Online Interactions as a Terror Management Mechanism:
How Death Anxiety Affects Facebook Use

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ABSTRACT

Death is source of fascination and fear and the deny of death is at the basis of the human motivation. Terror Management Theory suggests that death awareness and the fundamental instinct of self-preservation create a potential for anxiety that individuals try to face by using different mechanisms oriented toward self-esteem striving. While existing research deals with the role of close relationships in the terror management, research on how online interactions may serve as a terror mechanism is lacking. This research seeks to examine the relationship between death anxiety and Facebook use. A quantitative study was conducted among 181 participants. Results show a positive relationship between death anxiety and Facebook use, as Facebook is a means to present a valuable self-image and gain social recognition. Contributions for social marketing in particular and limits of the study are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Death Anxiety, Existential Anxiety, Facebook Use, Online Social Networks, Terror Management

INTRODUCTION

According to Becker (1973), “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else” (p. ix). Death is indeed the inevitable life event that people avoid to face directly, as if they were motivated by an unquestionable desire to stay alive. This specific topic is mainly source of mystery, fascination and fear and has long been studied in psychology, especially thanks to the work of Becker (1973). He highlighted the way individuals face the idea of their own death and how it can influence their daily life. Becker (1973) suggests that in our modern society the deny of death is at the basis of human motivation. This idea gave birth to the Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) which posits that the juxtaposition of the human death awareness and the fundamental instinct of self-preservation creates a potential for anxiety. To defend against it, people try to live their life in a meaningful and valuable way using different mechanisms. As needs for attachment, intimacy and affiliation may stand as components of the fundamental need for self-preservation (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), this study focuses on how the use of online social networks may serve as an anxiety-buffering mechanism.

According to TMT, people manage the potential anxiety by endorsing and protecting their cultural worldview, which also enables them to restore high levels of self-esteem (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). By providing understanding for why people invest in such
mechanisms, TMT offers insight into a broad array of human behaviors. To date, some studies focused specifically on the effect of death reminders on social behavior and donations (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Landau, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Martens, 2006; Cai & Wyer, 2015) and on consumption (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005; Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004; Mandel & Smeesters, 2008). Some studies even suggest that close relationships help to regulate fear of death (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Mc Coy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). For example, Mikulincer and Florian (2000) showed that securely attached persons responded to death reminders by presenting a stronger need for intimacy with a partner. While this research provides understanding on the possible role of close relationships in the regulation of death anxiety, research on how specifically online interactions may serve as a terror mechanism is lacking. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the specific relationship between mortality concerns, i.e. death anxiety, and Facebook use. Indeed, this area of research seems particularly interesting for three main reasons. First, while a recent study suggests that mortality-aware individuals engage in different web browsing practices as a defence mechanism oriented toward the self (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Magee, Bartosz, & Wojdynski, 2012), Facebook use may play the same role. Second, Facebook is one of the most famous and useful tool that helps to create and maintain relationships. Individuals use it to share personal information, comments, thoughts and pictures. While communication on the Internet and on Facebook in particular is perceived as being safer or more transparent than face-to-face communication (Kaare et al., 2007; Lüders, 2009), interactions on Facebook may help to reduce feelings of insecurity in a more useful way. Hence, interactions on Facebook may stand for a means of buffering existential anxiety. Finally, while some research has investigated individual and psychological predictors of social networks’ users (Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010), we introduce here death anxiety as a potential predictor of Facebook use. This focus has interesting managerial implications for social marketing campaigns or other death-related messages that are used to promote death-related products or services (such as funeral, insurance or financial services).

In this perspective, this study aims at contributing to the growing body of TMT research by providing knowledge on the importance of online interactions to the process of coping with death concerns. By examining the relationship between death anxiety and Facebook use, this study considers online social commitment as a psychological tool aimed at dealing with existential threats and needs. In order to test the conceptualization, a quantitative study was conducted among 181 participants. The following sections present a brief literature review, the research hypotheses, the methodology, the results and their discussion and the main contributions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

TMT and the Perspective of Death

The way individuals react to reminders of death has been examined in several studies in psychology, management and marketing. For example, Wong (1999) suggests that when facing death individuals are likely to invest in two psychological tasks: a deny of the reality of death in order to buffer death anxiety or a search for meaning in one’s life in a more positive way. TMT posits that human being is the only animal that has the ability to think symbolically about death, which generates the awareness of one’s vulnerability and the fragility of the existence. This consciousness associated with a biological instinct for self-preservation creates the potential for existential anxiety. In order to manage this terror, people invest in two main symbolic psychological defence mechanisms, i.e. distal defence mechanisms: maintaining faith in one’s cultural worldview and enhancing self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1997).

Cultural worldview mechanism provides order, control and meaning in one’s life. It also provides a set of standards of value and the promise of a symbolic death immortality (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991): individuals belong to a global structure that will endure even after their own death. The second mechanism, i.e. self-esteem striving, consists of efforts oriented toward increasing self-esteem by living up to those cultural standards of value and being a valuable member of one’s
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