A Typology of Superstitious Behaviors: Implications For Marketing and Public Policy

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In this conceptual article we present a comprehensive model of superstitious behavior and explain its relevance to marketing, consumer behavior, and public policy. Drawing on theory from marketing, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, we propose that individuals engage in superstitious to meet functional needs, psychological needs, and socio-cultural needs. Based on this theoretical foundation, we explain how marketing tactics can stimulate aspects of superstitious behavior among individuals which gives rise to significant public policy implications.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recently, an executive at the headquarters of a prominent business in San Francisco paid to have the sign with the building’s number changed despite no real change in the address. The executive explained that his astro-numerologist had advised the change in order to improve business. The executive insisted that the changing of the building’s number on the sign “worked” and that business is improving (Russell 2006). In a global business context, Chinese manufacturers favor the use of digit 8 and avoid using the digit 4 in their pricing as buyers in China associate the digit 8 with “enrichment” and digit 4 with “death” (Simmons and Schindler 2001). This numeric superstition also results in a price premium for properties on the 8th floor in Cantonese societies (Chau, Ma and Ho 2001). In Japan, gifting Kit Kat as a “good luck charm” has become a widespread ritual during exam season (Ryall 2005). Numerous executives admit to extensively using the services of feng shui experts (Tsang 2004). Lottery players who pick their own numbers have higher expectations of success (Langer 1975). Gamblers engage in superstitious rituals before making a decision, millions of individuals “touch wood” each day or avoid walking under a ladder, or use their “lucky pen” while taking an exam.

Although a variety of consumption activities are driven by superstitious behavior, there has been a surprising lack of attention given to superstitious in the consumer research literature (Kramer and Block 2008). There are a variety of different superstitious behaviors that are motivated by an assortment of underlying psychological and social processes. The extent literature in anthropology and sociology is unable to consistently explain the drivers of this behavior. Vaidyanathan, Aggarwal, Cha and Chun (2007) presented a comprehensive model of superstitious behaviors that attempted to resolve the conflicts between the different types of superstitious behavior and individuals’ motivation for performing the behavior. The objective of this conceptual article is to build on that comprehensive model of the mechanisms driving superstitious behavior to present a series of testable propositions and draw clear implications of these propositions for marketing and public policy.

The model posits that people are driven to engage in such behaviors because they serve to reduce the tension created by an unmet need. Based on a review of the literature on superstition across sociology, anthropology, psychology, and marketing, they classify the needs served by superstitions into (1) Functional Needs, (2) Psychological Needs, and (3) Socio-Cultural Needs. At the most basic level, people may engage in superstitious behaviors because they believe in its efficacy at influencing future outcomes. Research has shown that this belief in the ability of superstitious behaviors to affect outcomes is influenced by the amount of uncertainty in the environment (Kramer and Block 2008) and the importance of the outcome to their lives. Additionally, the more an individual believes in their ability to control future outcomes with superstitious rituals, the greater the risk proneness of the individual relative to the focal behavior and the less responsive the individual is to counterbelief feedback relative to the focal behavior. There is also evidence that if individuals take an active part in choosing the superstitious object, they will have a greater belief in its effectiveness at influencing outcomes. This implies that marketers may be able to influence consumer behavior by reinforcing the instrumentality of superstition-based behavior, enhancing the salience of the outcome, and engaging consumers in the choice of a particular superstition-based object. Such activities may also result in public policy implications to the extent that they deceive consumers into purchasing ineffective products.

Even when individuals do not explicitly believe in the ability of a superstitious behavior to influence a future outcome, they may engage in such behaviors to satisfy a psychological need for individuals with a strong desire to control an uncertain environment by engaging in some active behaviors. Positive and negative counterfactual thinking may also drive superstitious behavior. We present hope and anticipated regret as bipolar anchors to forward-looking counterfactual thinking by individuals deciding whether to initiate or continue a superstitious behavior. We posit that the initiation of superstitious behavior is driven more by hope of a favorable outcome and that the continuation of a superstitious behavior is driven more by anticipated regret of discontinuing the behavior. Marketers may be able to manipulate consumer emotions towards superstitious-related products by using communication strategies that manipulate hope and anticipated regret.

Finally, there is an entire class of superstitious behaviors that are driven by social norms rather than a belief in the instrumentality of the behavior. This is particularly notable in East Asian cultures where there is a strong pressure to conform to social norms. In fact, research has suggested that Chinese are among the most superstitious people in the world (Kramer and Block 2008; Tsang 2004). We propose that individuals in East Asian cultures engage in more social-need-satisfaction rituals than individuals in Western cultures. Further, based on research examining variations in attribution styles between Westerners and East Asians, we propose that focal-based communication messages will have a greater influence on superstitious behavior in East Asian Cultures while field-based communication messages will have a greater influence in Western cultures. We present the marketing implications of these propositions.

References
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