

# Shopping with the Grim Reaper in mind

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A new study by Alex Davidson, a graduate student at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business, has explored how fear of the Grim Reaper translates into Canadian buying patterns. Credit: Concordia University

Fear of death is a universal human emotion, but does it influence our behaviour as consumers? A new study, conducted by a graduate student at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business, has explored how fear of the Grim Reaper translates into Canadian buying patterns. The research has several implications for marketers in these uncertain times.

"It's impossible to watch the news without being bombarded with reports of murders, terrorist attacks, life-threatening epidemics or [environmental disasters](#)," says Alex Davidson. He explored the link between [consumer behaviour](#) and fear of death in his master's thesis: "The Impact of Mortality Salience Effects on Consumer Behaviour."

"We wanted to learn how existential anxiety affects consumers and what kinds of buying decisions they are likely to make when reminded of their mortality," continues Davidson.

## **Death or the dentist?**

As part of the study, Davidson designed an on-line survey of 540 Canadian men and women aged 18 to 40. Among the findings, increased awareness of death made respondents with lower self esteem more likely to purchase prestige items. Yet for people with high self esteem and older respondents, thoughts of mortality made them less likely to purchase prestige items.

Half the survey group answered a series of open-ended questions to increase their subconscious awareness of death – or in technical terms of their "mortality salience." Participants were asked to describe what emotions the thought of their own death aroused and their expectations about the death process.

The remainder of participants – the control group – was asked to describe their thoughts about going to the dentist and the type of pain it might cause. All participants answered another set of consumer behaviour questions.

## **Attitudes to charity unaffected**

Increases in mortality salience also made younger individuals and those with lower self esteem less inclined to take chances when confronted with what they saw as risky purchase decisions.

"This was the first study of its kind to gather data in this area using online consumer panels," says thesis supervisor Michel Laroche,

Concordia's Royal Bank Distinguished Professor in Marketing. "The approach permitted the testing of a hypothesis on a sample that reflects the entire Canadian population."

"Every day people are confronted with purchase decisions," observes Davidson. "Through this study, we've shown that mortality salience plays a greater role than we realized in that decision-making process. This type of research has implications for marketing, but it also offers a better understanding of economic history and the evolution of consumer practices."

**More information:** [gradworks.umi.com/MR/67/MR67272.html](http://gradworks.umi.com/MR/67/MR67272.html)

Provided by Concordia University

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