

Shuffling Deck Chairs on the Titanic: Mortality Salience and Behavioral Busyness

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Background

People tend to prefer behavioral busyness over idleness (Hsee, Yang, & Wang, 2010).

We suggest that the appeal of behavioral busyness over idleness can be partially explained via Terror Management Theory (TMT; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015) and that being behaviorally busy (vs. idle) functions to alleviate concerns about mortality.

TMT posits that acknowledging the reality of personal mortality could invoke intense, if not debilitating, anxiety, so humanity has addressed its fate by engaging psychological structures that provide opportunities for death transcendence via literal or symbolic immortality. These structures largely comprise maintaining faith in cultural worldviews that drape existence in symbolic meaning and cultivating self-esteem, the sense that one's individual being is significant.

Being busy is often culturally valued. Busyness is related to both high moral standing (Weber, 1905/1930) and high social status (Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2016; Gershuny, 2005).

Research indicates more positive perceptions of general action over inaction and that such positivity increases the more strongly a behavior exemplifies action (e.g. "run" vs. "plan") (McCulloch, Li, Hong, & Albarracin, 2012; Zell et al., 2012).

Hypotheses

H₁: Participants reminded of mortality should show greater likelihood of choosing behavioral busyness over idleness.

H₂: When psychological structures that buffer potential death-related anxiety are situationally engaged, the need for further defensive responding is reduced or eliminated. If behavioral busyness serves a death-anxiety buffering function, then being behaviorally busy after contemplating mortality should reduce the need for alternative defenses.

Study 1

Undergraduate psychology students ($N = 154$) completed materials, including the following:

Saliency Manipulation: Two open-ended questions about death (MS) or physical pain.

Choice Measure: A 10-minute waiting period could be spent choosing one of the following options (adopted from Hsee et al., 2010):

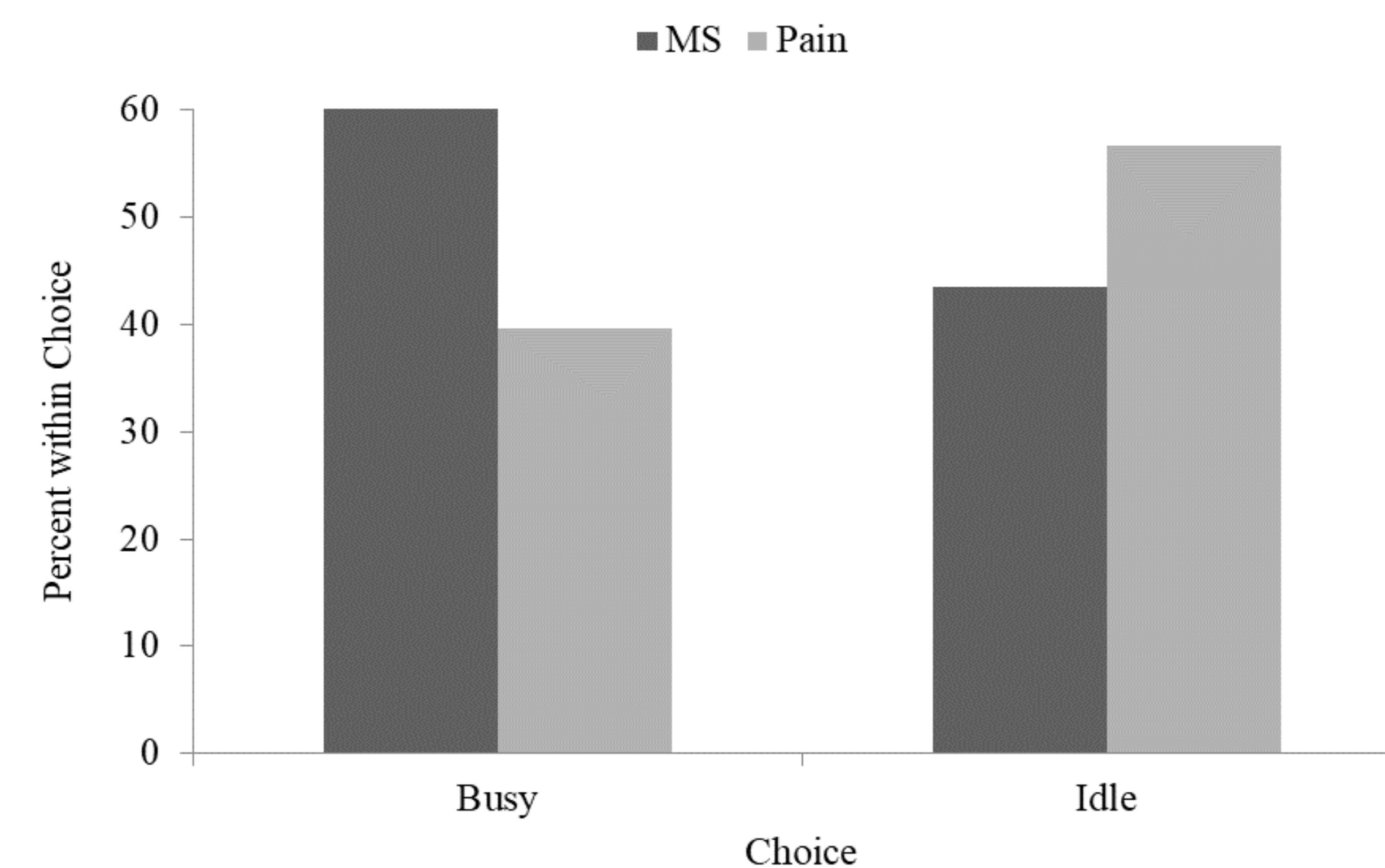
Idle Option:

Sit quietly alone without distractions (mobile devices, books)

Busy Option

Walk to deposit materials on another floor of the building and return

Results



Participants' choice (behaviorally idle vs. busy during the waiting period) was submitted to a chi-square test (Saliency: MS vs. Pain) which returned a significant result, $\chi^2(1) = 3.83, p = .050, OR = 2.00$.

Compared to participants in the control condition, participants in the mortality salience condition were twice as likely to choose behavioral busyness over idleness.

Study 2

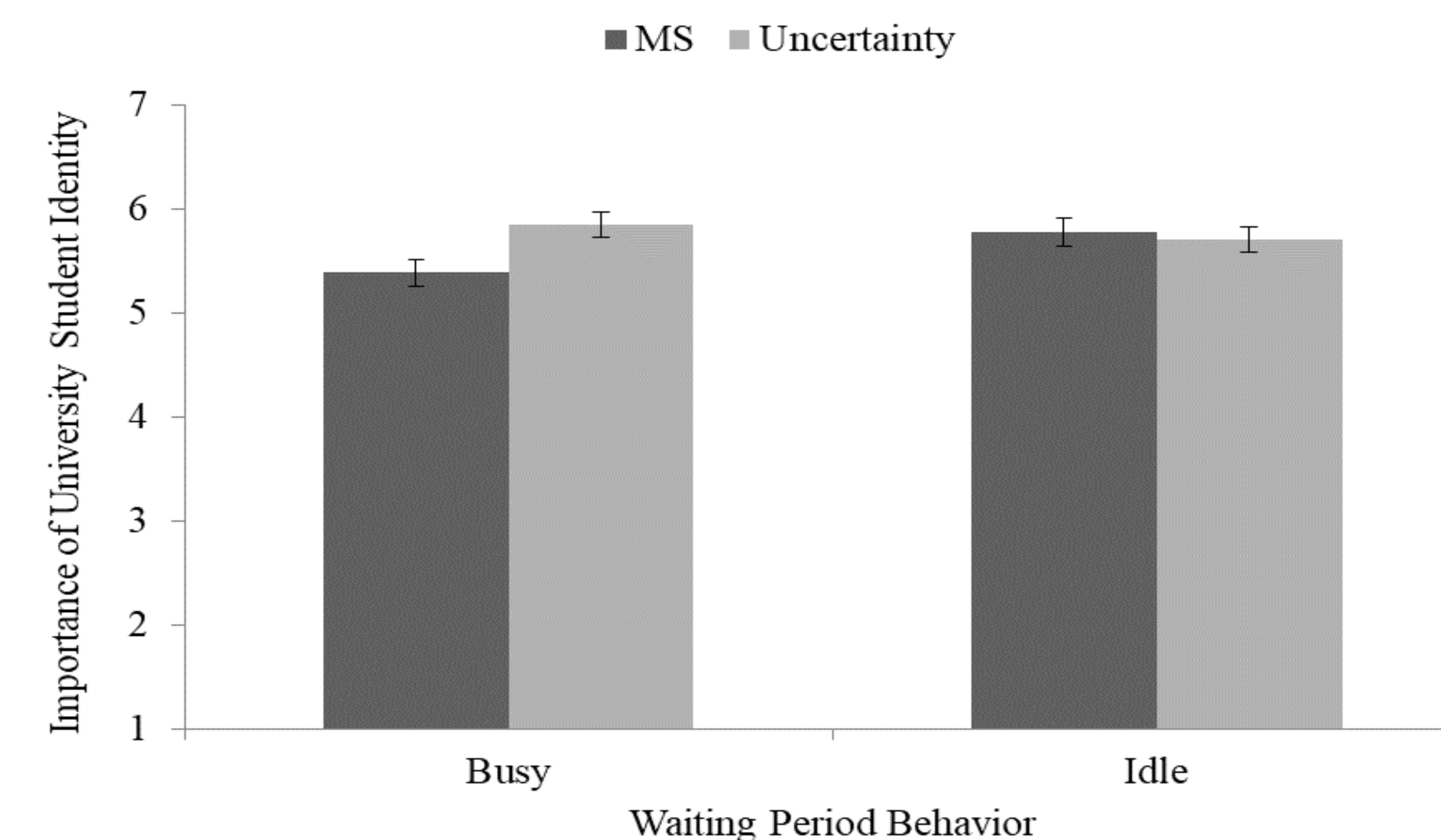
Undergraduate psychology students ($N = 308$) completed materials, including the following:

Saliency Manipulation: Two open-ended questions about death (MS) or uncertainty.

Behavior Manipulation: A 10-minute waiting period was spent being behaviorally busy or idle (adopted from Hsee et al., 2010).

Defense Measure: Participants completed five items measuring the strength and importance of their identity as university students on 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales. Scores on each item were averaged to create a single importance of university student identity composite ($M = 5.68, SD = 1.14, \alpha = .91$)

Results



A significant saliency x behavior interaction emerged, $F(1, 304) = 4.16, p = .042, \eta_p^2 = .013$. Contrasts revealed that within the MS condition, participants who were behaviorally busy during the waiting period indicated their identity as university students was of significantly less importance to them ($M = 5.39, SD = 1.11$) compared to their idle counterparts ($M = 5.78, SD = 1.16$), $F(1, 304) = 4.48, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .015$.

Looked at differently, of participants who behaved busily during the waiting period, those previously reminded of their mortality were significantly less identified with their role as university students ($M = 5.39, SD = 1.11$) compared to those primed with uncertainty ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 304) = 5.86, p = .016, \eta_p^2 = .019$.

Conclusions

Two studies examined whether a pervasive human preference for behavioral busyness over idleness is motivated, in part, by existential concerns stemming from awareness of personal inevitable mortality.

Findings suggest such is the case.

Study 1 demonstrated that participants who previously contemplated mortality were more likely to choose behavioral busyness over idleness.

Study 2 showed that being behaviorally busy after contemplating mortality reduced the need for alternative self-esteem striving-related defensive responding.

Taken together, these findings indicate behavioral busyness serves a terror management function.

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