

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS AND SUPERSTITIOUS BEHAVIORS AMONG BUSINESS STUDENTS

Praveen Aggarwal and Rajiv Vaidyanathan, Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 412 Library Drive, Duluth, MN 55812; paggarwa@d.umn.edu

ABSTRACT

Rational behavior by consumers is a common assumption underlying much of marketing and consumer behavior literature. Whereas consumers act as rational or near-rational decision-makers in most situations, there are circumstances where they exhibit non-rational behavior. One example of such non-rational behavior is when people engage in superstitious behavior. For example, if a person is in the market for a car, and decides to postpone the purchase by a month because she expects the company to introduce a major price promotion next month, the behavior will be considered perfectly rational. However, if car sales drop more than 30% from August 28 to September 15 in cultures where this period is considered to be a "ghost month" (Simmons and Schindler 2001), the behavior of people engaging in such beliefs is clearly superstitious.

If managers are aware of the existence of any superstitious behaviors that directly affect the performance of their products, they can plan around such superstitions to avoid any harm. For example, 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 2001).

Another aspect of superstitious behavior that is of interest to marketing educators is the prevalence of such behavior among marketing professionals. To the extent these managers engage in superstitious behaviors, they are committing acts that could be questioned by the stakeholders. The prevalence of superstitious behavior among practitioners is of interest to business educators as they are responsible for training future managers and practitioners. Superstitious behavior is a persistent trait. It should be possible for educators to assess the prevalence of such beliefs and behaviors among their students while they are still in college, and take appropriate steps to counter such beliefs (provided such an action is warranted).

One of the objectives of college education is to promote rational, scientific thinking among students. To the extent that superstitious beliefs do not have a scientific, rational basis, any engagement in such behaviors by the student community goes directly against that objective. In this study, we

develop a theoretical framework to understand the prevalence of superstitious beliefs among business students and propose a set of antecedent variables that could predict such behaviors. Following Campbell (1996), we also distinguish between engaging in superstitious practices and believing in their instrumentality. We develop a set of propositions that builds on this important distinction and has the potential of resolving some conflicting empirical findings in the literature. These propositions pertain to the relationships between superstition and locus of control, Type A behavior pattern, ambiguity tolerance, and academic performance.

This study is an initial attempt at clarifying the issues surrounding the idea of superstitious beliefs among students. By providing a theoretical framework that differentiates between superstitious behaviors and beliefs, we hope to jumpstart a stream of research on this topic that is important for educators in a variety of contexts. It also serves to resolve some of the conflicting findings in the literature on how and why individuals use superstitions. We also present a variety of testable propositions that can give additional insight into the role of superstitions in individual behavior.

REFERENCES

- Campbell, C. (1996), "Half-Belief and the Paradox of Ritual Instrumental Activism: A Theory of Modern Superstition," *British Journal of Sociology*, March, Vol. 47, Issue 1, p151-166.
- Simmons C., Lee and Robert M. Schindler (2001), "Cultural Superstitions and the Price Endings Used in Chinese Advertising," *Journal of International Marketing*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 101-111.