A Need-Satisfaction Model of Superstitious Behavior

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We present a comprehensive and parsimonious model of superstitious behavior that resolves several problems with prior models of superstitious behavior. The new model accommodates a variety of superstition types, explains different motives consumers may have for engaging in superstitious behavior and provides the operating principle underlying each of the motives. Our need-satisfaction model of superstitious behavior classifies the needs met by superstitious behavior into (1) Functional Needs, (2) Psychological Needs, and (3) Social Needs. We provide clear theoretical and managerial implications of this revised model.

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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, 1998). 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 here. 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

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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
Is There an Expected Trade-off Between a Product’s Ethical Value and Its Effectiveness?: Exposing Latent Intuitions about Ethical Products

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This research seeks to demonstrate consumers’ intuition that there is an inherent tradeoff between a given product’s “ethical attributes” and the product’s effectiveness, or functional performance. Ethical attributes are those attributes that reflect a person’s conscience and which may relate to a variety of environmental, individual and societal issues. We demonstrate in our first two studies, using toothpaste (Study 1) and laundry detergent (Study 2) as a product context, that the “ethical=less effective” intuition is moderated by the degree to which the consumer believes that the focal ethical issues are important overall. Those consumers who place the highest importance on these ethical issues infer that these products will actually be more effective. This halo effect, however, disappears and ultimately reverses such that the less importance the consumer places on the ethical issues, the less effective they believe the product will be, i.e. products rated “superb” on ethical attributes were rated significantly lower in effectiveness than products rated “poor” on ethical attributes. We also intend to replicate these studies using a broad, nationally representative sample, as well as test moderators of the intuition such as self/other judgments and precommitment to the intuition.

A national survey found that 88% of consumers were more likely to purchase products from a company deemed socially responsible (Public Relations Quarterly Winter 94/95). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that products from these companies receive limited distribution support and capture a minority share of the market when they are available. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many ethical products are positioned as premium products, and that price, therefore, may be a critical barrier to their mass market appeal. Recent research, however, suggests that the relative lack of success of ethical products is much more complex than just the tradeoff of ethicality and price. For example, Ehrich and Irwin (2005) demonstrate that consumers who are more motivated to buy products positioned as socially responsible are proportionally less likely to seek out information about a product’s ethical attributes. This “willful ignorance” is driven by an avoidance of the guilt one might experience upon discovering that a desired product does not perform well on ethical attributes. Ehrich and Irwin’s (2005) research also hints at the tradeoff that consumers assume they must make between purchasing a product that satisfies their immediate consumption needs versus one that satisfies their conscience.

In order to more fully understand consumer decision making about ethical products, our research explores both consumers’ inferences as well as their judgments about these products. We propose and test the following hypothesis:

H1: Rated importance of the relevant ethical issue will moderate ethical-effective inferences: As importance increases, respondents are more likely to infer greater product effectiveness from product ethicality. Conversely, as importance decreases, respondents are more likely to indicate that ethical products are less effective.

Thus, consumers who do not believe that a product’s ethics are important make inferences consistent with an intuition we believe is widespread in the market place, i.e. that ethical=less effective. Consumers who do place high importance on a product’s ethics will, instead, make inferences consistent with a halo effect mechanism, in which ethical products are inferred to be more effective.

While we intend to show that rated importance moderates ethical-effective inferences, we also intend to explore whether expression of the ethical=less effective intuition also depends on how the question is framed. It is likely that responses of subjects who rate the ethical issues as important will be more reflective of social desirability influences than of subjects’ beliefs. Belk et al (2003) demonstrate that when dealing with sensitive issues, such as ethical responsibility in our case, projective techniques will mitigate subjects’ tendency to respond in a manner consistent with social desirability influences. As such, we propose to test the following hypothesis:

H2: When subjects are asked to infer what the average person would think about the ethical-effective relationship (vs. what they personally believe), self rated issue importance will no longer moderate responses and instead all subjects will tend to express the intuition that ethical=less effective.

In our first study (n=207), we manipulated product ethicality by telling participants that a new brand of toothpaste had received a rating from the Environmental Sustainability Council (ECS) of either “poor,” for a lack of environmentally friendly practices, or “superb,”
for a demonstrated record of environmentally responsible actions. Thus, the study had a 2 factor (ethics: poor vs. superb) design. In order to test H1, participants were given information about the ethical attributes of the toothpaste, which varied by condition, and were asked to infer its effectiveness. The two key dependent variables were how well the toothpaste was inferred to whiten teeth and how well it provided the benefits the participant looks for in a toothpaste. Participants also rated the importance of a product’s ethics in general.

Two 2 factor ANOVAs (ethicality of toothpaste x participants’ ratings of importance of a product’s ethics) were conducted with inferences about whitening ability and the benefits provided as the dependent variables, respectively. In neither case was there a main effect of ethics on inferences. However, consistent with H1, there was a significant interaction between the ethicality of the toothpaste and the importance ratings such that those participants who felt that a product’s ethics were less important rated the toothpaste with poor ethics as better able to whiten, F(1, 203)=4.53, p<.05, and more likely to provide the benefits they desired than the toothpaste with superb ethics, F(1, 203)=13.73, p<.001, while participants who rated a product’s ethics as more important showed the opposite effect: they believed that the toothpaste with superb ethics would whiten better and would be more likely to provide all the benefits they desired in a toothpaste.

A second study confirmed the interaction between the ethicality of a product and ethical issue importance ratings in a new product context. Since toothpaste ingredients may also have health consequences for the consumer, we chose a new category without this confound: laundry detergent. Consistent with our findings in Study 1, we found a significant interaction between ethicality of the detergent and ethical issue importance ratings with both dependent measures: likelihood of the product’s being recommended by Consumer Reports, F(1, 179)=17.32, p<.0001, and likelihood of providing the benefits desired in a detergent, F(1, 179)=4.84, p<.05.

While these initial studies support H1, Study 3 intends to test H2, i.e. whether subjects will believe that ethical=less effective when asked to infer what the average person would believe about the focal products (as opposed to what they personally believe). In addition, this study will use a broad, nationally representative sample to improve generalizability of the results. Finally, Study 3 will explore what effect precommitment to the intuition has on subjects’ responses. This will be accomplished by varying the order of questions such that we can determine whether the ethical importance ratings were influenced by subjects’ prior inferences. While we have no a priori hypothesis for this manipulation, our intent is to understand the degree to which the ethical importance rating is an accurate assessment of subjects’ beliefs as opposed to resulting from subjects’ desire to be consistent with their prior inference ratings.

References

Examining the Influence of Prominent on Nonprofit Organizations
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Abstract
Corporate sponsorship is an often used fundraising strategy for nonprofit organizations and is considered to be a “win-win” situation for the sponsoring company as well as the nonprofit. While prior research suggests that corporate sponsorship can positively affect the sponsoring company, little research to date has investigated the impact of such sponsorships on the nonprofit particularly when it is the nonprofit that is communicating the existence of the sponsorship. We address this question and examine the impact of corporate sponsors on people’s perceptions of and willingness to support nonprofit organizations. Results from an experiment suggest that revealing corporate sponsors may, under certain conditions, negatively affect a nonprofit’s effort to garner financial support from the general public.

“It’s Glad I Did” or “I Wish I Had:” The Comparative Effects of Satisfaction and Non-Purchase Regret on Future Purchase Intentions
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Extended Abstract
It seems counterintuitive that a consumer who does not experience your product may be just as valuable as your most satisfied customers. Even less obvious is the recommendation that marketers design promotions such that they can highlight missed opportunities to consumers who did not take advantage of the offer. In this research we examine regret for a forgone purchase opportunity and