# The Effect of Mortality Salience on Consumers' Preference for Experiential Consumption Choices and Its Underlying Mechanism

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## Abstract

Consumers' decision-making psychology and purchasing behavior can be altered by exposure to death-related information in the surrounding environment. Grounded in the Meaning Maintenance Model, this study examines the impact of mortality salience on consumers' preference for experiential consumption choices and its underlying mechanism through four experiments. Findings indicate that consumers demonstrate an increased preference for experiential consumption under mortality salience. Additional analyses reveal that mortality salience enhances consumers' preference for experiential consumption by diminishing their sense of meaning in life. Simultaneously, social support exerts a buffering effect on this indirect relationship. These findings suggest that compensating for the deficit in sense of meaning in life constitutes the potential mechanism through which mortality salience increases experiential consumption choices, which also offers insights for interventions targeting consumers' decision-making behavior in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Full Text

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

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## Abstract

Consumers' decision-making psychology and purchasing behaviors are inevitably influenced by death-related information in their surrounding environment. Drawing upon the meaning maintenance model, this paper investigates the impact of mortality salience on consumers' preference for experiential purchases and its underlying mechanism through four experiments. The findings reveal that consumers exposed to mortality salience demonstrate a stronger preference for experiential consumption. Further analysis indicates that mortality salience enhances preference for experiential consumption by undermining consumers' sense of meaning in life. Additionally, social support buffers this indirect effect. These results illuminate that compensating for the loss of meaning in life represents a potential mechanism through which mortality salience increases experiential consumption choices, offering valuable insights for consumer behavior interventions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

## 1. Introduction

Mortality salience, a common manipulation in death psychology research, refers to exposing individuals to death-related information that forcibly evokes death awareness and prompts contemplation of mortality. In daily life, people frequently encounter death cues through news reports or social media, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic where daily updates on infections and fatalities constantly expose consumers to mortality-related information. This frequent exposure to death threats triggers panic and anxiety, subsequently leading to significant changes in consumption behavior. For instance, following the COVID-19 outbreak, consumers have shown increased preference for familiar products, greater favorability toward advertisements with authentic information, stronger inclination toward private dining spaces, and more diversified activities during travel.

Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) distinguished consumption types based on purchase intentions, categorizing them as experiential purchases (e.g., travel, attending performances) versus material purchases (e.g., clothing, electronics). Empirical data from the pandemic period suggest that mortality cues may differentially affect these consumption preferences. According to industry reports, textile and apparel exports declined by 22% year-over-year from January to April 2020, while China' s gaming market revenue reached 278.687 billion yuan in 2020, representing a 20.71% increase from 2019. These trends indicate a shift from material to experiential consumption during the pandemic. While lockdown policies may partially explain this shift, the psychological impact of pandemic-induced mortality salience—such as diminished meaning in life and heightened anxiety—may also drive changes in consumption patterns. However,

systematic research on how mortality salience influences consumption type preferences remains scarce.

As mortality salience becomes normalized in daily life during the ongoing pandemic, prior research demonstrates that mortality salience significantly alters consumer preferences, including increased preference for domestic over foreign products, greater likelihood of purchasing luxury goods, and stronger inclination toward prosocial and familiar products. Yet the question remains: Does mortality salience influence preferences between experiential and material consumption, and what psychological mechanisms underlie this effect? Addressing these questions holds both theoretical and practical significance, particularly for understanding shifting consumption patterns and informing marketing strategies during the pandemic.

Although preliminary evidence suggests mortality salience increases preference for experiential over material products, the underlying mechanisms remain underexplored. Most existing research adopts terror management theory, positing that mortality salience reduces perceived control, undermines self-esteem, and increases death anxiety, thereby affecting subsequent consumption behaviors. However, terror management theory struggles to explain the paradoxical increase in experiential consumption during the pandemic, given that such activities (e.g., travel, cinema attendance) may elevate infection risk and thus amplify death anxiety. Diverging from this perspective, the present research employs the meaning maintenance model to propose that compensating for lost meaning in life represents a crucial mechanism through which mortality salience increases experiential consumption preferences. Specifically, mortality salience disrupts individuals' meaning systems, prompting them to seek restoration through experiential consumption, which more effectively enhances meaning in life compared to material consumption. Through four experiments grounded in the meaning maintenance model, this research systematically examines mortality salience effects on consumption preferences, establishes meaning in life as a mediating mechanism, and tests the moderating role of social support. By integrating the meaning maintenance model into research on consumption preference antecedents, this study offers novel theoretical insights into consumer decision-making under mortality salience.

### 1.1 Mortality Salience Effects on Experiential Purchase Preference and Its Mediating Mechanism

Meaning in life refers to individuals' comprehension and awareness of life' s purpose, mission, and primary goals. This sense of meaning is crucial for psychological well-being, predicting anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation while enhancing self-esteem and overall happiness. Death, representing finality, poses a profound threat to individuals' meaning systems and relationships. According to the meaning maintenance model, humans possess an intrinsic motivation to seek meaning; when existing meaning frameworks are threatened, individuals automatically attempt to reconstruct meaning and restore connections. Conse-

quently, mortality salience threatens consumers' meaning frameworks, reducing their sense of meaning in life. To restore meaning systems, individuals employ various defensive measures, with consumption behavior representing one important coping strategy.

Prior research demonstrates that experiential purchases yield greater happiness, strengthen intimate relationships, and facilitate social connections more effectively than material purchases. Since intimate relationships and social connections constitute primary sources of meaning in life, experiential consumption can more effectively compensate for diminished meaning under mortality salience by promoting these connections. Additionally, individuals can compensate for meaning threats through enhanced self-esteem. Experiential products are considered more integral to the self, closer to consumers' self-identity centers, and more representative of the self compared to material products. Research shows experiential consumption positively reinforces authentic self-concept, identity, and satisfies needs for uniqueness and self-esteem, whereas material consumption may trigger social comparisons that negatively impact self-perception and damage self-esteem. Therefore, experiential consumption more effectively restores damaged meaning in life through self-esteem enhancement.

Based on this theoretical framework, we propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Mortality salience (vs. control condition) increases consumers' preference for experiential purchases.

**Hypothesis 2:** Diminished meaning in life mediates the relationship between mortality salience and preference for experiential purchases.

### 1.2 The Moderating Role of Social Support

According to the meaning maintenance model, individuals derive a sense of certainty from stable meaning and relational frameworks, fostering self-confidence. When meaning is threatened, individuals actively seek effective coping strategies. Beyond consumption behavior, social support represents another effective means of alleviating distress and death anxiety.

Social support refers to the emotional or material care and assistance individuals perceive and receive from family, relatives, friends, and society. Research indicates social support influences individuals through both main effects and buffering models. The main effects model posits that social support universally benefits psychological and physical health, while the buffering model suggests social support mitigates the negative effects of stressful events. Consequently, high levels of social support may buffer mortality salience-induced threats to self-esteem and relationships, thereby reducing the negative impact of mortality salience on meaning in life and subsequently influencing experiential purchase preferences.

**Hypothesis 3:** Social support moderates the effect of mortality salience on experiential purchase preference. Specifically, when individuals receive high

social support, the buffering effect mitigates the decline in meaning in life caused by mortality salience, rendering the mediating effect of diminished meaning in life non-significant.

## Study 1a

Study 1a aimed to test Hypothesis 1 by examining whether mortality salience (vs. control) increases preference for experiential purchases.

### 2.1.1 Pretest

We first identified representative products for material and experiential consumption, then matched them based on value and attractiveness to create appropriate consumption scenarios. This process involved three stages: In Stage 1, after providing definitions of material and experiential consumption, participants (N = 65; 23 males, 42 females; Mage = 23.68) listed eight representative products for each category. We selected the 11 most frequently mentioned products per category, yielding 22 total products (e.g., material: "new clothes, new phone, skincare products, brand-name shoes"; experiential: "travel, group meals, movies, amusement parks" ).

In Stage 2, two independent raters paired products based on equivalent value and attractiveness, initially creating 11 pairs (e.g., "buying brand-name shoes vs. buying a concert ticket" ). Inter-rater reliability was strong ( = 0.68, p < 0.001). In Stage 3, participants (N = 77; 25 males, 52 females; Mage = 22.31) evaluated the value and attractiveness of these pairs to ensure no significant differences. We finalized three product pairs with equivalent value and non-significant attractiveness differences: (1) brand-name shoes vs. concert ticket (Mshoes = 4.53, SD = 1.63; Mconcert = 4.77, SD = 1.54; t(76) > 0.05); (2) new backpack vs. karaoke session (Mbackpack = 4.40, SD = 1.58; Mkaraoke = 4.21, SD = 1.78; t(76) > 0.05); (3) professional book vs. 3D movie (Mbook = 4.70, SD = 1.46; Mmovie = 5.00, SD = 1.36; t(76) > 0.05).

### 2.1.2 Participants and Design

Study 1a employed a single-factor (mortality salience: mortality salience vs. control) between-subjects design, with the dependent variable being the number and proportion of experiential product choices. The questionnaire was distributed via Wenjuanxing platform, with small monetary compensation provided. We collected 158 responses, excluding invalid questionnaires based on completion time, attention check failures, and irrelevant responses, yielding 140 valid responses (88.61% retention). The mortality salience group contained 70 participants, and the control group contained 70 participants. Ages ranged from 18 to 30 years (Mage = 21.72, SD = 2.69), with 33 males and 107 females. A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that with effect size w = 0.5, $\alpha$ = 0.05, df = 1, and N = 140, statistical power for chi-square tests exceeded 0.99, confirming adequate sample size.

### 2.1.3 Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to mortality salience or control conditions, then completed the PANAS emotion scale, a distraction task, consumption choice task, manipulation check, and control variable measures.

**Mortality Salience Manipulation:** Following Fritsche and Jonas (2008) and Liu et al. (2014), the mortality salience group imagined being diagnosed with an incurable infectious disease, while the control group imagined needing dental surgery. Both groups responded to two open-ended questions: (1) "What thoughts and emotional reactions do you have when thinking about your life ending (vs. upcoming dental surgery)?" and (2) "What physical changes do you think will occur during and after your death (vs. during and after your dental surgery)?"

**PANAS Emotion Scale:** We used the Chinese revision of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Qiu et al., 2008), containing nine positive and nine negative emotion descriptors rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Overall Cronbach' s $\alpha$ was 0.82 (positive affect $\alpha = 0.95$; negative affect $\alpha = 0.89$).

**Distraction Task:** Following the classic mortality salience paradigm (Greenberg et al., 1994, 2003), we implemented a delay task to mask immediate emotional reactions and increase cognitive load, rendering death thoughts nonconscious to examine distal effects. We adopted Guo' s (2003) "number triangle" task: Participants filled integers 1-6 into six circles forming two triangles, making each side sum to 9 (first triangle) and 10 (second triangle) within a 5-minute time limit.

**Consumption Choice Task:** Using the three product pairs from the pretest, participants imagined having money to spend and chose between options: (1) brand-name shoes vs. concert ticket; (2) new backpack vs. karaoke session; (3) professional book vs. 3D movie.

**Manipulation Check:** After providing definitions of experiential and material consumption, participants classified the three product pairs on a 7-point scale (1 = completely material consumption to 7 = completely experiential consumption).

**Control Variables:** Demographics (gender, age, monthly disposable income) and materialism (Richins, 1994; 7-point Likert scale, $\alpha = 0.82$) were measured as potential confounds.

### 2.1.4 Results

**Manipulation Check:** Paired-samples t-tests confirmed successful manipulation. Concert tickets (M = 6.46, SD = 0.56) were rated significantly more experiential than brand-name shoes (M = 2.13, SD = 1.26), t(139) = -34.18, p $<$ 0.001, d = 4.43. Karaoke sessions (M = 6.26, SD = 0.91) were rated significantly more experiential than new backpacks (M = 1.74, SD = 0.89), t(139)

= -34.78, p < 0.001, d = 5.02. 3D movies (M = 6.26, SD = 0.90) were rated significantly more experiential than professional books (M = 2.21, SD = 1.67), t(139) = -23.92, p < 0.001, d = 3.02.

**Control Variables:** Independent-samples t-tests revealed no significant differences in positive affect (t(138) = 0.22, p > 0.05) or negative affect (t(138) = -1.87, p > 0.05) between conditions, ruling out emotional confounds.

**Hypothesis Testing:** Chi-square analysis of experiential product choice proportions (see ) revealed significant differences between conditions. In the control condition, material consumption dominated (66.2%) over experiential consumption (33.8%). In the mortality salience condition, choices were evenly split (50.0% each), $^{2}(1) = 11.31$, p = 0.001. Multinomial logistic regression with mortality salience predicting experiential choice preference (material = 0, experiential = 1) yielded a significant positive effect, B = 0.97, SE = 0.34, Wald $^{2}$ = 8.34, p = 0.004, supporting Hypothesis 1.

### 2.1.5 Summary

Study 1a established that mortality salience increases preference for experiential products, providing initial support for Hypothesis 1.

## Study 1b

Study 1b aimed to replicate Study 1a using alternative mortality salience materials to rule out potential confounds from the "infectious disease" scenario, which might reduce social contact and artificially inflate experiential preferences. Additionally, we employed a single-dimension measure of consumption preference for greater sensitivity.

### 2.2.1 Participants and Design

Study 1b used a single-factor (mortality salience) between-subjects design with experiential purchase preference as the dependent variable. We collected 290 responses via Wenjuanxing, retaining 252 valid responses (86.90% retention) after excluding invalid questionnaires. The mortality salience group had 124 participants, and the control group had 128 participants. Ages ranged from 17 to 41 years (Mage = 25.66, SD = 5.83), with 115 males and 137 females. Power analysis indicated that with effect size d = 0.4, $\alpha = 0.05$, and N = 252, statistical power exceeded 0.99 for independent-samples t-tests.

### 2.2.2 Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions, then completed mortality salience manipulation check, PANAS, distraction task, consumption choice task, consumption type manipulation check, and demographic measures.

**Mortality Salience Manipulation:** Following Wang et al. (2019), McGregor et al. (1998), and Fritsche et al. (2008), participants wrote brief descriptions without concern for coherence. The mortality salience group imagined their own death and described: (1) thoughts and feelings when thinking about their death, and (2) physical changes during and after death. The control group imagined toothache and described corresponding thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations.

**Manipulation Check:** Participants rated the extent to which the imagination task triggered death-related thoughts on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very strongly).

**Consumption Choice Task:** Following Li et al. (in press), Chan and Mogilner (2017), and Yang et al. (2020), we presented two identical cameras with different descriptions (see [Figure 1: see original paper]). Camera A emphasized "affordable and portable"(material), while Camera B emphasized "capturing wonderful moments" (experiential). Participants rated their preference on a 9-point scale (1 = Camera A, 9 = Camera B), with higher scores indicating stronger experiential preference. Purchase intention and perceived meaningfulness were also assessed.

**Additional Measures:** Consumption type manipulation check, PANAS, and distraction task were identical to Study 1a.

### 2.2.3 Results

**Manipulation Check:** Mortality salience participants reported significantly more death-related thoughts ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.32$) than controls ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(250) = 11.79$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.61$. Camera B ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.59$) was rated significantly more experiential than Camera A ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.75$), $t(251) = -12.67$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.31$.

**Control Variables:** Mortality salience participants reported higher negative affect ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.43$) than controls ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(250) = 3.42$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 0.17$. However, mediation analysis following Schindler et al. (2019) revealed non-significant indirect effects of negative affect (95% CI [-0.256, 0.046]), and negative affect did not moderate the mortality salience-experiential preference relationship (95% CI [-0.325, 0.858]), ruling out emotional confounds.

**Hypothesis Testing:** Mortality salience participants showed significantly stronger experiential preference ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 3.11$) than controls ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 2.49$), $t(250) = 3.13$, $p = 0.002$, $d = 0.33$. Purchase intention for experiential products was higher in the mortality salience condition ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.43$) than in the control condition ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(250) = 2.07$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.26$, while material purchase intentions did not differ. Multinomial logistic regression confirmed mortality salience significantly predicted experiential preference, $B = 0.64$, $SE = 0.23$, Wald $^{2} = 7.60$, $p =$

0.006, supporting Hypothesis 1.

**Supplementary Analysis:** Mortality salience participants perceived significantly greater meaningfulness in experiential consumption (M = 5.43, SD = 1.37) than controls (M = 5.02, SD = 1.50), t(250) = 2.27, p = 0.024, d = 0.29, with no difference for material consumption, providing preliminary support for Hypothesis 2.

#### 2.2.4 Summary

Study 1b replicated Study 1a using alternative mortality salience manipulation and a single-dimension preference measure. Results confirmed that mortality salience significantly increases experiential purchase preference and purchase intention, with experiential consumption perceived as more meaningful following mortality salience.

## Study 2

Study 2 examined the underlying mechanism by testing both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. We manipulated mortality salience using a more concrete event (traffic accident news report) to enhance ecological validity and replicate findings.

### 3.1 Participants and Design

Study 2 employed a single-factor (mortality salience vs. control) between-subjects design with meaning in life and experiential purchase preference as dependent variables. We collected 246 responses, retaining 219 valid responses (89.02% retention). The mortality salience group had 109 participants, and the control group had 110 participants. Ages ranged from 16 to 47 years (Mage = 24.68, SD = 5.13), with 67 males and 152 females. Power analysis indicated statistical power exceeded 0.99 for chi-square tests with N = 219.

### 3.2 Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions, then completed emotion measures, distraction task, Meaning in Life Questionnaire, consumption choice task, manipulation checks, and demographics.

**Mortality Salience Manipulation:** Following Zhou (2018), adapted from Liu and Smeesters (2010) and Ke (2009), the mortality salience group read a traffic accident news report containing fatality numbers and scene descriptions, then answered: (1) "How many people died in this accident?" and (2) "Describe the accident scene and your emotional reactions." The control group read a dental surgery technology report and answered parallel questions. Both reports were approximately 300 words to control reading time and cognitive load (see [Figure 2: see original paper]).

**Emotion Measure:** Given that mortality salience primarily affects negative affect, we administered only the negative affect subscale of PANAS ($\alpha = 0.93$).

**Meaning in Life Questionnaire:** We used the Chinese revision of Steger et al.' s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Chen et al., 2015), assessing presence of meaning and search for meaning ($\alpha = 0.73$).

**Additional Measures:** Manipulation checks, consumption choice task, and distraction task were identical to previous studies.

### 3.3 Results

**Manipulation Check:** Mortality salience participants reported significantly more death-related thoughts (M = 5.87, SD = 1.26) than controls (M = 1.50, SD = 0.94), t(217) = -9.12, p < 0.001, d = 3.93. All three product pairs were successfully manipulated as more experiential (all ps < 0.001, ds > 2.65).

**Control Variables:** Mortality salience participants reported higher negative affect (M = 2.82, SD = 1.43) than controls (M = 1.59, SD = 0.81), t(217) = -10.57, p < 0.001, d = 0.17. However, negative affect did not correlate with the dependent variable (r = 0.067, p = 0.321), and mediation analysis revealed non-significant indirect effects (95% CI [-0.256, 0.108]), with no moderation effect (95% CI [-0.011, 0.196]). Negative affect was controlled for in subsequent analyses.

**Hypothesis Testing:** Chi-square analysis (see ) revealed significant differences: control participants preferred material consumption (65.8%) over experiential (34.2%), while mortality salience participants showed no significant difference (54.4% material, 45.6% experiential), $^{2}(1) = 8.78$, p = 0.003. Multinomial logistic regression confirmed mortality salience significantly predicted experiential preference, B = 0.97, SE = 0.27, Wald $^{2} = 12.72$, p < 0.001, supporting Hypothesis 1.

**Mediation Analysis:** Following Baron and Kenny' s (1986) procedure and controlling for demographics and negative affect, mortality salience significantly predicted experiential preference ($\beta = 0.23$, p = 0.006) and meaning in life ($\beta$ = -0.29, p < 0.001). When both predictors were included, meaning in life significantly predicted experiential preference ($\beta$ = -0.15, p = 0.033), while the direct effect of mortality salience decreased ($\beta = 0.18$, p = 0.031). Bootstrap analysis (Hayes, 2017; Preacher et al., 2007) using SPSS Process Model 4 (5,000 iterations) revealed a significant indirect effect (effect = 0.08, 95% CI [0.007, 0.162]) and direct effect (effect = 0.33, p = 0.031, 95% CI [0.031, 0.623]), supporting Hypothesis 2 (see [Figure 3: see original paper]).

### 3.4 Summary

Study 2 replicated mortality salience effects on experiential preference and demonstrated that meaning in life mediates this relationship. When mortality is

salient, death-related anxiety threatens meaning in life, motivating individuals to seek experiential consumption as a compensatory mechanism.

## Study 3

Study 3 tested Hypothesis 3 regarding social support' s moderating role while replicating Hypotheses 1 and 2. Using COVID-19-related materials for mortality salience manipulation enhanced ecological validity.

### 4.1 Participants and Design

Study 3 employed a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) × 2 (social support: high vs. low) between-subjects design with experiential purchase preference as the dependent variable. We targeted working consumers, collecting 200 responses and retaining 166 valid responses (83.00% retention). The sample included 72 males and 94 females, aged 22-60 years (Mage = 29.49, SD = 5.57). Power analysis indicated statistical power exceeded 0.99 for two-way ANOVA with N = 166.

### 4.2 Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to mortality salience conditions, then to social support conditions, completing manipulation checks, meaning in life measure, consumption decision task, emotion measures, demographics, and mortality salience manipulation check.

**Mortality Salience Manipulation:** Following Cui et al. (2020) and Hu et al. (2020), the mortality salience group read a news report about global COVID-19 fatalities (case numbers, death tolls, trend analysis) and answered: (1) "How many COVID-19 deaths were mentioned?" and (2) "Describe your thoughts and feelings." The control group read about pandemic-related tourism industry losses. Both reports described pandemic negative impacts, but the mortality salience version emphasized death counts to activate death awareness.

**Social Support Manipulation:** Following Liu et al. (2016), high social support participants recalled a difficult event where family/friends provided support, described their feelings, and listed five supportive individuals' initials. Low social support participants recalled a difficult event faced alone.

**Social Support Manipulation Check:** Participants rated three items (e.g., "I feel my family/friends are trying to help me" ) on a 7-point scale ($\alpha = 0.84$).

**Consumption Preference Measure:** Due to pandemic risks affecting previous product choices, we adapted Yang et al.' s (2020) measure. After presenting definitions, participants indicated their preference on a 9-point scale (1 = material consumption, 9 = experiential consumption).

**Additional Measures:** Meaning in life, emotion measures, and mortality salience manipulation check were identical to Study 2.

### 4.3 Results

**Manipulation Checks:** Mortality salience participants reported more death-related thoughts (M = 5.90, SD = 1.08) than controls (M = 5.22, SD = 1.79), t(164) = -3.00, p = 0.003, d = 0.46. High social support participants reported greater perceived support (M = 6.35, SD = 0.58) than low support participants (M = 5.76, SD = 1.01), t(164) = -4.61, p < 0.001, d = 0.72.

**Control Variables:** Negative affect did not differ between mortality salience (M = 2.39, SD = 0.75) and control conditions (M = 2.46, SD = 0.85), t(164) = 0.56, p = 0.579.

**Hypothesis Testing:** Two-way ANOVA controlling for demographics and negative affect revealed a significant main effect of mortality salience on experiential preference, F(1, 156) = 6.35, p = 0.013, $^2$ = 0.039, with mortality salience participants (M = 4.61, SD = 0.31) showing stronger preference than controls (M = 3.50, SD = 0.31), replicating Hypothesis 1. Social support' s main effect and interaction effect were non-significant (Fs < 0.16, ps > 0.05).

**Mediation Analysis:** Replicating previous findings, meaning in life mediated the mortality salience-experiential preference relationship (indirect effect = 0.22, 95% CI [0.008, 0.577]), supporting Hypothesis 2.

**Moderation Analysis:** Two-way ANOVA on meaning in life revealed a significant mortality salience × social support interaction, F(1, 158) = 4.59, p = 0.034, $^2$ = 0.028 (see [Figure 4: see original paper]). Under low social support, mortality salience significantly reduced meaning in life compared to control, F(1, 158) = 11.55, p = 0.001. Under high social support, this effect disappeared, F(1, 158) = 0.11, p > 0.05.

**Moderated Mediation:** Using SPSS Process Model 7 (Hayes, 2017; Preacher et al., 2007), we tested whether social support moderates the mediated pathway. Results showed significant moderated mediation (effect = -0.354, 95% CI [-0.901, -0.002]). Under low social support, the indirect effect was significant (effect = 0.392, 95% CI [0.053, 0.879]), but under high social support, it became non-significant (effect = 0.039, 95% CI [-0.226, 0.369]), supporting Hypothesis 3 (see [Figure 5: see original paper]).

### 4.4 Summary

Study 3 replicated Hypotheses 1 and 2 and demonstrated that social support buffers the detrimental effect of mortality salience on meaning in life, thereby eliminating the mediating role of meaning in life in the relationship between mortality salience and experiential purchase preference.

## Single-Paper Meta-Analysis

Our four experiments employed different manipulations and measures, with varying sample sizes and participant ages, potentially affecting effect consis-

tency (McShane & Böckenholt, 2017). Single-paper meta-analysis (SPM) provides robustness tests by integrating multiple experiments and deriving general conclusions while controlling for methodological variations (McShane & Böckenholt, 2017, 2022). To ensure reliability and replicability, we conducted SPM using multiple contrast standardized meta-analysis (McShane & Böckenholt, 2022) after converting dependent variable measures to a common metric.

As shown in , we summarized manipulation materials and statistics across four experiments. SPM results revealed a significant difference between mortality salience and control conditions (Estimate $\beta = 0.30$, SE = 0.07, z = 4.178, $p < 0.001$), confirming robustness across different mortality salience manipulations and measurement approaches.

## General Discussion

### 6.1 Conclusions

Four experiments investigated the relationship between mortality salience and experiential purchase preference. Studies 1a and 1b used classic mortality salience paradigms to establish the basic effect. Study 2 replicated findings using traffic accident news and demonstrated meaning in life' s mediating role. Study 3 employed COVID-19-related materials and introduced social support as a boundary condition. Results indicate: (1) Mortality salience increases preference for experiential consumption; (2) Meaning in life mediates this effect, with mortality salience reducing meaning in life, thereby increasing experiential consumption preference; (3) Social support buffers this mediated pathway —under low social support, the mediation holds, but under high social support, it disappears. These findings reveal that compensating for lost meaning represents a key mechanism through which mortality salience influences experiential consumption, with social support serving as a protective buffer.

### 6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

This research makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it enriches antecedent research on experiential vs. material consumption. Prior work has focused predominantly on consequences, particularly happiness mechanisms, with limited investigation of antecedents and underlying mechanisms. Our four experiments systematically examine mortality salience as an antecedent, addressing this gap.

Second, we broaden theoretical perspectives on mortality salience effects by adopting the meaning maintenance model. Unlike terror management theory' s emphasis on death anxiety and control loss, we demonstrate that meaning compensation represents a crucial mechanism. Mortality salience disrupts meaning systems, and experiential consumption effectively restores meaning more than material consumption, validating the meaning maintenance model in consumer decision-making.

Third, we identify social support as a boundary condition. Consistent with the buffering model, high social support mitigates mortality salience' s detrimental impact on meaning in life, enriching both meaning maintenance theory and understanding of mortality salience' s contextual moderators.

Practically, these findings inform post-pandemic consumer well-being and economic recovery strategies. Consumers can cope with mortality salience through both consumption adjustments and seeking social support. For businesses, understanding these psychological shifts enables more effective product positioning and marketing strategies, such as emphasizing experiential features to align with pandemic-era consumer needs.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant attention. First, our samples primarily comprised young and middle-aged adults, limiting generalizability. Future research should include broader age ranges, particularly older adults, to enhance ecological validity.

Second, we examined only social support as a moderator. Individual differences may also matter—for instance, materialistic consumers derive greater happiness from material purchases (Nicolao et al., 2009), potentially altering their compensatory responses to mortality salience. Additionally, personality-purchase fit influences well-being (Matz et al., 2016), suggesting that trait differences may moderate mortality salience effects.

Third, different death awareness activation methods may produce differential effects. Concrete, realistic death thoughts increase prosocial behavior, while abstract death thoughts produce paradoxical effects depending on worldview compatibility (Blackie & Cozzolino, 2011; Cozzolino et al., 2004). Although our SPM supports robustness across different paradigms (individual death reflection vs. public event-induced death thoughts), future research should systematically explore how different levels of death consciousness produce varied effects and boundary conditions.

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## References

*References are preserved exactly as provided in the original manuscript.*