Faculty Fellowships 2008-2009

Centre for Comparative Social Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences, VU

Application form 2008-2009

(Note: As far as one of the following criteria is not applicable, please indicate why and supply alternative relevant information.)

1. Details of applicant
Name, title(s): Enny Das, PhD
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Duration: 0 Application for an additional 0.4 fte research time during six months / X Application for an additional 0.2 fte research time during one year

Discipline: Communication Science
Keywords: Mortality Salience, Life Salience, Consumption, Materialism, Intrinsic Values, Extrinsic Values

2. Title of the application
Dying to Consume: Existential Motives, Materialism, and Consumer Behavior

3. Research proposal (3a + 3b = max 800 words)

3a. Problem statement and theoretical background
In Western society, consumption and materialism have come to play an intriguing and important role. Consumers buy goods not only because they need to eat, replace a broken piece of equipment, or wear warm clothes when it’s cold outside. Consumers go shopping to express some desired or real aspect of the self, or to be judged positively by others (e.g., Das & Vermeulen, 2007). Consumers may even go shopping when faced with life-threatening events. Immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, Americans bought homes, cars, and electrical gadgets in record quantities (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004). This suggests that consumption and materialism may soothe existential concerns and provide citizens with a sense of security and meaning. The objective of the present proposal is to empirically test the relationship between materialism, existential concerns, and consumer behavior.

In philosophy, a materialist proposition holds that the only thing that can truly be said to exist is matter. Material goods are tangible, and may therefore be particularly suited to provide individuals with a sense of security when faced with existential fears. The desire for wealth and material possessions following existential insecurity has been the object of discussion in religious text, and in classical existential and humanistic traditions (Fromm, 1976; Maslow, 1954). More recently, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991) has proposed that an excessive focus on money, goods, and fame may be a compensation for psychological needs that have not been met. Also, Terror Management Theory (TMT: Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) proposes that existential terror may intensify consumerism and materialism, because these are important values to a Western worldview.

The problem with claims about existential fears and fundamental psychological needs has generally been that they are notoriously hard to verify (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004). Fortunately, new research methods and technologies have recently emerged that provide scientists with the instruments needed to tap into motives previously hidden to the human eye. For instance, attention to incoming stimuli can now be reliably measured with Lexical Decision Tasks, and unconsciously activated fears can be measured with a Word Fragment Completion Task (e.g., Das et al., 2007). Spurred by these
developments, recent studies have started to explore the relationship between materialism, existential concerns, and consumer behavior. These studies suggest that materialism may increase when people are faced with one of the biggest existential fears in life: the fear of one’s own death. Specifically, mortality salience increases the desire to spend money on luxury items (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000), materialism (Arndt et al., 2004), and greed (Cozzolino et al., 2004). Existential fear may thus be a key element in driving excessive consumer behavior.

Of course, there is more to life than a struggle against the inevitability of death; life is for the living, and – at times- may be experienced to the fullest. Unfortunately, very little is known about the relationship between materialism and the brighter side of human existence (see e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). There is some evidence that escaping death may instigate a value shift, away from materialistic values (Cozzolino et al., 2004). In addition, recent findings suggest that feeling ‘wholly awake and fully alive’ (Fromm, in Norell, 1981) may decrease excessive consumption patterns (Das, 2007). Both may trigger life salience, i.e., a flow-like state in which individuals feel ‘fully alive’. The present research tests the role of life salience in consumers’ focus on materialism and consumption. Life salience (versus death salience) is hypothesized decrease the accessibility of materialistic values, increase intrinsic values related to growth and self-actualization, and decrease consumption and materialism.

3b. Method / Approach

Following Cozzolino and colleagues (2004), Experiment 1 will present participants with a scenario about a near death experience, and compare the effects with a typical mortality salience manipulation (Arndt et al., 2004), and a neutral control condition. Key dependent measures are life- and death-related Word Fragment Completions, impulsive consumption patterns (e.g., Das, 2007b), and materialistic aspirations (e.g., Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). All measures have proven reliable in previous studies. Participants in the near death condition are expected to have more life completions, and less death-completions, and decreased materialistic aspirations and consumption than participants in the death and control conditions.

Experiment 2 will ask participants to reflect upon an experience in which they felt fully alive, and compare the effects with a typical mortality salience manipulation, and a neutral control condition. The main dependent measure is responses in milliseconds to target words related to intrinsic (e.g., personal growth, meaningful relationships) and extrinsic goals (e.g., fame, wealth; cf. Kasser & Ryan, 1996) measured by a Lexical Decision Task (LDT). The remaining dependent measures will be copied from Experiment 1. Participants in the life salience condition are expected to show increased accessibility of intrinsic values, decreased accessibility of extrinsic values, and decreased materialistic aspirations and consumption patterns.

4. Key publications relevant to the present proposal (3 - 5)


5. Time Plan (max ½ A4 or 100 words)

The available time (0.2 fte = 320 hours) will be divided among the following activities:

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Develop, program and run Experiment 1  
Analyze data of Experiment 1  
Write journal article 1  
Develop, program and run Experiment 2  
Analyze data of Experiment 2  
Write journal article 2  
Prepare NWO proposal for submission

### 6. Relevance (scientific, societal; max 300 words)

On September 12, 2007, the following item made headlines in newspapers across the world: "On Tuesday night, the opening of the largest MediaMarkt in the world has ended in complete chaos in Berlin. 100 policemen forced thousands of eager customers out of the store, where escalators and glass windows had broken down under the unexpected weight of so many people. Several customers suffered injuries. Small riots broke out. The store was forced to close its doors again at 2 AM.” A few months before, on June 27, 2007, another – more peaceful- story hit the news across the globe: “Americans seem to be more iPhone fans than anyone could possibly expect: on Monday, approximately 100 hours before AT&T stores start selling one of the most sensational gadgets of the 21st century, iPhone fans have started a queue on Fifth Avenue in NYC. It is probably only a matter of speculation how long the line would become by Monday”.

In Western society, consumption and materialism appear to have become key elements in people’s lives. Whereas ‘back in the old days’, consumers went shopping to satisfy their hunger, or repair a broken bicycle, nowadays, consumers go shopping when they don't lack a thing, when they feel good, when they feel bad, and even when they’re terrified (Arndt et al., 2004). Excessive consumption patterns may be rooted in several unconscious needs, and soothe existential fear, meaninglessness, or low self-esteem. Unfortunately, not much is know about the relationship between existential motives, materialism and consumer behavior. The present proposal fills this void by testing the effects of life and death salience on materialistic aspirations and consumption patterns. Apart from the apparent societal relevance, the findings of this research will be relevant to communication scientist, economists, psychologists, and academics from other disciplines like philosophy, and psychiatry.

### 7. Expected output and contributions (7a - 7d = max 500 words)

#### 7a. Expected output

The results of the studies described in this proposal will be presented at highly visible national (e.g., Etmaal voor de Communicatiewetenschap) and international conferences (e.g., International Communication Association, Association for Consumer Research). The results will be submitted to high impact (i.e., ISI rated) peer-reviewed international journals. The project will be conducted in collaboration with Brad Bushman, a visiting professor at the VU, and a full professor at the University of Michigan.

#### 7b. Contribution to the research program of the Department

The research project is solidly embedded in the research focus of the Department of Communication Science, because it deals with the interplay between (1) message characteristics and (2) receiver processes in communication, the two main research lines of the Department. The methodological approach contributes to current research of the department in two important ways: (1) it examines unconscious, cognitive mechanisms that determine receiver processes in the realm of consumer behavior (2) it has clear implications for the content of communication efforts by pinpointing key persuasive elements that should be addressed (i.e., consumer needs).

#### 7c. Contribution to the research mission of the CCSS

The scientific approach of the proposed research fits in nicely with the objective of the CCSS, i.e. to conduct theory-driven and problem-oriented research. The present research
is theory-driven by applying and extending assumptions from Terror Management Theory in the field of consumer behavior. The research is problem oriented because it focuses on an important and highly contemporary issue in Western society: materialism and excessive consumption patterns.

7d. Additional value
- What is the additional value of the proposal? Why is it not possible / would it be possible to conduct the proposed project within regular work time?
- Has the content of the proposal (similar subject matter) been submitted elsewhere? If yes, where?

The content of the present proposal has not been submitted elsewhere, but is tied in between a recently rejected EU grant and a to-be-submitted NWO grant. The ERC Starting Grant proposal that I submitted to the EU in 2007 received very positive evaluations (7.5, threshold for acceptance was 8) but was rejected, at least partly due to an overwhelming number of applicants. I am currently planning to submit a revised version of this proposal to NWO. The present CCSS proposal is designed to improve my chances at NWO, where, as you all know, the competition is extremely tough. In order to improve my chances, the present proposal tests new methods for manipulating the key concept of 'life salience', and, in addition, develops and tests different methods for assessing the accessibility of life- and death-related thoughts, and their relationship to materialism and consumption patterns. The results of these studies will be submitted to international peer-reviewed journals. As such, this proposal serves two purposes: (1) improve my expertise and track record, in particular in the domain of consumer behavior, and (2) underscore the viability of newly developed experimental paradigms in the to-be-developed NWO-proposal. Because of my teaching load, and the hours needed for other ongoing research projects, time to conduct the proposed research is currently scarce.

8. Replacement of applicant’s teaching obligations
Replacement of the applicant’s teaching obligations is stated in the attached letter by the Head of the Dept. of Communication Science in Appendix A.

9. CV of applicant
In the past years, I have published in the leading journals across disciplines: marketing and communication research (e.g., Communication Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology), psychology (e.g., Psychological Science, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin), and health (e.g., Health Psychology, Journal of Health Psychology). See CV in Appendix B for detailed information.

10. I hereby declare that I have completed this form truthfully:
Name: Enny Das
Amsterdam, Date: November 14, 2007

11. Literature references (max 1 A4)

References


