THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH CULTURE
A Terror Management Approach

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In the literature, youth culture has been addressed in two distinct ways: the aesthetic approach, which has led to criticism of youth culture, and the empirical approach, in which the functions and benefits of youth culture have been stressed. In this article, Terror Management Theory (TMT) is used to provide a functional approach to youth culture. According to TMT, culture is conceived of as a buffer against the awareness of death. To assess the anxiety-buffering function of youth culture, an experiment was conducted in which awareness of death (mortality salience) was manipulated. In the experimental condition, results showed more extreme evaluations of pro-youth and anti-youth essays and their authors, suggesting that awareness of death increases allegiance to youth culture. Implications of these findings are discussed in light of the nature of youth culture and its relation to larger society.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, adolescence did not exist as a separate developmental stage, at least in the traditional Western societies. The transition from childhood to adulthood was smooth and relatively short. From a very young age, the youth participated in the production process, and expressions of youthful behavior could only be observed in the evenings and on holidays. Only then was there time for mischief and could the practices of charivari evolve (Ariès, 1973; Gillis, 1974). Students were the exception, having had the opportunity to develop their own culture in isolation since the Middle Ages.

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Over the course of the 19th century, the number of adolescents who went to school increased, and the youth had more leisure time. Consequently, youth culture became a widespread phenomenon. Especially in Germany, a free and independent adolescent life emerged. The concept of youth culture (*jugendkultur*) was first introduced there by Gustav Wyneken (1913/1963). Whereas youth culture manifested itself as an organized and elitist movement between the First and Second World Wars, it subsequently became massive and commercialized. Being young became especially popular in the 1960s. Not only adolescents, but adults also, were inspired by this ideal.

The concept of youth culture increased in popularity as well, which may be particularly ascribed to the publications of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Clark, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976). Youth culture can be defined as "the sum of the ways of living of adolescents; it refers to the body of norms, values, and practices recognized and shared by members of the adolescent society as appropriate guides to actions" (Rice, 1996, p. 405). In contemporary society, adolescents create a world of their own using material artifacts such as clothing and music to distinguish themselves from others (Rice, 1996, pp. 413-420). These material artifacts are part of an "extended sense of self" (Dittmar, 1992, p. 41) and "symbolize social and political affiliations" (Dittmar, 1992, p. 157). Both these notions have been substantiated in empirical research (De Hart & Janssen, 1991).

In the Netherlands, youth culture flourishes. In a survey conducted in 1989, ten different groups were distinguished: punk, *kak* (posh), disco, flower power, hard rock, new wave, Rastafari, skinhead, *normalo* (average people), and rock (Janssen, 1994). Krooshof (1998, p. 59) listed the following youth cultures: *gabber* (a Dutch invention of a predominantly male music culture called *house*), *alto* (a new name for flower power), *kak* (posh), punk, hard rock, house, hip-hop, nerd, and straight edge. Although several labels have changed, music and clothing as well as a sense of morality are still the most important ingredients of adolescents’ worldview. Whereas a small minority of the young may have become fully immersed in one of these subcultures, most identify themselves with one or more groups by adopting just its music style or elements of its presentational style (Janssen, 1994).
In the literature on youth culture, two general lines of argument may be distinguished. According to some, youth culture is nothing but a commercialized leisure activity, just a fashion hype of clothes and music without any psychological or existential meaning. In this moralistic approach to youth culture, the characterization of youth and their culture tends to be deprecatory. The philosopher Allan Bloom (1988), for example, depicted youth as a bunch of superficial layabouts who lack any form of idealism and live decadently in a rotten and anarchistic world. Their minds are deprived of any sign of real culture (for similar perspectives see also Finkielkraut, 1995; and Mestrovic, 1991). In this approach, hardly any reference is made to empirical studies on youth.

Others have challenged these deprecatory views of youth culture. In contrast to the authors mentioned above, others take a more empirical approach; at least they ask the young people to express their opinions and feelings. Central to this approach is the effect of youth culture on socialization and psychological well-being. Some researchers interpret the participation of young people in youth culture primarily as coping behavior. Arnett (1991), for example, argued that youth culture constitutes a binding element in the collective consciousness of adolescents. Popular music, in particular, is conceived as beneficial to the regulation of aggression, anxiety, and negative moods. Or, as a subject in Arnett’s study remarked, “[youth culture] is good for frustrated depression” (p. 83). In a similar fashion, Seca (1991) stressed the positive effects of youth culture for seeking one’s own lifestyle and identity. In accordance with this reasoning, a growing body of research indicates that youth culture in general and music in particular moderate anxiety and provide an opportunity to express one’s suppressed problems (Kurdek, 1987; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; Mark, 1986, 1988). Hassner (1983) even argued that rock music functions therapeutically for the treatment of depression.

Each of these approaches has its drawbacks. The problem with the moralistic approach to youth culture is that it takes the perspective of a distant observer who restricts himself or herself to aesthetic criteria. The problem with empirical research is that it uses mainly the manifest opinion of the youth (survey research) from which researchers draw their conclusions. Consequently, an endless, though sometimes very interesting, discussion remains.
In this article, we follow a third line of argument. Rather than evaluating youth culture on moral or aesthetic grounds or describing its positive functions as reported by the young, we will try to study the underlying psychological importance of youth culture by applying the recently developed Terror Management Theory (TMT). According to TMT, culture is important because it provides people a meaningful place in a meaningful world. We will examine whether youth culture serves this psychologically vital function.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY (TMT)

Inspired by the “existential psychoanalysis” of Ernest Becker (1962, 1973), TMT (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) starts with the assumption that virtually all behavior is driven by the need for self-preservation. Unfortunately, due to their specific abilities to reflect on themselves, to think causally, and to foresee events in the future, humans are also aware of the inevitability of death. According to TMT, this combination of the will to live and the awareness of death creates the potential for a paralyzing terror.

To avoid the realization of this potential, humans try to control their mortality both actively and symbolically (see, e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, in press). Examples of the former are gathering food and the development of medicine and arms to keep enemies away. Despite these activities, however, death remains inevitable and can therefore only be dealt with symbolically. According to TMT, symbolic representations of reality—that is, cultures—serve, at least in part, to help individuals cope with their concerns about their finiteness. This function may be accomplished by two components, which together constitute a dual-component, cultural-anxiety buffer. The first component is a worldview, which provides rules and standards by means of which individuals can judge themselves to be of value, and a religion or ideology that promises literal or symbolic immortality to those who live up to these rules and standards. The second component of the anxiety buffer is self-esteem. This concept is defined as a sense of value and immortality attained by successfully living up to the rules and standards provided by a particular worldview. Because this dual
component cultural-anxiety buffer is a social invention and, therefore, by definition a fragile construction (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967), most social behavior is directed toward the defense or maintenance of either one's worldview or one's self-esteem.

One hypothesis to be derived from TMT is that symbols and symbolic activities that help one cope with mortality become especially important when the prospect of one's own finiteness is made salient. The empirical merits of this hypothesis have been confirmed using an experimental paradigm that was first reported by Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Lyon (1989). In this paradigm, which is actually presented to participants as two separate studies, participants first fill out some questionnaires allegedly to assess personality characteristics, and then are asked to judge other persons. The first part of the study is actually included to create experimental groups by reminding half of the participants about death and the other half about an irrelevant topic. To assess the effects of this experimental manipulation of death accessibility on allegiance to cultural practices and beliefs, participants engage in a "second" study in which they are asked to judge or evaluate persons who somehow violate or uphold the cultural morals of the participants. Previous research has indicated that experimentally induced reminders of death lead to harsher bonds for an alleged prostitute, greater rewards for someone who defends the values of the subjects (Rosenblatt et al., 1989), more positive evaluations of in-group members, more negative evaluations of out-group members (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon et al., 1990; Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996), increased amount of tension, and perceived task difficulty when using cultural icons inappropriately to complete a problem-solving task (Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995). Moreover, it was shown that reminders of other concerns—such as pain and failing an important exam—do not lead to the same effects as the mortality salience manipulation (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Greenberg, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1995). Finally, the effects of mortality salience cannot be explained as mere mood effects because, in all studies, the experimental manipulation of death concerns did not lead to changes in self-reported affect. A thorough review of findings is provided by Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (1997).
THE PRESENT RESEARCH

One particularly effective method of assessing the effects of experimentally induced reminders of death has been to ask participants to evaluate the authors of two essays (see, e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997; Greenberg, Simon, Solomon, Chatel, & Pyszczynski, 1992). One of the essays is very positive about the beliefs and practices of the participants, and the other is very critical. If, as TMT posits, cultural practices and beliefs serve to provide a sense of equanimity in the face of death, then these practices and beliefs should become more important when death-related thoughts are induced. As importance increases, tolerance for those who criticize these practices and beliefs should diminish, and liking for those who praise them should increase.

If youth culture serves to help adolescents deal with problems of vulnerability and finiteness, then reminders of mortality should lead to increased allegiance to cultural practices and beliefs of the youth. For assessing this anxiety-buffering function of youth culture using the mortality salience paradigm, the main challenge was to develop essays that addressed youth culture in general terms yet retained a content specifically designed for this type of culture. As noted previously, research in the Netherlands has revealed several common themes across youth cultures (e.g., Janssen, 1994) including presentational styles (clothing, makeup), pop music, morality, and spirituality, which are particularly used to distinguish oneself from parents, school, and society at large. We used these four elements to characterize youth culture in either a positive or negative fashion. Following the procedure used in previous research, half of the participants were first reminded about death and the other half about watching television. Then all participants were asked to read the essays. It was expected that, if youth culture serves to protect adolescents from the paralyzing consequences of death concerns, the induction of mortality salience would lead to effects similar to those found previously. That is, it was expected that, compared to a control condition, inducing adolescents to think about their mortality would lead to (a) an increased preference for the author of the positive essay, and (b) a more negative evaluation of the author of the critical essay.
METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 53 high school students (age ranging from 16 to 19) who took part in an informative meeting about studying cultural psychology at the University of Nijmegen.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

Prior to the actual informative meeting, all participants took part in the study simultaneously in one classroom session. The materials and procedure of the experiment were based mainly on earlier studies conducted by Greenberg, Simon, Solomon, Chatel, & Pyszczynski (1992). Before the experiment, participants were informed that the experiment was an illustration of how research is conducted by social psychologists and that they first would fill out a set of questionnaires as an example of how personality traits are assessed and then a set of questionnaires that would illustrate how opinions and attitudes are measured. After the participants were instructed to answer the questionnaires in the order they were presented, both sets of questionnaires were distributed.

The first set of questionnaires consisted of a cover story and four “personality” questionnaires. The first two, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and Lerner’s Belief in Just World scale (Lerner, 1980), were included to disguise the true purpose of the experiments. Then, an inventory was presented with written instructions stating that “recent research has indicated that thoughts and feelings about particular topics can reveal a great deal about one’s personality,” and, therefore, participants were asked to write down their thoughts and feelings about death or, in the control condition, about a trivial topic. Half of the participants filled out the Mortality Attitudes Personality Survey (Rosenblatt et al., 1989), which consists of two questions: (a) “Describe what you think will happen to you when you physically die” and (b) “describe the feelings that the thoughts of death arouse in you.” The other half of the participants filled out a similar filler questionnaire about watching television, a presumably irrelevant topic. Participants completed the personality questionnaires
by indicating their current affective state on the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965).

The second set of questionnaires consisted of a cover story and the two essays on youth culture, each followed by two measures on which participants could express their evaluation of the essays and the authors. The cover story stated that the department conducted survey research on attitudes toward several topics including youth in contemporary society and that the youth were now asked to give their opinions about these attitudes. Participants were instructed to read two essays and evaluate the essays and the authors. The essays were positive and negative in content, and were counterbalanced for order of presentation. The positive essay stated the following:

Through the ages, youngsters have had to pay for it. I think that’s unfair. People tend to forget that youngsters have made an important contribution to societal changes. The criticism on contemporary youth is, as I see it, uncalled for. Youngsters do have moral values. That these deviate from those of earlier generations does not alter that fact. There has never been so much interest in ‘higher’ affairs like art and spirituality as today. Currently, youngsters don’t have an easy life, but I admire the creativity with which they handle their problems. Youth are probably the most underestimated section of the population in the Netherlands.

The bogus author of the negative essay argued that

People sometimes claim that youth have the future, but I don’t believe that. Youngsters nowadays seem to be occupied only with themselves; they are not interested in society at all. Besides, they have no norms and values left, and they lack any form of idealism. They try to disguise their emptiness and superficiality by their clothing and make-up, but I can see through that. The only thing they’re interested in is cheap amusement. Take pop music, for example. These youngsters call it art, but in fact it’s nothing more than a commercial racket. No, youngsters call it art, but they don’t do anything sensible with it. They think they are very special and exclusive, but they are not.

Each essay was followed by two evaluation measures. The first measure consisted of five questions concerning the extent to which the essay made valid points, how biased the essay was, how well it was written, how much subjects liked the author, and how interested they
would be in meeting the author (all answers could range from 1—*not at all*—to 9—*extremely*). On the second evaluation form, participants were asked to indicate, on a 9-point scale, the applicability of 15 positive traits and 15 negative traits of the author.

After participants returned the questionnaires, TMT and the true purpose of the experiment were explained. After this information, all participants gave consent for their information to be used as data for further analysis.

**RESULTS**

**EVALUATION OF ESSAY AND AUTHOR**

A principal components factor analysis performed on the first evaluation measure of both the positive and negative essay revealed that four items loaded on one factor (all $rs > .60$). The item *how interested would you be in meeting the author* did not load on the factor ($r = .12$). Therefore, the sum score of the other four items was taken as the evaluation measure.

This measure was further analyzed using a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) $\times$ 2 (order of presentation: positive vs. negative essay first) between-subjects $\times$ 2 (target: positive vs. negative essay) within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for target, $F(1, 49) = 117.20$, $p < .001$, indicating that the positive essay was evaluated more positively than the negative essay. More important, a significant Mortality Salience $\times$ Target interaction was found, $F(1, 49) = 4.60$, $p < .04$, indicating that subjects in the mortality salience condition discriminated more between the essays than control subjects. Relevant means are displayed in Table 1.

Not surprising, within-condition pairwise comparisons of differences between the evaluations of the positive and the negative essay revealed significant effects of valence in the death condition, $t (25) = 9.63$, $p < .001$, and the control condition, $t (25) = 7.61$, $p < .001$, indicating that the author of the positive essay was liked more than the author of the negative essay in both conditions. Pairwise comparison revealed that mortality salience led to a significantly more positive evaluation of the pro-youth essay, $t (51) = 2.01$, $p < .05$, compared to


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<th>Pro-youth Essay</th>
<th>Anti-youth Essay</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mortality salience</td>
<td>28.11</td>
<td>14.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>24.81</td>
<td>15.89</td>
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NOTE: The evaluation scores could range from 4 to 36; higher scores indicate a more favorable attitude toward the essay.

the control condition. Though the anti-youth essay was rated more negatively in the mortality salience condition, a similar analysis of the evaluation of the anti-youth essay did not reveal a significant effect, t (51) = .76, n.s. These results suggest that the experimentally induced reminders of death increased the liking for the author of the positive essay but did not lead to decreased liking of the author of the negative essay.

TRAIT RATINGS

A principal components factor analysis indicated that eight positive traits (i.e., honest, flexible, likable, intelligent, reliable, kind, warm, and generous) and eight negative traits (i.e., rigid, insensitive, arrogant, snobbish, obnoxious, weak-minded, self-centered, and hypocritical) loaded on one factor (all rs > .50). These 16 trait ratings were transformed into an evaluation measure by adding the reversed average score of the negative traits to the average score of the positive traits. This scale was internally consistent (Cronbach’s alphas > .78). The author trait rating measure was analyzed using a 2 (mortality salience vs. control) × 2 (order of presentation: positive vs. negative essay first) between-subjects × 2 (target: positive vs. negative essay) within-subjects ANOVA, which revealed a significant main effect for target, F(1, 49) = 62.05, p < .001. However, the Mortality Salience × Target interaction failed to reach significance, F(1, 49) = 2.39, p < .13. Moreover, the ANOVA revealed an unexpected but highly significant Order of Presentation × Target interaction, F(1, 49) = 8.95, p < .004, which indicates that the evaluation of the pro-youth author was more positive when subjects first read the anti-youth essay than when the pro-youth essay preceded the anti-youth essay. This effect occurred
independent of the experimental manipulation because no Mortality Salience × Order × Target interaction was found. Relevant means are displayed in Table 2.

As for the evaluation scores, within-condition pairwise comparisons of differences between trait ratings of the authors of the positive and the negative essay revealed significant effects of valence in the death condition, $t(26) = 9.63, p < .001$, and the control condition, $t(26) = 7.61, p < .001$, indicating that the author of the positive essay was liked more than the author of the negative essay in both conditions. Although the predicted Mortality Salience × Evaluation interaction was not significant, pairwise comparisons of the evaluation ratings did reveal a marginally significant effect of mortality salience on the evaluation of the positive essay, $t(51) = 1.89, p < .06$, which indicates that participants tended to rate the author of the pro-youth essay more positively due to the manipulation of mortality salience. The expected reversed pattern on the anti-youth essay was not found, $t(51) = -.07$, n.s. These results corroborate the findings of the evaluation measure. Mortality salience increased the allocation of positive traits to the author of the positive essays. The author of the negative essays was not liked less due to mortality salience.

**AFFECT**

The effects of the experimental manipulation of anxiety and positive affect and negative affect were tested by one-way ANOVAs. No significant differences were found (all $ps > .16$). Furthermore, within-cell correlations revealed that affective state did not mediate the evaluations of the essay and the author (all $ps > .17$). Thus, as in previous studies on terror management, effects of the experimental manipulation cannot be explained as mere mood effects.
DISCUSSION

The findings of the experiment provide a replication of the mortality salience effect found in previous studies. When participants are reminded of death, they seem to seek protection by strengthening their allegiance to socially constructed symbolic systems from which they can derive positive self-esteem and that enable them to alleviate their concerns about mortality. These findings suggest that youth culture is one of these protective symbolic systems. Apparently, participants discriminated significantly more between the positive and negative essays about youth culture after mortality was made salient because of their increased need for equanimity provided by that particular culture. This finding cannot be attributed to different affective states because the experimental manipulation did not lead to changes in anxiety nor positive and negative affect (an extensive discussion of the implications of this finding would go beyond the scope of this article). For a more extended comment on the absence of changes in mood after mortality is made salient, see, for example, Greenberg et al. (1997).

It is important to note, however, that some findings deviate from previous research. Notably, the effects of the mortality salience manipulation were found primarily in the evaluations of the positive essay. The lack of the mortality salience effect found in the evaluation of the author of the negative essay needs to be further addressed. Though this finding is open to a variety of explanations, we believe three deserve consideration. The first is that the essays used in the experiment were quite general in their content and, thus, rather than defending or criticizing specific symbols and practices, they addressed the more general category of youth, which may have been less pertinent to the participants. This may account for the rather weak effects compared to those found by Greenberg et al. (1990) and Greenberg et al. (1992). In future research, this could be checked by investigating the importance of specific youth cultures. Perhaps punk has more existential value for punks than disco culture for disco fans, and so on. But, for the time being, it seems unlikely that this tells the whole story because the same category was addressed in the positive essay, on which the mortality salience manipulation did cause a significantly more positive evaluation. The second explanation is that youth culture is not an important source of personal value and consequently does not require any de-
fense when criticized. We believe, however, that this explanation is also unlikely, especially when taking into account the amount of time and money spent in the maintenance of one’s position within a particular youth culture. We believe that a third explanation is the most viable and lies in the specific nature of youth culture, which will be discussed in more detail.

**YOUTH CULTURE: CULTURE, SUBCULTURE, OR COMMERCIAL INVENTION?**

One should not interpret youth culture as a cultural system that exists on its own because it always forms part of the larger cultural system of the society in question (Amit-Talai, 1995). Criticism of a particular youth culture may therefore not hurt the youth involved as much as would criticism of their culture or identity at large (e.g., their nationality). In a sense, the limited pervasiveness of a particular youth culture renders it less crucial as a defense system than the more encompassing general culture of a society. Thus, in the case of youth culture, one can defend one’s worldview not only by denigrating critics, but also by identifying more with other protective cultural systems and less with one’s youth culture. Obviously, to establish whether youth culture indeed has limited significance for worldview defense, further research on this issue is needed.

We do not intend to imply, however, that because youth culture is not defended when criticized, youth culture is not important or should be conceived of as nothing more than a commercial invention (as noted by some critics). Despite its fragility, youth culture could provide an important source of self-esteem, especially when taking into account the unavailability of other sources (e.g., being a young child or having a vocational identity) during adolescence.

**THE PARADOXICAL COMBINATION OF YOUTH AND DEATH**

The combination of youth culture as an important source of self-esteem and self-esteem as an anxiety buffer leaves us with a final ques-
tion: Do adolescents actually think about death? The combination of youth and death may appear somewhat paradoxical at first glance. We believe, however, that the prospect of death is particularly salient among the youth because, during adolescence, a coherent self-image emerges, and adolescents are forced by society to look to their futures without having any certainties about fulfilling their wishes (Farnsworth, 1973; Fasick, 1984; France, 1996). With a society that increasingly stresses the importance of getting a good career yet decreasingly guarantees a valuable place in a secure worldview, the prospect of death is even more likely to become salient. Indeed, in such a society, for example, the Dutch society, youth cultures that focus on death instead of life are likely to emerge and actually do emerge (death metal rock music, doom, etc.) (Lowney, 1995; Took & Weiss, 1994).

NOTE

1. In the Netherlands, parental approval is, strictly speaking, required for those under the age of 18. In fact, this rule is freely interpreted in studies that follow the standards of the American Psychological Association (APA). In our research, we strictly followed the ethical standards of the APA: (a) The test has no known harmful effects, (b) there was no real deception in the test, (c) the respondents were completely free to participate and were explicitly told that they could withdraw from the experiment at any moment, and (d) the participants were carefully debriefed. No problems were encountered in the debriefing.

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