

Security blankets: Materialism and death anxiety lead to brand loyalty

January 26 2009

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Authors Aric Rindfleisch (University of Wisconsin-Madison and Korea University), James E. Burroughs (University of Virginia), and Nancy Wong (University of Wisconsin-Madison) examined levels of materialism and insecurity in consumers and discovered that the combination of "death anxiety" and materialism led to strong attachment to brands.

While conventional wisdom holds that materialistic individuals are weakly connected to brands and use them as superficial status badges, the new research proves that brands hold more meaning for materialistic consumers than previously thought. When those individuals are also worried about death, their brand attachment grows.

"We propose that materialistic individuals form strong connections to their brands when death anxiety is high but not when death anxiety is low," write the authors. "Materialistic individuals are strongly connected to their brands and employ them as an important source of meaning in their lives."

The authors tested their hypothesis by conducting two different but related studies. The first study asked adults in the United States to rate their degrees of materialism, death anxiety, and brand connection. In the second study, conducted among college students, the researchers manipulated death anxiety by having participants consider their own deaths in detail. In both studies, participants rated their degree of connection to a variety of products including cars, microwaves, jeans, cell phones, MP3 players, and sunglasses.

"Materialistic consumers with anxiety about their existence are especially in need of the symbolic security that brand connections provide," write the authors. "Given the recent rise in materialistic tendencies along with the media's heightened focus on existential threats, the number of consumers who display this combination of values and motives should increase in the near future."

Reference: Aric Rindfleisch, James E. Burroughs, and Nancy Wong. "The Safety of Objects: Materialism, Existential Insecurity, and Brand Connection." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2009.

Source: University of Chicago

Citation: Security blankets: Materialism and death anxiety lead to brand loyalty (2009, January 26) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-01-blankets-materialism-death-anxiety-brand.html>

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