Decoupling Awe and Self-Transcendence

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Abstract

Awe is often seen as a self-transcendent emotion. This research dissociates awe from self-transcendence to better understand awe's unique effects on consumer psychology. Self-transcendence is a transient state characterized by self-loss and connection, and we find that not all awe experiences produce it to the same extent. Across two studies (N=569), we elicited beauty or threat awe. Study 1 found that threat awe led to less salient self-transcendence and greater powerlessness than beauty awe; self-diminishment mediated the effect of threat (vs. beauty) awe on feelings of powerlessness. Study 2 identified safety as key to self-transcendence and replicated the effect of threat awe on its salience and self-diminishment, with self-diminishment mediating its effect on feelings of powerlessness. Through this research, we contribute conceptually and methodologically to the literature of awe and self-transcendence, and specifically to threat-awe, about which we know very little.

Keywords. *Awe; Self-transcendence; Powerlessness*

Track**:** *Consumer behavior*

1. Introduction

Awe is defined as a response to something physically or conceptually vast that challenges our existing understanding and forces us to accommodate new perspectives (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe research in marketing is still sparse, and a recent discussion called for more research (Cavanaugh, 2025; Hagtvedt, 2025; Keltner, 2025). Awe is classified as a "self-transcendent emotion" because it tends to shift attention away from the self and toward entities outside of the self (Stellar et al., 2017). This research advances our understanding of both awe and self-transcendence by decoupling them. This is important to clarify their unique effects: Are the observed effects of awe found in the literature due to the experience of awe as an emotion, or due to self-transcendent experiences coupled with awe?

Although self-transcendence is a complex concept (Kitson et al., 2020), we focus on the local experience of self-transcendence, defined as a brief mental state characterized by self-loss and increased connection to the surroundings (Yaden et al., 2017). Awe, as a self-transcendent emotion, has been listed as a contextual antecedent of self-transcendent experience, along with other self-transcendent emotions such as compassion or gratitude, as well as other contextual triggers such as meditation or the use of psychedelics (Yaden & Newberg, 2022).

This research aims to further 1) our understanding of awe by decoupling it from self-transcendence and 2) our knowledge of two variants of awe, especially threat awe, about which we know less. To empirically decouple awe and self-transcendence, we begin by conceptually analyzing the phenomenology of each.

1.1.The Phenomenology of Awe and Self-Transcendence

A basic phenomenology of awe is a sense of self-diminishment, meaning it makes people feel smaller, subordinate, or less important compared to something vast and powerful (Bai et al., 2017; Piff et al., 2015), captured by scale items such as "I felt my sense of self shrink" (Yaden et al., 2019). Awe is also associated with reverence, submission, or devotion to something greater (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). In addition, awe is a mixed and ambivalent emotion: Although typically a positive emotion associated with feelings of wonder and amazement, awe is also tinged with fear and can even cause anxiety (Gordon et al. 2017). Awe is neurologically and behaviorally ambivalent (Lee et al., 2025) and involves visceral physical sensations described by reactions

like “I had goosebumps” or “I felt chills” (Yaden et al., 2019) and (Gordon et al., 2017). Awe arises from distinct sources: threat-based, beauty-based, ability-based, virtue-based, and supernatural-based awe states (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). In this research, we will focus on threat and beauty awe because our theorizing suggests that threat awe is associated with a lower level of self-transcendence. We will focus on beauty awe as a comparison point because it is widely used in marketing (Senyuz et al., 2025) and offers a more controlled standard of comparison with threat awe.

Self-transcendent experiences have two main components: self-loss and connection (Chen & Mongrain, 2021; Yaden et al., 2017). Self-loss occurs when the boundaries of the self dissolve, expanding into the surroundings (Yaden et al., 2017), captured by scale items such as “I felt my sense of self boundaries fade away” (Yaden, 2020). People describe a sense of merging with the universe, feeling a deep connection to the world around them, whether to other people, nature, or something intangible (Yaden et al., 2017). People often report feeling close to others, to nature, or to all of existence: “I had the sense of feeling closely connected to everything” (Yaden, 2020). Self-transcendence is also associated with feelings of peacefulness and harmony (Cloninger, 2013) and reduces anxiety in the short term (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015).

Table 1. *Comparing the phenomenology of awe and self-transcendence.*

Awe	**Self-transcendence**
Self-diminishment	Self-loss
Reverence	Connection
Fear and anxiety	Peacefulness and harmony
Distance	Closeness

1.2.Conceptual and empirical ambiguity

As seen in Table 1, awe and self-transcendence are distinct experiences. However, recent work on self-transcendence has identified awe as a “variety of self-transcendent experience” because it is one of the most common elicitors of self-transcendence (Bai et al., 2017; Jiang & Sedikides, 2022). As such, self-transcendence can happen while looking at a sky full of stars, attending a powerful concert, or helping a stranger in need. This conceptual entanglement makes it hard to isolate which effects come from awe and which come from self-transcendence. Some recent studies have begun to address this entanglement. With self-transcendence as a mediator, awe predicts self-compassion (Yuan et al., 2025), wise reasoning (Wang et al., 2025), and

increased inspiration (Dai & Jiang, 2024). Ahmmad et al. (2024) found that self-diminishment following awe increases ambiguity aversion in consumers, while self-transcendence decreases it. Similarly, Edwards et al. (2024) showed that awe has two divergent pathways: it reduces existential isolation via vastness, which in turn predicts greater connectedness, but it increases existential isolation via smallness, which in turn predicts lower connectedness. However, it is unclear if awe always produces self-transcendence to the same extent.

1.3.Decoupling Awe and Self-Transcendence.

Decoupling these concepts would offer both theoretical and methodological clarity. We contribute to our understanding of awe by examining conditions in which it is associated with varying degrees of self-transcendence. We propose that two variants of awe will make self-diminishment or self-transcendence more salient: Beauty awe will allow individuals to "transcend the self" and connect with entities outside the self, whereas threat awe will primarily make individuals feel small in comparison to the stimulus. Awe can feel intensely pleasurable or deeply unsettling, depending on context and appraisal (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Beauty awe is pleasant; threat awe is characterized by more fear than other forms of awe (Gordon et al., 2017). Threat awe more strongly leads to self-diminishment (Gordon et al., 2017) and can emphasize distance, fostering reverence more than connection, yielding lower self-transcendence than beauty awe. According to Keltner and Haidt's (2003) framework, "the removal of threat and the addition of beauty yield the transcendent feelings" (p. 307). We argue that the "threat" aspect of awe is key to determining whether awe will be more or less associated with self-transcendence. Thus, we hypothesize that **threat awe will be associated with less salient feelings of self-transcendence compared to beauty awe (H1).**

We also provide a clearer dissociation between awe and self-transcendence by examining a consequence of threat awe: powerlessness. These results can provide greater clarity in interpreting past research and analyzing new research on awe and/or self-transcendence. Threat awe leads to a sense of powerlessness (Gordon et al., 2017). We would like to replicate this finding and hypothesize that **threat awe will be associated with more powerlessness than beauty awe (H2).** Threat reduces perceived control and certainty, so people feel they have little power over the situation (Keltner et al., 2003; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Threat awe can be especially effective at inducing feelings of powerlessness, as awe generally makes individuals

feel small (Bai et al., 2017; Piff et al., 2015). In threatening scenarios, this perception tends to become negative and fear-inducing, leading to feelings of powerlessness. Based on this rationale, we hypothesize that **feelings of self-diminishment (vs. self-transcendence) will mediate the effect of threat (vs. beauty) awe on feelings of powerlessness (H3).**

This research tests whether different awe experiences lead to varying levels of self-transcendence. We identify awe conditions likely to produce different levels of self-transcendence and deploy a tool that contrasts the phenomenology of awe and self-transcendence. This allows us to clearly distinguish them and explore when awe results in higher self-transcendence across two studies. We also examine how awe influences powerlessness through self-diminishment *versus* self-transcendence.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we aimed to test our Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3: threat awe will be associated with less salient feelings of self-transcendence and more powerlessness than beauty awe; feelings of self-diminishment (vs. self-transcendence) will mediate the effect of threat (vs. beauty) awe on feelings of powerlessness. We recruited 300 participants (63%females, M_{age} = 41.82) through Prolific for a 3-condition (threat awe vs. beauty awe vs. control) between-subjects design. Awe was induced using pretested video clips: for beauty-awe, a video of the Italian Dolomites; for threat-awe, a tsunami scene. In the control condition, participants watched a neutral clip (Valdesolo & Graham, 2014). We developed a novel 3-item scale to measure the salience of self-diminishment *versus* self-transcendence, decoupling awe and self-transcendence based on their phenomenological differences. Salience of self-diminishment vs. self-expansion was captured with the item: “Please consider these two possible feelings: self-expansion and self-diminishment. “While watching the video, which of these were more salient to you?” (1 = I felt that my sense of self was diminished, 7 = ... was expanded). Perceived distance to the environment was measured by asking: “While watching the video, how did you feel in relation to the environment?” (1 = I felt very distant to the environment, 7 = ... very close...). Perceived connection with the environment was measured with the item: “While watching the video, how did you feel in relation to the environment?” (1 = I felt submissive to the environment, 7 = ...one with the environment). On the left-hand side of each scale, we anchored the typical phenomenology of awe: feelings of self-diminishment, submissiveness, and distance (Piff et al.,

2015; Bai et al., 2017; Gordon et al., 2017). On the right-hand side, we anchored the phenomenology of self-transcendence: feelings of self-expansion, closeness, and oneness (Yaden et al., 2017). This design allowed us to directly assess the extent to which self-transcendence or self-diminishment was more salient.

Manipulation checks showed that participants reported more fear ("While watching the video, to what extent did you feel fear?", Gordon et al., 2017) in the threat condition (M = 4.94, SD = 1.67) than in the beauty (M = 2.46, SD = 1.65; $p < .001$) and neutral conditions (M = 2.07, SD = 1.47; $p < .001$), $F(2, 297) = 94.66$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .39$. The fear between the beauty and neutral conditions was not significant ($p = .08$), suggesting that the manipulation worked. They reported more awe (three items: "While watching the video, to what extent did you feel awe/wonder/amazement?", $\alpha = .94$, Gordon et al., 2017) in the beauty condition (M = 5.28, SD = 1.28) than in the threat (M = 4.42, SD = 1.71; $p < .001$) and the neutral conditions (M = 3.26, SD = 1.64; $p < .001$), and higher in the threat condition than in the neutral condition ($p < .001$), $F(2, 297) = 43.01$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .22$, also suggesting that the manipulation worked.

Results showed that participants reported higher self-transcendence ($\alpha = .88$, three items adapted from Kaufman (2023); e.g., "While watching the video, I felt one with all people and things on planet.") in the beauty condition *(*M = 4.07*,* SD = 1.78*)* than in the threat (M = 3.52*,* SD = 1.53*;* $p = .018$) and the neutral conditions (M = 2.92*,* SD = 1.59*;* $p < .001$), and higher in the threat than condition than in the neutral condition ($p < .001$), $F(2, 297) = 12.41$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. They also reported higher salience of self-transcendence (vs. self-diminishment) ($\alpha = .80$; 3 items) in the beauty condition (M = 5.16, SD = 1.19) than in the neutral (M = 4.26, SD = 1.24, $p<.001$) and threat conditions (M = 4.46, SD = 1.19, $p<.001$), $F(2, 297) = 15.25$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, supporting H1. The effect was comparable between the neutral and threat conditions (p=.262).

Finally, participants also reported greater powerlessness ("While watching the video, to what extent were you feeling powerful?", reverse-coded; Gordon et al., 2017) in the threat condition (M = 5.42, SD = 1.53) than in the neutral (M = 4.74, SD = 1.69; $p = .003$) and the beauty conditions (M = 4.01, SD = 1.68; $p < .001$), and higher in the neutral condition than in the beauty condition ($p = .002$), $F(2, 297) = 50.25$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, supporting H2. Self-diminishment (vs. self-transcendence) also mediated the relationship between awe (threat = -1,

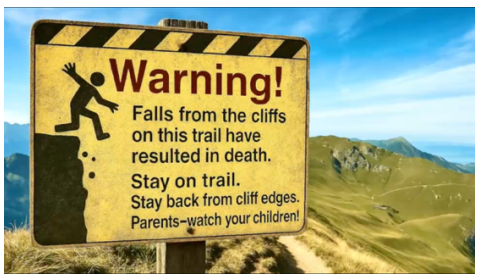
beauty = 1), and powerlessness (indirect effect: b=-0.19, bootstrap SE=0.06, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.31,-0.09]), supporting H3.

The findings supported all our hypotheses. Threat awe was associated with less salient feelings of self-transcendence (H1) and more powerlessness (H2) than beauty awe; feelings of self-diminishment (vs. self-transcendence) mediated the effect of threat (vs. beauty) awe on feelings of powerlessness (H3). Past research has compared beauty awe with controls to test its effect on self-transcendence (Yaden, 2020), but we added a threat awe condition and showed that it leads to lower self-transcendence (vs. self-diminishment) salience. This is a novel finding that contributes to a nuanced understanding of awe as an emotion, and of threat awe in particular, about which we know very little (Cavanaugh, 2015). Also, the mediation of self-diminishment on awe and powerlessness goes beyond the findings of Gordon et al. (2017) by highlighting the processes involved. One limitation of this study is that the videos differed not only in the source of awe (beauty vs. threat) but also in content and genre (e.g., natural scenes vs. fictional settings). Such content differences can alter cognitive appraisals (e.g., realness, agency) that might influence the outcomes.

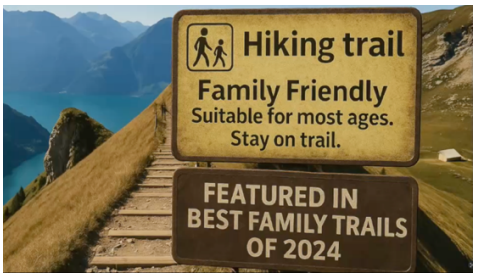
3. Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to retest hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 by using a new and more controlled manipulation of awe, using the same stimulus across conditions. We tested safety as a key to self-transcendence. We recruited 269 participants (51% females, M_{age} = 39.39) through Connect for a 3-condition (safe awe vs. threat awe vs. control) between-subjects design. Awe was induced using pretested video clips: for safe and threat awe conditions, the same hiking video was used with different signage. In the control condition, they watched a neutral urban walking tour.

Figure 1. *Signage used in the awe conditions of Study 2.*



Signage used in the threat awe condition



Signage used in the safe awe condition

Manipulation checks showed that participants reported more fear (same item as Study 1) in the threat condition (M = 3.01, SD = 1.50) than in the safe condition (M = 2.46, SD = 1.64; p = .027) and the neutral condition (M = 1.64, SD = 1.10; p < .001), and higher in the safe condition than in the neutral condition (p < .001), $F(2, 266) = 22.63$, p<.001, η^2 = .15, suggesting that the manipulation worked. They reported similar awe ("While watching the video, to what extent did you feel awe?", Gordon et al., 2017) in the safe (M = 5.04, SD = 1.31) and threat (M = 4.74, SD = 1.23) conditions (p = .141), but both conditions reported higher awe than the neutral condition (M = 3.24, SD = 1.61; ps < .001), $F(2, 266) = 44.77$, p<.001, η^2 = .25, also suggesting that the manipulation worked.

Results showed that participants reported higher self-transcendence (α = .91, same items as study 1) in the safe (M = 4.20, SD = 1.71) and threat (M = 4.05, SD = 1.64, (p = .587)) conditions than in the neutral condition (M = 3.43, SD = 1.51; safe vs. neutral: p = .002; threat vs. neutral: p = .009), $F(2, 266) = 5.994$, p=.003, η^2 = .04. They also reported higher salience of self-transcendence (vs. self-diminishment) (α = .79; same items as study 1) in the safe (M = 5.26, SD = 1.26) than in the neutral condition (M = 4.59, SD = 1.22; p < .001) and the threat condition (M = 4.85, SD = 1.24; p = .041) $F(2, 266) = 6.588$, p=.002, η^2 = .05, supporting H1. The threat and neutral conditions did not differ significantly (p = .155).

Finally, participants reported similar levels of powerlessness (same item as study 1) in the safe (M = 4.46, SD = 1.59) and threat (M = 4.46, SD = 1.67) conditions (p = 1.000), but both conditions reported lower powerlessness than the neutral condition (M = 5.13, SD = 1.59; safe vs. neutral: p = .005; threat vs. neutral: p = .006), not supporting H2. Interestingly, self-diminishment (vs. self-transcendence) mediated the relationship between awe (threat = -1, beauty = 1), and powerlessness (indirect effect: b=-0.11, bootstrap SE=0.05, 95% bootstrap CI [-0.22,-0.03]), supporting H3.

The findings supported H1 and H3 but not H2. Safe awe was associated with more salient feelings of self-transcendence than threat awe. This is a novel finding that underscores the significant role of perceived safety in the pathway from awe to self-transcendence. Threat awe, however, did not lead to powerlessness. This might be due to the stimuli remaining inherently positive (hiking in the mountains), with framing safety shifting appraisals without affecting what participants observed. If this is true, it indicates that even positive awe can lead to varying levels

of self-transcendence depending on how safe the stimulus or activity feels. Finally, we replicated the mediation of self-diminishment on awe and powerlessness (Study 1), contributing to the literature of awe and self-transcendence.

4. General Discussion

We contribute to the awe literature by distinguishing it from self-transcendence and by advancing our understanding of threat awe in particular. We find that two variants of awe (beauty awe and threat awe) are associated with different levels of self-transcendence, thereby validating the theoretical necessity of distinguishing between them. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how awe impacts the self. This distinction also prevents the overgeneralization of awe's benefits and clarifies why different awe experiences produce divergent psychological outcomes (i.e., varying levels of powerlessness). These results, and the measure decoupling awe and self-transcendence, will facilitate future research on this topic, advancing our understanding on their psychological and behavioral consequences. As research on awe and consumer behavior grows (Rudd et al., 2018), with emerging concepts such as brand awe (Kim et al., 2021), scholars are exploring its effects on choice and emotions (Cavanaugh, 2025; Hagtvedt, 2025; Keltner, 2025). This article contributes to these ongoing discussions.

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