

DYING TO BUY HIGH STATUS BRANDS: BANNER ADS DESIGNED WITH REMINDERS OF DEATH INFLUENCE BRAND CHOICE IN ONLINE SHOPPING DESPITE BANNER BLINDNESS

Dr. Rene Holl

The New School for Social Research, USA

ABSTRACT

Terror Management Theory (TMT) research demonstrates that exposure to mortality salient (MS) content—reminders of death—can influence consumers to prefer high-status brands and effects of MS occur even when MS content is only peripherally present. Peripheral information in Web shopping may have a similar effect: people exposed to MS banner ads should choose high-status brands more often than people who are exposed to non-MS banner ads, especially when they are "banner blind" (i.e., when they do not consciously register the ads).

Participants shopped for a single product within each of four product categories (T-shirts, watches, chocolates and automobiles) on a fictitious e-commerce site in both a pilot study, where participants completed MS or non-MS writing tasks before shopping, and in a main study, where participants shopped on webpages that displayed MS or non-MS banner ads. In both studies, they then ranked each product by status; in the main study, they indicated if they recalled seeing any of the banner ads shown during shopping in a banner ads recognition task, to detect banner blindness. The result from the pilot study supported the MS hypothesis. In the main study, MS banner ads marginally increased the likelihood of selecting high-status automobiles. Among the 136 "banner blind" participants—but not the 59 participants who recognized at least one banner ad—MS banner ads significantly increased shoppers' likelihood of selecting higher-status items.

A framework for evaluating ethical versus unethical advertising was reviewed to determine that it is unethical for advertisers who are tempted to intentionally use MS stimuli in online advertising to influence consumer behavior. This study aims to not only find evidence to support the hypothesized effect, but to also bring us one step closer to determining if such a subtle peripheral effect might already influence people's decision-making processes, and sway their purchase decisions, in their day-to-day experiences. Ideally, these findings can serve to make consumers aware of the peripheral subliminal MS effect that may bias their decision-making and educate them to be vigilant for circumstances when this MS effect may occur.

Keywords: Terror Management Theory, Banner Blindness, Subliminal Advertising, Brand Status, E-commerce Psychology, Judgement and Decision Making, Behavioral Economics, Ernest Dichter