The Effect of Superstitious Beliefs on Consumer Judgments

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12928/volumes/v34/NA-34

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite their large impact on the marketplace, we currently know very little about how superstitious beliefs influence purchase likelihood ratings and consumer satisfaction. In a series of studies, we show that consumers are less (more) satisfied with products following product failure for which they hold positive (negative) superstitious associations. Furthermore, we demonstrate that consumers are more (less) likely to purchase products with prices for which they have positive (negative) superstitious associations, even compared to the identical product priced lower (higher). These effects are limited to Asian consumers for whom the superstitious associations with the particular colors and numbers exist.

While academic research has recognized the importance of various elements of the social and cultural environments in marketing (e.g., values, Han and Shaviv 1994; goals, Aaker and Lee 2001; or language, Luna and Peracchio 2005), individuals' superstitious beliefs and their impact on consumer behavior have received very little attention. This lack of investigation into superstitious beliefs is all the more surprising given its strong impact on the marketplace. For example, between $800 and $900 million is lost in business in the United States each Friday the 13th because people do not want to go to work or tend to business in general that day. Additionally, an increasing number of U.S. companies are adopting the principles of feng shui, often hiring feng shui experts who apply these superstitious Chinese practices to offices in such esteemed companies as Smith Barney and Morgan Stanley (Tsang 2004).

However, we currently know very little about how superstitious beliefs (e.g., Vyse 1997) affect consumer behavior, and the current paper seeks to address this shortcoming. Over a series of studies, we explore how positive and negative superstitious beliefs influence purchase likelihood ratings and consumer satisfaction. Specifically, individuals often rely on superstition or superstitious rituals in the hope that these behaviors will help them perform better. Analogously, we expect that superstitious associations with product attributes will also influence expected product performance, and, importantly as investigated in this research, consumers' satisfaction following product failure. For example, Ang (1997) finds that quality expectations are greater for products with brand names for which consumers hold positive superstitious associations. Differences in expectations, in turn, are likely to influence how satisfied consumers will be (Oliver 1980; Oliver and Bearden 1985). Accordingly, we suggest that consumers are likely to be less (more) satisfied with a product for which they hold positive (negative) superstitious beliefs following product failure.

In Study 1a, we test if Taiwanese consumers would be less satisfied following the failure of a product for which positive superstitious associations with its color exist. In particular, we show that participants expect to be less satisfied with a red (positive superstitious beliefs) versus green (neutral) rice cooker following product failure. Next, in Study 1b, we generalize the previous findings from positive superstitious associations to negative superstitious associations, and to a new attribute (price). We show that Taiwanese participants are more satisfied with a failed product priced at TW$ 6,444.44 than the same product priced at TW$ 6,555.55.

While the first two studies demonstrate the effect of superstitious beliefs on satisfaction, the next two studies address the question of whether superstitious beliefs will actually influence how likely consumers are to purchase a product. In particular, Study 1c tests if participants are more likely to purchase a product with which they have positive superstitious associations, as compared to higher-priced products with which they do not. As expected, we show that purchase likelihood for a portable radio is greater when it is priced at a “lucky” TW$ 888 than at a “neutral” TW$ 777. Next, Study 1d generalizes the previous findings from positive superstitious associations to negative superstitious associations and demonstrates that participants are less likely to purchase a product priced at an “unlucky” TW$ 6,444.44 than the same product priced more expensively at a “neutral” TW$ 6,555.55.

Study 2 tests and rules out an alternative explanation for these results that suggests that participants may have formed quality associations, expecting the higher priced radio or digital camera to be of better quality, which in turn may be reflected in the higher purchase likelihood. Eliminating the potential confound of price/quality inferences, we next investigate superstitious beliefs concerning numbers by manipulating the quantity of a product sold in a set. Additionally, Study 2 investigates the cultural basis of superstitious beliefs by including both Taiwanese and US participants. That is, if the findings we have obtained are based on culturally shared superstitious beliefs as we hypothesize, then we should replicate our previous results with the Taiwanese participants, but not with the US participants whose culture does not include these superstitions.

Providing evidence for the robustness of the effect of superstitious beliefs on satisfaction, Study 2 shows that following product failure, Taiwanese consumers expect to be significantly less satisfied with products that contain an attribute (i.e., the number in the set) with which they have positive superstitious associations, as compared to products that do not. However, confirming the culture-bound nature of superstitious beliefs, this effect is only obtained for Taiwanese consumers for whom the number 8 is associated with good luck. Additionally, we once again show that superstitious beliefs also affect purchase intentions. In particular, we find that superstitious associations with the number 8 led Taiwanese participants to indicate greater purchase likelihood for a set that contained fewer tennis balls, while the reverse was found for the US participants for whom superstitious associations with the number 8 do not exist.

Our studies thus demonstrate a robust effect of superstitious beliefs on Chinese consumers’ behavior, including instances when superstitious beliefs cause consumers to make purchase decisions that run counter to economic rationality. That is, Taiwanese consumers are more likely purchase a product at the higher “lucky” price, are less likely to purchase a product with a lower “unlucky” price, and are more likely to purchase the “lucky” product with fewer units contained in the package. In contrast, the US consumers, for whom no such superstitions exist, adhered to the more rational choice paradigm.

REFERENCES


