Choosing Between Service Sequences: the Joint Effect of Ego Depletion and Mood on Consumers' Decision Strategy

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In many service encounters consumers choose between anticipated sequences of outcomes. We hypothesize that these choices may be affected by consumer mood and ego depletion. We investigate this in a 2 x 2 between subjects experimental design were mood (positive/negative) and ego depletion (depletion/no depletion) are manipulated. We expect that the selection of simplifying decision strategies based on ego depletion is moderated by consumer mood. We investigate this using a computerized experiment in which we test the proposed hypotheses.

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for the launch was provided. Also, participants were given the information that the planned launch of the new brand had failed and been aborted to avoid further damage. No exact reasons were explained, only a "flop" was mentioned. Participants were asked to carefully study the material. They evaluated both the product brand and the parent brand before, and after the presentation of the scandal. After studying the information of the scandal, we asked participants to retell the story with their own words as if they were telling it to a friend. The space was limited to one page. We analyzed the resulting texts using the Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991, 1992).

Our Data is consistent with our expectations: the language participants used to retell the story was significantly less abstract, indicating a more situative attribution of the events that were described. In line with this, the strong parent brand took significantly less damage than the weak parent brand did.

This finding implies that the risk of imposing a parent brand may be smaller than thought by some marketing experts. The parent brand, if it is strong enough, can clear the path for a more favorable perception, even of negative behavior.

References

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Extended Abstract
Previous research on preferences for sequences of outcomes shows that people prefer some sequences over others. For example, people prefer sequences where positive and negative outcomes are spread out over time (Loewenstein and Prelec, 1993). Although previous research presents us with valuable insights into the sequence evaluation process, the conditions under which these sequence preferences hold have not received much attention. Previous research has shown that mood and ego depletion have a profound influence on the level and quantity of information that is processed and as a result on the decision making process (Schwarz, 2001; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, 1998). Therefore, we believe that when looking at sequence preferences, these two mechanisms can not be overlooked.

This research presents the results of an experiment designed to test a theoretical framework in which the combined effect of mood and ego depletion influences preferences for sequences of service experiences. We argue that ego depletion and mood play an important role in service encounters and that the initial mood state of the customer will influence which components of the service are considered important for the evaluation of the service. In addition, certain events within a service encounter require active self-control by the customer,
such as long waiting times, which might result in ego depletion. In turn, ego depletion will determine how much information is extracted from the service for evaluation.

Our theoretical framework treats mood and ego depletion as two separate mechanisms which operate under different principles. These principles are based upon the level and the quantity of information processing. Based upon these operating principles, we identify 6 ‘rules’ for sequence evaluation which determine service encounter preferences of consumers.

The level of information processing is influenced by mood and can be either gestalt-based or components-based. Gestalt-based refers to the fact that people in a positive mood will process information more superficially (heuristics) than people in a negative mood (Schwarz, 2001) and therefore they will look more at the gestalt, or ‘overall’ appearance of the sequence. Spreading, improvement and the peak-end rule are three sequence characteristics which are important for the sequence evaluation in this case, because spreading, improvement and peak-end are all related to the gestalt or overall ‘appearance’ of the sequence.

Component-based means that people in a negative mood treat the sequence as consisting of separate components instead of looking at the overall pattern. This is grounded in the fact that negative mood states usually lead to more systematic information processing (Schwarz, 2001). Balanced count, myopia and simplified count are characteristics which are important for the sequence evaluation in this case. Balanced count refers to the fact that people determine the overall utility of the sequence and equally weigh all attributes in this count. Myopia (short-sighted) means that people focus primarily on the first element in the sequence. Simplified count means that people will only look at the utility of their most preferred attribute when evaluating the sequence. These sequence characteristics thus focus on the separate components or one component in the sequence instead of the overall pattern.

The quantity of information processing is influenced by the level of ego depletion and can either be focused on multiple components or few components in the sequence. Multiple components refers to the fact that non-depleted people will focus on more information/components in the sequence when making their choice than depleted people. This is based on the reasoning that depleted people have limited resources available to process information and therefore they will use a more simplified decision strategy and evaluate fewer pieces of information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, 1998). The peak-end rule, myopia and simplified count are important for sequence evaluation in this case because in all these strategies of sequence evaluation, the focus is on only a few elements in the sequence. Non-depleted people have more resources available and are able to focus on more information/multiple components in the sequence. Spreading, improvement and balanced count are important for sequence evaluation. All these strategies require the processing of multiple components in the sequence.

The combination of the different levels of mood and ego depletion make up a 2 x 2 experimental design with 4 experimental conditions: positive mood/no depletion, positive mood/depletion, negative mood/no depletion and negative mood/depletion. We expect important interaction effects between mood and ego depletion, where mood moderates the selection of decision strategies based on ego depletion. In particular, people in a positive mood who are depleted, will focus on the peak and end moment in the service encounter. In contrast, people in a negative mood who are depleted, will use myopia and simplified count as strategies for choosing between service sequences.

We investigate our proposed hypotheses in a computerized experiment using Windows MouselabWEB where we systematically manipulate mood and level of depletion and present subjects in each condition with choices between sequences of positive and negative service experiences. We expect that the choice and the decision making process in each experimental condition are based on the rules for sequence evaluation that are provided by the theoretical framework for that specific experimental condition.

References

A Need-Satisfaction Model of Superstitious Behavior
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Extended Abstract
Chinese manufacturers favor the use of digit 8 and avoid using the digit 4 in their pricing as buyers in China connote digit 8 with “enrichment” and digit 4 with “death” (Simmons and Schindler 2003). This numeric superstition also results in a price premium for properties on the 8th floor in Cantonese societies (Chau, Ma and Ho 2001). Many American hotels skip from the 12th floor to the 14th floor to avoid having guests stay on the unlucky 13th floor (Mowen and Carlson 2003).

Why do so many people, usually well-educated members of a modern, scientific society, engage in these behaviors? What motivates such behavior? The objective of this research is to present a comprehensive model of the mechanisms driving superstitious behavior among individuals and highlight its relevance both in terms of theory and practice. There are five basic problems with existing models of
superstition. First, some models view superstitious behavior as a consequence of a superstitious belief system which is based on a superstitious personality trait (e.g., Mowen and Carlson 2003). Such models are narrow in that they do not provide an adequate explanation for a variety of superstitious behaviors that are not based on a lack of belief in science. A second criticism is that current models fail to recognize the differences between superstition in contemporary society and traditional superstitions. Third, even models that accommodate superstitions based on “half belief” ignore instrumentality-based and social-based superstitious behavior. Fourth, existing models have an inordinate focus on negative superstitions instead of positive superstitions. The most widely used scale measuring superstitious beliefs—the three-item superstition sub-scale of the Paranormal Belief Scale (Tobacyk and Milford 1983; Tobacyk 1988)—only measures the belief that certain omens (e.g., seeing a black cat) are associated with harmful consequences. Not only does this constrain our view of what constitutes superstition, but restricts it to negative superstitions instead of also considering positive superstitions such as rubbing a lucky charm to bring good luck (Wiseman and Watt 2004). Finally, superstition models based on psychological therapeutic effects do not fully explain why the superstitious behavior takes on the particular and stereotyped form that it does.

Assuming that superstitious behaviors serve some underlying individual need, we present a need-satisfaction model of superstitious behavior that classifies the needs met by superstitious behavior into (1) Functional Needs, (2) Psychological Needs, and (3) Social Needs. The operating principle underlying functional need satisfaction is the illusion of control (Langer 1975). A key construct driving this need is perceived luckiness. Luck has been conceptualized as a personal and stable trait that leads individuals to maintain irrational and superstitious beliefs (Darke and Freedman 1997). The illusion of control effect has been found to be a robust psychological effect underpinning lottery gambling (Rogers 1998).

The operating principle underlying the psychological need satisfaction of superstitious behavior is counterfactual thinking (cf. Kahneman and Miller 1986). Individuals evaluate outcomes not only in isolation, but also in relation to alternative events that could have, might have, or should have happened. While a gambler may initially engage in a superstitious ritual because of an illusion of control, the literature has often been at a loss to explain why they continue to engage in the ritual when a series of negative observations show that the ritual is not effective in influencing outcomes. The psychological need-satisfaction element of our model suggests that there is an emotional comfort offered by continuing a ritual and having hope in positive future outcomes. On the flip side, should a superstitious behavior (e.g., picking an anniversary date as one’s personal lottery numbers) be discontinued, there is the “emotional amplification” effect associated with the dread that those numbers would be drawn soon after the behavior is discontinued. Since a person can easily imagine the situation of these long-played numbers hitting right after s/he chooses a different number, there is a strong pressure to continue the superstition. Engaging in a superstitious behavior to avoid a negative outcome “might stem not from the belief that bad things are more likely to happen … but from the belief that any bad thing that does happen will be more psychologically painful.” (Miller and Taylor 1995; p. 368). Our model expands on the concept of “hope” (MacInnis and de Mello 2005) and invokes “anticipated regret” as an opposite emotion that is just as important in driving behavior.

The operating principle underlying the social need satisfaction dimension of superstitious behavior is social learning (Bandura 1962). A great deal of superstitious behavior may be based on observing others and following traditions simply as a way of identifying oneself with the group. Several non-religious superstitious behaviors are driven by social factors without any individual-level belief in its instrumentality. The showering of a newly married couple with rice (interestingly, many modern weddings substitute soap bubbles for the rice suggesting the lack of belief in any instrumental or religious significance of rice), the sharing of rice cakes in Korea before important exam days, and the Indian superstition of crushing a lemon under the wheels of a new automobile are examples of superstitions driven by socio-cultural norms. While it is possible that some of these superstitions were originally developed based on perceived instrumentality, they get adopted as a social ritual over time. The main motivation for individuals engaging in such behavior is to maintain or strengthen their social ties.

This research makes several contributions to the marketing, consumer behavior, and superstition literature. It is the first to present a comprehensive model of superstitious behavior that accommodates a variety of superstition types and different motives consumers may have for engaging in superstitious behavior. The model resolves several problems with prior models of superstitious behavior and provides the operating principle underlying each of the motives for superstitious behavior. We offer a new conceptualization of the emotional underpinnings of counterfactual thinking. Our presentation of hope and anticipated regret as positive and negative emotions associated with counterfactual thinking opens a promising research stream for researchers. The model also lays the groundwork for the development of a more comprehensive scale for the measurement of superstition. Existing scales are grossly inadequate in capturing the variety of factors underlying superstitious behavior. Finally, the model helps those interested in superstition-related marketing communications—both marketers and public policy advocates—to better understand how various communication elements influence consumers to enhance or reduce their superstitious beliefs.

References