

Spiritual Transcendence, Mortality Salience and Consumer Behaviors: Is Spirituality Really Opposite to Materialism?

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Abstract

In the current study (N = 161) we examined the effect of activation of spiritual transcendence and death anxiety on spending on hedonistic and status goods as expressing materialism. Additionally, the difference between the effects of spiritual transcendence in religious and non-religious form on consumer behaviors was examined. Basing on TMT assumption we expected increased spending on materialistic goods in the mortality salience condition. Spiritual transcendence, as logically opposite to materialism, was assumed to decrease levels of spending on materialistic goods. Finally, we examined whether spiritual transcendence, as related to transcending self (including own mortality) could serve as a buffer against death anxiety. We have found partial support for the assumption, that spiritual transcendence (only in non-religious form) indeed inhibits effects of mortality salience on higher spending on status goods.

Introduction

There are a lot of studies presenting how activation of mortality salience affects consumer behaviors, especially from the Terror Management Theory (TMT) perspective [1,2]. The TMT authors assume that people use several defences to avoid terror induced by awareness of own death. Two basic buffers acts against mortality salience are postulated: self-esteem and shared worldview [3]. As consumer behaviors are related to basic human needs and motives, therefore purchasing particular goods could help satisfy a broad set of motives, including these which are expression of self-esteem and cultural worldview. This assumption is supported by repeating effects of mortality salience on purchasing hedonic and status goods, which are expressions of materialistic attitude and could serve as a means of self-enhancement [1,2].

The aim of current study is to extend previous findings by examining how spiritual transcendence could affect consumer behaviors. Spiritual transcendence is defined here as “*human capacity to extend their direct experience of time and place and to viewing life from broader, more objective perspective*” [4]. Such defined spiritual transcendence could be expressed both in religious and non-religious form. It is opposite to materialism, defined as willingness possessing many goods and satisfaction from possessing them. As spiritual transcendence is based on beliefs about transcending time and feeling connected with whole humanity and universe, it could serve as a buffer against death anxiety. Thus, by its self-transcendent meaning (including transcendence of own death) and opposition to materialism, spiritual transcendence is supposed to have interesting effects on consumer behaviors.

Consumer motivations and types of goods

Among existing classifications of goods one of the most popular is distinction between utilitarian and hedonistic ones [5]. Hedonistic goods serve as a source of positive experiences, while utilitarian goods are purchased in aim to possess them. More specific classification of consumer's motives was proposed by Holt [6] who indicated four categories of motives and goods which could express these motivations: related to status, relational, hedonistic and expressing of own personality. Status goods serve as a mean for expressing high social position, they typically are luxury goods. Relational goods are an expression of bounds with others; an example could be

gift for a friend. Hedonistic goods serve as means for pleasure; one example could be computer game or drugs. Personality expression goods serve as means for building social identity and expressing own individuality, like original clothes or a souvenir from exotic trip. Typically, purchasing particular types of goods is linked with subjective well-being [5]. As consumer behaviors could serve as a mean for expressing important values or worldview, they could act also as a buffer against mortality salience. Such importance of consumer behaviors were indicated by Kasser and Sheldon [1] and Arndt and colleagues [7] who posed that materialism is an important worldview, especially in the U.S. [8]. Thus, expressing materialism in consumer behaviors could be regarded as any other type of worldview defence. More specifically, possessing goods which reflect high status or allow satisfying the need for possessing itself, increases self-esteem and allows expressing important values. Therefore, hedonistic and status building goods could be regarded as an expression of materialism and mortality salience indeed increase tendency to purchasing them [1,7]. These materialistic tendencies are present not only in the American culture, as these findings were successfully replicated by Zawadzka [9] in Poland.

Spiritual Transcendence, Materialism and their Relationship to Consumer Behaviors

Materialism, as linked to extrinsic motivation, is logically opposite to transcendence, which is linked to intrinsic motivation [10,11,4]. Burroughs and Rindfleisch [12] indicated empirically that materialism is opposite to collective goals, like religion and family. Empirical evidence confirmed that spiritual transcendence is negatively correlated with materialism [11,13], spirituality decreases conspicuous consumption [14], as well as there is a negative correlation between materialism and religious involvement [13]. Thus, one could expect

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that relationship between spiritual transcendence and purchasing materialistic goods (i.e., hedonistic and status-building ones) should be negative. However, Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. [13] found that activation of spiritual transcendence (i.e., paintings presenting religious and spiritual content) resulted in purchasing status goods. Moreover, Piedmont et al. [11] reported positive correlation between one facets of spiritual transcendence (i.e., connectedness, expressing feelings of bounds with other people) with materialism. These mixed results could be explained by employing distinction between two forms of spiritual transcendence. Spiritual transcendence could be expressed in religious form (e.g. prayer fulfilment, relationship with God) or in non-religious form (e.g. connection with whole humanity, being a part of the universe). Mutual relationships between religiosity and spirituality were thoroughly discussed before [15]. One of the most important issues is poor distinction between religiosity and spirituality. However, one of the most popular approach to spirituality and religiosity treats them as strictly interrelated but distinct phenomena. Moreover, many studies examining relationship between spirituality and consumer behaviors have correlational character, focusing mostly on self-transcendence values [10,16] or did not distinguish between religiosity and spirituality [14,16]. For instance, as a measure of spirituality there were included a question “*I feel God’s presence*” [14], what refers to religiosity.

The current study

In the current paper we adopt a broad definition of spiritual transcendence, which is expressed in transcending self in searching the meaning of reality and maintaining broad relationships with others, including whole humanity and the universe. This aim could be fulfilled both within religious beliefs (like relationship with God) or beyond them (like experiencing relationship with humanity, nature or universe, [4]). Distinctiveness of both forms of spiritual transcendence was previously shown in the studies of Piotrowski and Żemojtel-Piotrowska [17] on helping behaviors. Activation of non-religious transcendence content resulted there in helping others independent on group categorization (i.e. in-group versus out-group), while activation of religious form of spiritual transcendence resulted in helping only in-group members.

Thus, the main aim of current study is to examine how activation of religiously infused and non-religiously infused spiritual transcendence affects consumer behaviors, namely tendency for purchasing luxury (status building) and hedonistic goods. Basing on former studies we formulated several hypotheses related to effect of spiritual transcendence and death-related thoughts activation on consumer behavior. First of all, in the concordance with TMT assumptions and former studies [1,9], we expect that activation of mortality salience increases the levels of spending on status-building and hedonistic goods (Hypothesis 1). We focus exclusively on these two kinds of goods, despite that mortality salience or spiritual transcendence could affect purchasing relational goods. However, the motivation responsible for such plausible effects would be different and not related to TMT assumptions. Therefore, we do not explore these effects in the current paper. Further, we expect that an activation of spiritual transcendence decreases levels of spending on status and hedonistic goods (Hypothesis 2). As status and hedonistic goods are expressions of materialism and extrinsic motivation [1,7,8], and materialism is supposed to be opposite to transcendence and spirituality [11,16], we expect that activation of transcendence decreases levels of materialism and its expression. Finally, we assume that spiritual transcendence could serve as a buffer against mortality salience.

Thus we predict that in the condition with simultaneously activated death-related thoughts and spiritual transcendence, all effects of mortality salience on spending on materialistic goods would be the same as in the control condition (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis is formulated on the basis of assumption that mortality salience and transcendence operate in opposite directions. As spiritual transcendence is based on transcending self it could work parallel to belief in own literal and symbolic immortality which was proved to act as a buffer against mortality salience. Moreover, to examine whether spiritual transcendence acts independent on beliefs and worldview we examine the effects of activation of spiritual transcendence both in religious form (which is worldview infused) and non-religious form (which is independent from worldview and culturally universal, [4,17]). Finally, we formulated two additional competing hypotheses: Hypothesis 3a: assuming that both forms of transcendence act as a buffer against death anxiety and both forms decrease purchasing status and hedonistic goods as expressing materialism, and Hypothesis 3b: assuming that only transcendence in non-religious form decreases purchase of materialistic goods, while religious ST increases it. Hypothesis 3a is based on assumption about opposition between spirituality/religiosity and materialism [10,11,16]. More specifically, most researchers do not differentiate between religiosity and spirituality [10,12,14,16] and they report opposition between materialism and spirituality/religiosity. Hypothesis 3b is based on previous study by Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. [13] who found that spiritual transcendence increased materialism, however it could be caused by religious content of spirituality activation. Moreover, the opposition between spirituality/religiosity and materialism is assumed as a reflection of opposition in values [10], i.e., materialism is positively related to self-enhancement values, while spirituality to self-transcendence values. However, religiosity is not only related to self-transcendence values, but also to conservatism dimension, as religion is grounded in tradition and maintaining social order [18]. In addition, opposition between religiosity and materialism seems to be limited to intrinsic religiosity in Protestant samples [14,19]. Therefore, it is possible, that spiritual transcendence has different effects on consumer behaviors, depending on the content associated to it, i.e., religious content is related to worldview, while non-religious – does not. For this reason religious content could activate materialistic worldview with associated motivation for purchasing status-building and hedonistic goods, while non-religious content activate self-transcendence values, opposite to materialistic values, what decreases tendency to possessing status-building and hedonistic goods.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted by 162 university students majored in the social sciences and humanities (111 women, 48 men); mean age $M = 23.44$ ($SD = 6.38$). The study was anonymous and it had no time limits. Students were rewarded for participation by credit points.

Procedure and materials

Study was designed on between-subjects comparisons, according to 3 (presence of spiritual transcendence in religious form vs presence of transcendence in non-religious form vs control group) x 2 (presence of mortality salience vs control group) design. Activation of spiritual transcendence or death thoughts was based on Srull and Wyer, after [20] procedure of anagrams. Anagrams contained words referring to spirituality like “divine, soul, God,

angel, universe". Participants were asked to create ten sentences from ten anagrams by removing one word which does not match to the rest (example: desert, divine, was, spoon, this). There were six conditions: in religious transcendence, non-religious transcendence and mortality salience conditions there were five anagrams contained word related to particular category, and five were neutral. In control condition there were 10 neutral anagrams. In two interaction conditions participants were presented five anagrams contained words referring to death and five related to spiritual transcendence in religious form (MS/religious ST condition) and in other – five related to spiritual transcendence in non-religious form (MS/non-religious ST condition).

Words used in religious-related spiritual transcendence condition were: God, divine, saint, angel, heaven. In non-religious related spiritual transcendence following words were used: chain of generations, meaning, spiritual, cosmos, and community. In the mortality salience condition we used words referring to death: death, deathly, mortal, coffin, hanged. In the control condition the anagrams contained neutral words, referring neither to death nor spiritual transcendence.

In the first part of study participants were asked for creating sentences. They were informed that this task is intended to measure their lexical abilities and creativeness. Then they were asked for completing materialism scale [2] and general affect scale [21]. After completing this task they were asked for deciding how they would like to spend 10,000 Polish zloty (about 3,000 USD) if they have such amount. They were presented a list of items representing different categories of goods (status building, relational, hedonistic and expression of own personality) which they could purchase.

List of goods: The list of goods comprised 12 items representing four categories referring to four consumer motives: relational, status building, expressing own personality and hedonistic [13]. Status building goods were: murmur floor in the kitchen; expensive suit, plasma TV; relational: party of friends, a gift, foreign language lessons; hedonistic: alcohol, sweets, computer games, expression of personality: money for support animals orphanage, gold table with own name, T-shirt with unusual print.

Dependent variable: The number of chosen goods representing particular category and amount of money spent on them were indicators of consumer behaviors, i.e. willingness to purchase luxury goods. We used two separate indicators: the numbers of chosen goods from each category and averaged amount of money spent on items representing each category. We standardized averaged amount of money as the value of items was very diverse, ranging from T-shirt to plasma TV. We analysed only spending on hedonistic and status goods, as expressing materialism.

Materialism: Materialism was measured by 5-item version of materialism scale [21]. The scale consists of five items (e.g. I believe that happiness is related to living in luxury, possessing many goods), measuring materialism defined as willingness to possess many goods and satisfaction with possessing them. Participants answered on scale ranging from 1-I definitely disagree with this statement to 5 – it's my way of thinking. One item was reversely scored. Reliability of scale in current study was Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$.

General affect scale [21]: The scale serves as a brief measure of affect defined as a state. We used version comprised by four items, two related to positive affect and two – negative. Participants answered how they feel on scale ranging from 1 – *definitely* no to 5 – *definitely*

yes. General affect is calculated by subtracting sum for items referring to negative affect to items referring to positive effect, thus higher scores indicate more positive mood.

Results

Two indicators of consumer decisions were analysed by using MANOVA. As analyses have not shown any effects for sum of spending, only results for number of chosen goods are reported (Figure 1). To control the impact of materialism and mood on results, these variables were introduced into MANOVA analyses as covariance.

There was no significant effect of death activation on number of chosen goods from status category, $F(1, 161) = 1.66, p = .199$. However, congruent with Hypothesis 1, contrasts analysis indicated marginally higher number of chosen status goods in mortality salience condition ($M = 0.63, SD = 0.33$) than in control group ($M = 0.56, SD = 0.32$), $p = .09$. After controlling the level of materialism this result became insignificant. There was no effect of mortality salience on the spending on status goods, $F(1, 160) = 0.00, p = .990$. Activation of death category did not affect spending on hedonistic goods neither, $F(1, 160) = 0.28, p = .596$.

There was marginally significant effect of transcendence for purchasing status goods, $F(1, 160) = 2.73, p = .068, \eta^2 = .02$. Planned contrasts analyses revealed that the spending on status goods (standardized means) were higher in religious transcendence condition ($M = 0.14, SD = 0.63$) than in non-religious transcendence condition ($M = -0.12, SD = 0.56$), $p = .023$, congruent with Hypothesis 2.

Results did not confirm Hypothesis 3. There was no interaction between death activation and transcendence activation for number of chosen status goods, $F(2, 159) = 0.30, p = .743$ (Figure 1 and 2). However, there was marginally significant interaction for hedonistic goods, $F(2, 160) = 2.96, p = .057, \eta^2 = .036$. Contrasts analysis indicated that in the absence of death-related thoughts participants with activated religious transcendence declared higher spending on hedonistic goods ($M = 0.19, SD = 0.75$) than participants with activated non-religious transcendence ($M = -0.08, SD = 0.63$), $p = .047$. In the death activation condition there was no difference in spending on hedonistic between activation of two types of transcendence, $p = .146$, as well as between transcendence activation and control condition (without activating death-related thoughts). Thus, this last pattern of results supports Hypothesis 3 assuming that spiritual transcendence acts as a buffer against mortality salience.

Finally, we conducted planned contrasts analyses for number of purchased hedonistic and status goods. We tested two competing hypotheses: Hypothesis 3a: assuming that both forms of transcendence acts as a buffer against death anxiety and both forms decrease number of purchasing status and hedonic goods as expressing materialism, and Hypothesis 3b: assuming that only transcendence in non-religious forms decreases purchasing materialistic goods, while religious ST increases them. To test Hypothesis 3a we prescribed following values for particular conditions: 1 for control, 2 for mortality salience, -2 for spiritual transcendence in both forms, 0.50 for simultaneous activation of mortality salience and two forms of spiritual transcendence. We did not use value of 0 for control condition, as it results for ignoring this condition in subsequent analyses. These contrasts were insignificant both for hedonic goods, $t(79.89) = -0.69, p = .493$ and for status goods, $t(90.58) = -0.33, p = .742$.

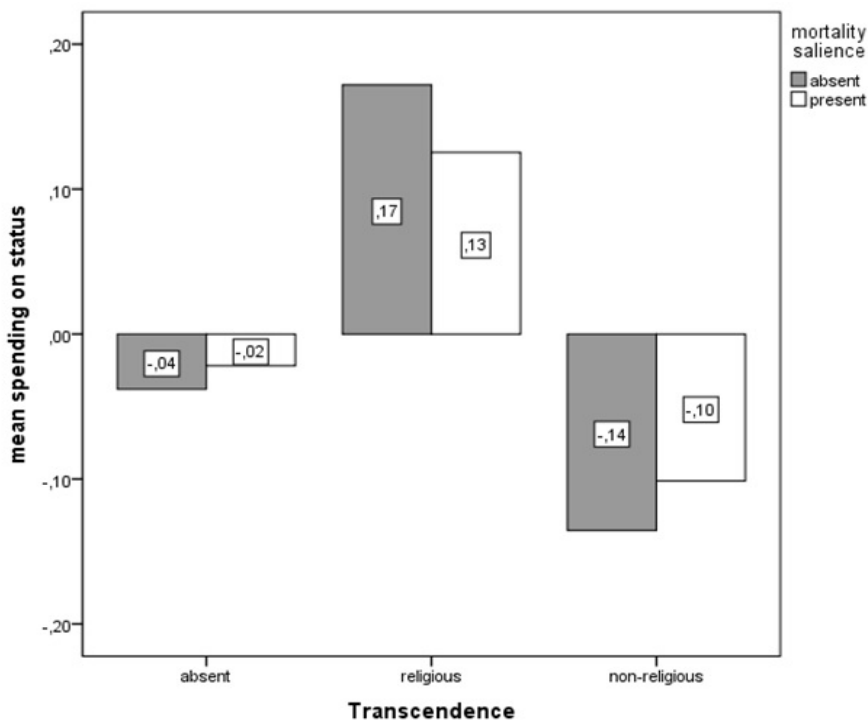


Figure 1: Standardized mean spending on status goods as a function of activating mortality salience and spiritual transcendence in religious and non-religious form.

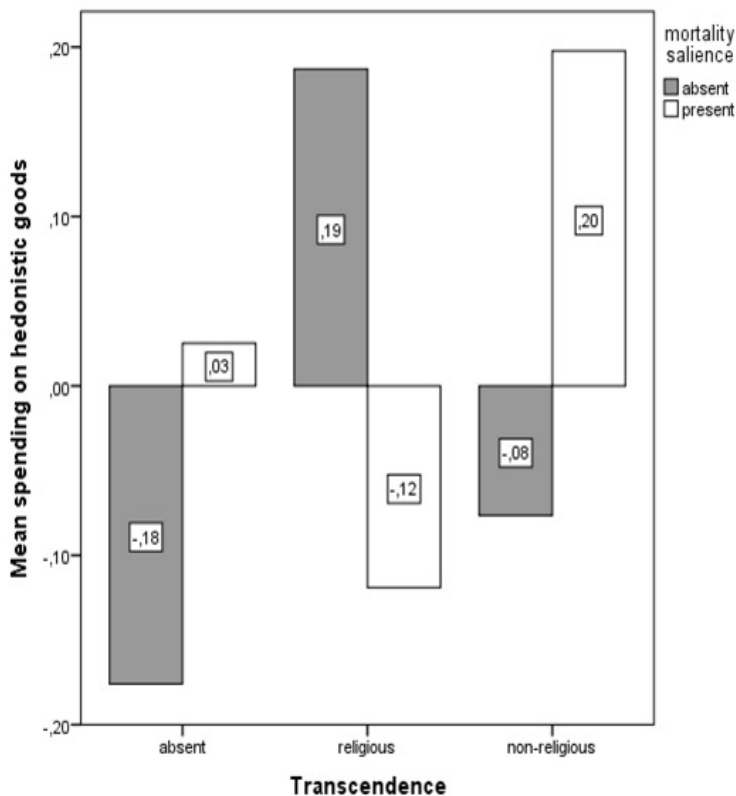


Figure 2: Standardized mean spending on hedonistic goods as a function of activating mortality salience and spiritual transcendence in religious and non-religious form.

Discussion

In general, the current study did not replicate effects of mortality salience on spending on status and hedonistic goods. More in-depth analyses indicated that mortality salience affected spending on status goods (at the tendency level), but this effect was fully dependent on materialism level. However, activation of spiritual transcendence affected consumer behaviors in the predicted way, i.e., we detected a difference between activation of spiritual transcendence in religious and non-religious form.

Congruent with predictions, spiritual transcendence in religious form resulted in higher spending on status goods in comparison to non-religious transcendence and control condition. Therefore the effect reported in earlier studies [13] was limited only to a religious form of spirituality. Congruent with Hypothesis 2, spirituality decreased purchasing status goods, but only in non-religious form. This result supports distinction between two forms of spiritual transcendence.

The Hypothesis 3 was partially supported by data, i.e., we have found that spiritual transcendence in non-religious form could inhibit effects of MS on purchasing luxury (status-building) goods, while ST in religious form acted in opposite direction. Thus, we have found again support for a distinction between religiosity and spirituality. Apparently, spirituality which is independent from religious beliefs is pure expression of self-transcending values, as suggested also by Piotrowski and Żemojtel-Piotrowska [17]) findings on prosocial behaviors. As former studies often did not differentiate between religiosity and spirituality in their analysis of human goals [10,16], it is hard to state whether opposition between external (materialistic) goals and internal (spiritual) ones detected by them is limited only to spirituality, or is it relevant also to religiosity.

In general, our findings suggest that introducing a distinction between religious and non-religious ST allows for shedding a light on the contradictory results for transcendence and materialism. It seems that only spiritual transcendence expressed in non-religious form (by establishing relationship with whole humanity, universe or nature) is opposite to materialism, while in religious form – is not. Religious content is strictly related to the worldview. As such, it could be positively related also to materialism, which could be considered both as a worldview [1] or as a value [22]. Thus, religiosity is not logically opposite to materialism, contrary to spirituality in non-religious form. Our study seems to support this logic.

Our study has a number of limitations and it should be treated rather as a first step in searching for distinct effects of two forms of spiritual transcendence on consumer behaviors. First, the current researches has rather a low number of participants and as the detected effects were small (with following low to moderate power of effects), it would be recommended to replicate it with a larger number of participants. Another amendment would be using more engaging examples of goods. Despite our examples were prepared on the basis of the pilot studies, some of goods could be regard as atypical and not too attractive for students. Thus it would be valuable to extend examples of goods and replicate this study on working adults, as having more experience with real-life consumer behavior than students. Finally, we generally did not replicate TMT effects in our study and all effects were rather weak.

The most important finding, worth further exploration, is a distinct effect of both forms of ST on consumer behaviors. Undoubtedly, as our study suggests (in line with previous studies, e.g., [11,13]) religion is positively related to materialism, and therefore its effects on consumption could be similar to any other cultural factors [23]. Spiritual transcendence in religious form could activate important values [24]. Religion could also evoke focus on self-esteem. Self-esteem is not only an important buffer in TMT model, but it is also related to motivation, like prevention-promotion focus, which significantly affects consumer preferences [25,26,27]. Thus further exploration of the importance the spiritual transcendence for consumer behaviour should extend TMT assumptions, employing other alternative explanations and theoretical framings.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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