the pandemic, including damage to global and domestic tourism and future trend analysis, then answered: (1) "How many people in the global tourism industry were expected to face unemployment in 2020?" (2) "Write down your thoughts and feelings upon seeing this news." Both materials were pandemic-related and could potentially activate death-related thoughts.

Social Support Manipulation: Following Liu et al. (2016), the high social support group recalled and wrote about a difficult event where family or friends were present and supportive, described their feelings about the event, and wrote the initials of five people they could rely on for help and support. The low social support group recalled a difficult event where they had to face it alone, described their feelings, without listing supportive others.

Manipulation Check for Social Support: Following Liu et al. (2016), after the social support manipulation, participants rated three items: "Right now, I feel my family/friends are really trying to help me" ; "Right now, I feel I can rely on my family/friends when encountering difficulties" ; and "Right now, I feel there is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings." Ratings

were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree), with $\alpha = 0.84$.

Consumption Preference Measure: Given that pandemic risks might affect previous product choices, we changed the measurement approach. Following Yang et al. (2020), we first presented definitions of material and experiential consumption, then asked participants to imagine having money to spend and indicate their preference on a 9-point scale (1 = material consumption, 9 = experiential consumption).

The manipulation check for mortality salience and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire were identical to Experiment 2.

2.3.4 Results

Manipulation Checks. Independent samples t-tests showed that the mortality salience group (M = 5.90, SD = 1.08) reported significantly more death-related thoughts than the control group (M = 5.22, SD = 1.79), t(164) = -3.00, p = 0.003, d = 0.46, confirming successful manipulation. For social support, the high social support group (M = 6.35, SD = 0.58) perceived significantly more social support than the low social support group (M = 5.76, SD = 1.01), t(164) = -4.61, p < 0.01, d = 0.72, confirming successful manipulation.

Hypothesis Testing. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on experiential consumption preference, controlling for gender, age, education, and monthly disposable income, revealed a significant main effect of mortality salience: the mortality salience group (M = 4.61, SD = 0.31) showed significantly higher preference than the non-mortality salience group (M = 3.52, SD = 0.31), F(1, 158) = 6.16, p = 0.014, ^{2} = 0.037, supporting H1. The main effect of social support was non-significant, F(1, 158) = 0.03, p > 0.05, and the interaction between mortality salience and social support was also non-significant, F(1, 158) = 0.17, p > 0.05.

We tested the mediating role of meaning in life using Baron and Kenny' s (1986) procedure. After controlling for demographics, mortality salience significantly affected experiential consumption preference ($\beta = 0.19$, p = 0.013) and meaning in life (β = -0.21, p = 0.009). When both mortality salience and meaning in life predicted experiential consumption preference, meaning in life had a significant effect (β = -0.19, p = 0.015), and the direct effect of mortality salience decreased ($\beta = 0.15$, p = 0.049). Using Preacher et al.' s (2007) PROCESS macro (Model 4), a 5,000-bootstrap analysis showed a direct effect of 0.87 and an indirect effect of 0.22, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.024, 0.586] that did not include zero, confirming mediation.

Finally, we tested the moderating role of social support. A 2 × 2 ANOVA on meaning in life revealed a significant interaction between mortality salience and social support, F(1, 158) = 4.59, p = 0.034, ^{2} = 0.028. Simple effects analysis showed that under low social support, the mortality salience group had significantly lower meaning in life than the non-mortality salience group, F(1,

158) = 11.55, p = 0.001. Under high social support, no significant difference existed between groups, F(1, 158) = 0.11, p > 0.05. This indicates that social support moderates the relationship between mortality salience and meaning in life, with the negative relationship being significant only when social support is low. [Figure 2: see original paper]

Combining H2 and H3, we used Hayes'(2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 7) to test H4 regarding the moderated mediation. A 5,000-bootstrap analysis showed that the total indirect effect of the moderated mediation was significant, B = -0.354, 95% CI [-0.979, -0.020]. The indirect effect of meaning in life was significant under low social support (B = 0.392, 95% CI [0.055, 0.900]) but non-significant under high social support (B = 0.039, 95% CI [-0.189, 0.403]). Thus, H4 was supported.

Table 1. The effect of meaning in life on mortality salience and experiential consumption preference at different social support levels

2.3.5 Summary and Discussion

Building on Experiments 1 and 2, Experiment 3 introduced social support as a moderator. By manipulating mortality salience and social support levels, we observed changes in consumers' experiential consumption preference and meaning in life. Using COVID-19 death reports to induce mortality salience and a recall task to manipulate social support, we measured meaning in life and consumption preference. Results replicated H1, supported H2, and demonstrated that social support moderates both the relationship between mortality salience and meaning in life and the mediated pathway. When social support is low, mortality salience significantly reduces meaning in life, leading consumers to compensate through experiential consumption. When social support is high, it buffers the negative effect of mortality salience on meaning in life, eliminating the need for compensation through experiential consumption. Thus, H3 and H4 were supported.

General Discussion

5.1 Research Conclusions

This research investigated the relationship between mortality salience and experiential purchase preference through three experiments. Experiment 1 used classic death reflection questions to induce mortality salience and examined its effect on the number of experiential products chosen. Experiment 2 used traffic accident news reports to replicate H1 and test the mediating role of meaning in life (H2). Experiment 3 used COVID-19 death reports to induce mortality salience and introduced social support as a moderator to explore intervention strategies, testing H3 and H4. The findings indicate: (1) Compared to non-mortality salience, mortality salience significantly increases both the number and preference for experiential products, suggesting consumers prefer experiential over material consumption to cope with death-related threats. (2) Meaning

in life mediates this relationship: mortality salience reduces meaning in life, and consumers subsequently increase experiential consumption preference to restore their damaged sense of meaning. (3) High social support buffers the negative effect of mortality salience on meaning in life, making experiential consumption preference no different from the control group.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

This research makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, while previous research on experiential vs. material consumption has focused on consequences, particularly effects on well-being, few studies have examined antecedents of consumption type preferences. Our three experiments enrich and expand research on antecedents of experiential and material consumption preferences, addressing a gap in the literature. Additionally, we extend mortality salience research by confirming consumption behavior as an effective coping mechanism for death anxiety.

Second, we are the first to reveal the mediating mechanism of meaning in life between mortality salience and experiential consumption preference. This enriches TMT and the Meaning Maintenance Model, providing evidence for the controversial relationship between mortality salience and meaning in life. Specifically, mortality salience initially damages and reduces meaning in life, but individuals may subsequently restore meaning through experiential consumption or other meaning-enhancing behaviors (e.g., prosocial behavior; Jonas et al., 2002), potentially increasing meaning in the long term.

Third, we identify high social support as a buffer against mortality salience' s negative effects on meaning in life, revealing that individuals need not rely solely on experiential consumption for compensation when social support is available. This establishes boundary conditions for the effect of mortality salience on consumption behavior and confirms that consumption can serve as a psychological defense mechanism against death anxiety and meaning loss.

These findings offer practical implications for maintaining consumer well-being and socioeconomic development in the post-pandemic era. For consumers, our results suggest two methods for coping with the negative psychological effects of ubiquitous death information: adjusting consumption behavior or seeking social support to buffer death threats. For governments, the findings suggest that promoting social support can buffer consumers' meaning in life from death threats, especially when mortality salience is high. For businesses, understanding these psychological shifts can inform product and marketing strategies. For example, emphasizing the experiential aspects of products may increase sales during periods of high mortality salience.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this research has limitations. First, our samples were primarily young and middle-aged adults, with fewer elderly participants. Future

research should expand the age range to increase ecological validity and include more older adults. Additionally, worldviews, values, and social status may influence attitudes toward death, so samples should be more diverse in occupation and education level to examine how different death attitudes and age groups affect consumption choices under mortality salience.

Second, while we examined social support as a moderator, many other factors could influence consumption preferences under mortality salience. For instance, highly materialistic consumers derive greater happiness from material purchases (Nicolao et al., 2009)—would they also prefer experiential consumption to restore meaning under mortality salience? Furthermore, personality-purchase fit affects happiness (Matz et al., 2016). Future research could examine how individual traits moderate the effects of mortality salience on consumption preferences.

Keywords: mortality salience, experiential purchase, material purchase, meaning in life, social support

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.