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THE EFFECT OF SUPERSTITION ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: HOW SUPERSTITION
INFLUENCES PURCHASING DECISIONS

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Consumer behavior is a rapidly growing field; it is the study of how affect, cognition, behavior, and environment affect the decisions consumers make. Studying consumer behavior is important because every person is a consumer and makes a choice every day. What color shirt to wear, what to eat for breakfast, what type of milk or yogurt brand to buy are all examples of consumer decisions. Understanding what influences consumer decisions will provide answers on what drives behavior, factors fueling motivation, and will help marketers understand consumers' desires. One important impact on consumer behavior is superstition. For example, the superstition of a black cat crossing your path is believed to be bad luck. So does this belief make consumers less inclined to purchase cat food with a picture of a black cat on the front? Some people hold superstitious beliefs about lucky shirts or colors when football season approaches, does this belief make people more inclined to buy shirts of a certain color? Through this capstone project, I aim to present how superstition affects consumer behavior and influences consumer decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to offer my sincerest and deepest gratitude to Professor Thomas Kramer who so patiently and kindly mentored me throughout the entirety of this project. Even with my little to no experience, Professor Kramer enabled me to explore my interests in examining the cross between superstition and consumer behavior. There were so many obstacles and personal dejections brought on by the pandemic that interfered with my ability to conduct research in the way I had earlier envisioned. It is because of Professor Thomas Kramer's gentle encouragement and continuous guidance, I was able to take an alternative approach to the research I wanted to conduct and bring this capstone to completion. I'd also like to thank Dr. Richard Cardullo for admitting me into the UCR Honors program and allowing me the opportunity to carry out this capstone project. Thank you to Interim Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Thomas M. Smith for funding and selecting me as a recipient of the Honors Excellence in Research (HEIR) Scholarship. I'd like to thank my honors counselor, Mayra Jones, for believing in me and offering advice at every point while I was in the honors program. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to family and friends who supported me along the way and pushed me to believe in myself throughout the journey with my capstone. None of this would have been possible without any of you. Thank you so much.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	6
History of Consumer Behavior.....	8
Defining Superstition.....	10
Influence of Superstition on Consumer Behavior.....	12
Future Directions: Broadening the Scope of Research.....	16
Conclusion.....	19
References.....	20

PREFACE

As a student majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in marketing, you would think choosing the subject of my capstone presentation would have been easy enough, but it was quite the contrary. I was admitted into the Honors Program during my third year of college with little to no idea of what I wanted to do. I wanted to find a project I would be passionate in, but didn't know which of my many interests I should pursue. Should I travel back in time to the dark ages and paint a picture of how plague and political strife shaped the realm of art across Europe? Should I enter the glamorous world of show business and present a film narrating how representation of people of color has evolved throughout Hollywood, now more so with the implementation of token characters? Or should I dare to defy gravity and blast off into space to explore the possibilities of parallel universes and alternate timelines? How ever would I be able to choose a topic? Moreover, how would I know which was the **right** one for me? The answer came randomly, as most answers in life often do, when I least expected it. I sat in on my first class of the day, one which so happened to be an Introduction to Consumer Behavior, taught by my now mentor, Professor Thomas Kramer. As I sat in the front row watching Professor Kramer provide insight to the course and what we could expect, he briefly touched on one of his many areas of expertise; superstition and how they affect consumer behavior. I was enthralled. This was it, this was going to be the topic I spent my last years conducting research on. Was this more than happenstance? Was it a stroke of luck because I was wearing my lucky shirt that day? Was it thanks to the penny I found head side-up right before entering class? I don't think I'll ever truly know, but I'm thankful I had the opportunity to truly delve into this topic of research. My hope is that everything I learned within my capstone contributes to the success of students alike who are interested in exploring the field of consumer behavior. I hope this serves as positive

encouragement to future honors students who choose to open their minds to topics outside of their respective majors. And I hope this project sparks curiosity and wonderment in others, as my faculty mentor sparked in me when he first introduced this topic. Working on this capstone project has been a positive and wonderfully enriching experience I am grateful to share with others.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that some hotels don't have a 13th floor? The elevator button goes straight from 12 to 14. According to Otis Elevators, an estimate of 85% of elevators omit the number 13 from their number panels. Some examples include the first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building, developed in Chicago and a 38-story hotel/condominium across from the WSRB office.



Figure 1. Elevator without 13th floor button

The association of bad luck with the number 13 has affected people so much so that even when designing hotels, the 13th floor is left out. Similarly, some hotels have earned more money by including the 13th floor for consumers intrigued by the paranormal.

Many sports fans also carry superstitious beliefs that wearing certain shirts or eating certain foods or even sitting in certain locations during game time will ensure victory for their favorite team. A lot of professional athletes carry their own superstitious beliefs that wearing the exact same pair of socks or athletic apparel will guarantee winning the game they participate in. Some take it to such an extreme that they don't even wash the "lucky" clothing item because they believe that will wash away the "luck" and result in a loss for the team.

There is an entire Chinese art and practice that caters to superstitious beliefs enforcing the rhetoric that if certain placements in a household are not aligned, misfortune could befall the members of the household.

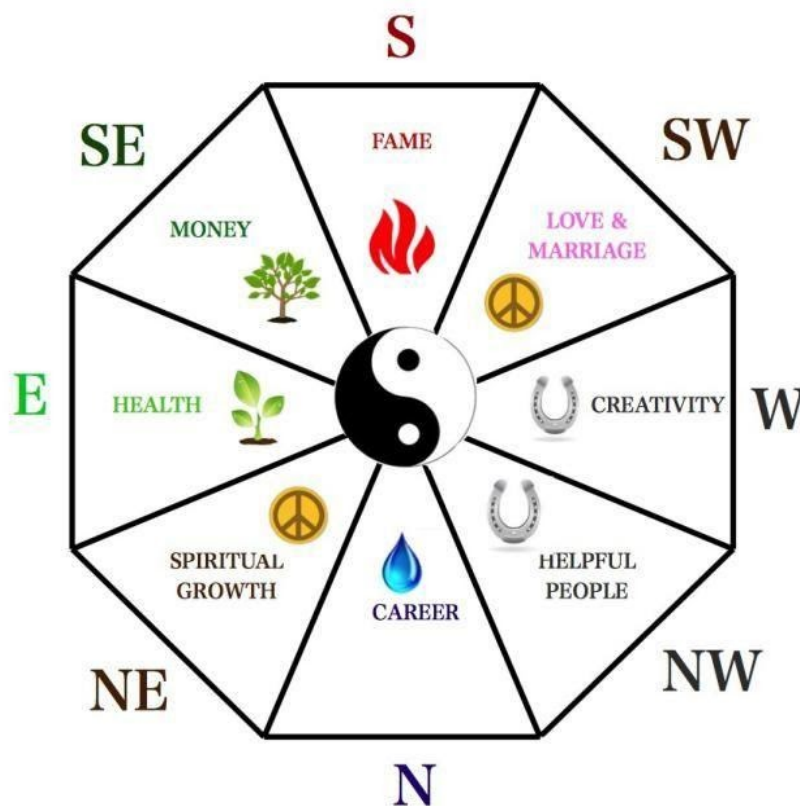


Figure 2. Feng Shui Map

Feng Shui is a thousand year old practice of arranging one's environment so that the “chi” or energy can flow smoothly through one's home, business, and life. A stuck and blocked “chi” can otherwise lead to ill health, domestic strife, and financial struggle (Tchi, 2020). Those who properly practice Feng Shui can declutter and open their internal, as well as, external spaces to allow good energy to flow thereby welcoming in abundance, peace, and prosperity. It is incredible how much beliefs in superstition can influence the way people make their choices.

In this essay, I will offer a brief introduction to the science of consumer behavior--what it is, where it comes from, and where it stands. I will explore the definition of superstition, afterwhich, I will present and expand upon existing research that serves to explain how consumer beliefs of superstition can affect consumer behavior and influence consumer purchasing decisions.

HISTORY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The history of consumer behaviour is highly intertwined with the history of marketing. There were different marketing era discoveries which each paved way for specific types of consumer behavior research (Sheth, 1985). Earlier, consumer behavior fixated on the aggregate market behavior and shifted from a fixation of behavioral science to more traditional social sciences. The classical thoughts of marketing emphasizing concepts of demand theory and spatial markets meant that consumer behavior generated theories, research methods, and great knowledge in the economics of consumption, patronage sponsorship, and self-service concepts. Come another shift to the managerial school of marketing thought where focus drifted away from demand theory towards notions of monopolistic competition and product differentiation (Sheth, 1985).

It was when behavioral marketing became fashionable that there was a change in the focus of marketing to study the individual consumer in the marketplace. This enabled behavioral sciences to provide a deeper understanding of individuals than most other social sciences traditionally relied on. This allowed substantive knowledge of brand loyalty, demographic segmentation, and opinion leadership to be attained and further established the thought that consumers are more often than not logically “but psychologically driven in their buying behavior” (Sheth, 1985). As time progressed, consumer behavior began to integrate abstractions and practices from social, organizational, and clinical psychology enabling it to better its scientific sophistication and establish itself as its own association independent of marketing.

As mentioned above, consumer behavior is an ever growing study constantly expanding as time moves forward. Extensive research in consumer behavior has shown how reliance on heuristics, societal standards, and authority influence the behaviors consumers engage in, as well as, the decisions they make as a result. To define it succinctly, in more comprehensible terms, consumer behavior is the study of how cognition (people’s thoughts), affect (people’s emotions), behavior (physical, observable reactions), and environment (cultural/social surroundings) influence consumers’ needs and how that affects their choices.

Especially in today’s world with advanced technologies and multitudes of platforms to reach consumers, the information and knowledge gained from studying consumer behavior can help marketers better understand how to assess and cater to their target market’s needs and desires. Thus it is imperative to discuss how inconspicuous factors, such as the belief in superstition, can affect the way consumers process the information around them and in turn influence their purchasing decisions in the marketplace. Doing so would allow researchers and

marketers to understand how to use these beliefs in superstition to sway the consumer target audience towards a particular product or service offered.

DEFINING SUPERSTITION

Before we can go any further, for the context of this research paper, it is necessary to traverse what constitutes a superstition. There is no single definition of superstition; some generalize the word to mean a belief in supernatural forces like fate or destiny. Others believe superstition to be an irrational abject attitude of the mind resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, or a false formulation of causation. The definition used to discuss superstition throughout this paper will be defined as such: superstition is a belief that runs counter to rational thought or is inconsistent with known laws of nature. Superstition can be classified as either cultural or personal, and is invoked either to bring good luck or fend off bad luck (Block & Kramer, 2008). For this research, the focus on good or bad luck is what differentiates superstition from other irrational beliefs.

As mentioned in the introduction, beliefs in superstition have shaped the way people have reacted throughout history. I'm sure any reader would be familiar with the superstition regarding the black cat. As black cats were often thought to be the assistants of witches, they were deemed unlucky, and a black cat crossing one's path was seen as a sign of impending misfortune.



Figure 3. Black Cat Witch

While the veracity of the myth remains questionable, all that matters is an individual's perception as to whether the superstition holds any real truth. As such, one's behavior would most likely be influenced by the belief enabling them to pursue another course of action. Thereby illustrating the importance of understanding how these beliefs could influence consumers in a rationally perceived economic transaction.

INFLUENCE OF SUPERSTITION ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

So what are the factors that influence consumer behavior—more specifically, what are the factors that influence a consumer’s decision to purchase a product in the marketplace? Price, quality, durability, aesthetic/packaging, and convenience are far more obvious, not to mention rational, answers as to the factors that affect consumer choices, but what about the ambiguous factors? As much as people don’t realize it, their beliefs in the different forms of superstition, as well as the degree to which they trust these beliefs, can greatly affect their decisions to purchase products.

In a study conducted by Lauren Block and Thomas Kramer, both explored how superstitious driven expectations impacted consumers initial purchase likelihood and satisfaction. They did this by examining the effect of perceived “lucky” colors on product consumption by Taiwanese consumers. The color red was chosen as a positive product attribute and included in the experiment as follows: participants were asked to read a scenario in which they were told to imagine themselves purchasing a new rice cooker. They were asked to consider a model, assess it based on its features—capacity, timer, and keep-warm time (all of which were kept constant) and color (either red or green), and then rate how likely they were to buy the rice cooker (Block & Kramer, 2008).



Figure 4: Rice Cookers

As expected, participants were more likely to purchase the red rice cooker in comparison to the green rice cooker. That is to say they expected better performance from the red rice cooker than the green rice cooker, even though the performance features were the same for both the red and the green model. It doesn't matter whether those superstitious beliefs in regards to color were intentionally considered by the consumer during the assessment of the rice cooker or not, the underlying belief that red is a "lucky" color served as a positive attribute and influenced the consumers purchasing decision in this particular scenario.

Another researcher, Zili Yang, explored the influence of perceived "lucky" and "unlucky" numbers on economics in China. In Chinese culture, 8 is considered a very lucky number (signifying prosperity) whereas 4 is considered unlucky (signifying death). Yang asserts that marketers and retailers in China have actually been known to exploit consumer beliefs in this

superstition to manipulate price tag patterns. For example, when a Chinese airline presented a flight for 888 yen, consumers rushed to purchase the ticket. However, when numbers that are considered unlucky (4 & 7) were used, consumer purchases decreased (Yang, 2011). Throughout his research, Yang was able to conclude that the retailers in China could have gained an extra 4.16% by exploiting the superstition of “lucky” and “unlucky” numbers which translate into an increase of about 1.40% of China’s annual GDP (Yang, 2011). As both of these studies show, consumer’s belief in a superstition can influence consumers in such a way that they pay no heed to economic rationality.

A study conducted by Lu Zhang and Sean McGinley investigates how and the degree to which superstitious beliefs instilled through advertisements could influence consumer behavior. They did so by inculcating a belief in participants that watching a major sports game at a lucky bar would cause their favorite team to win the game.

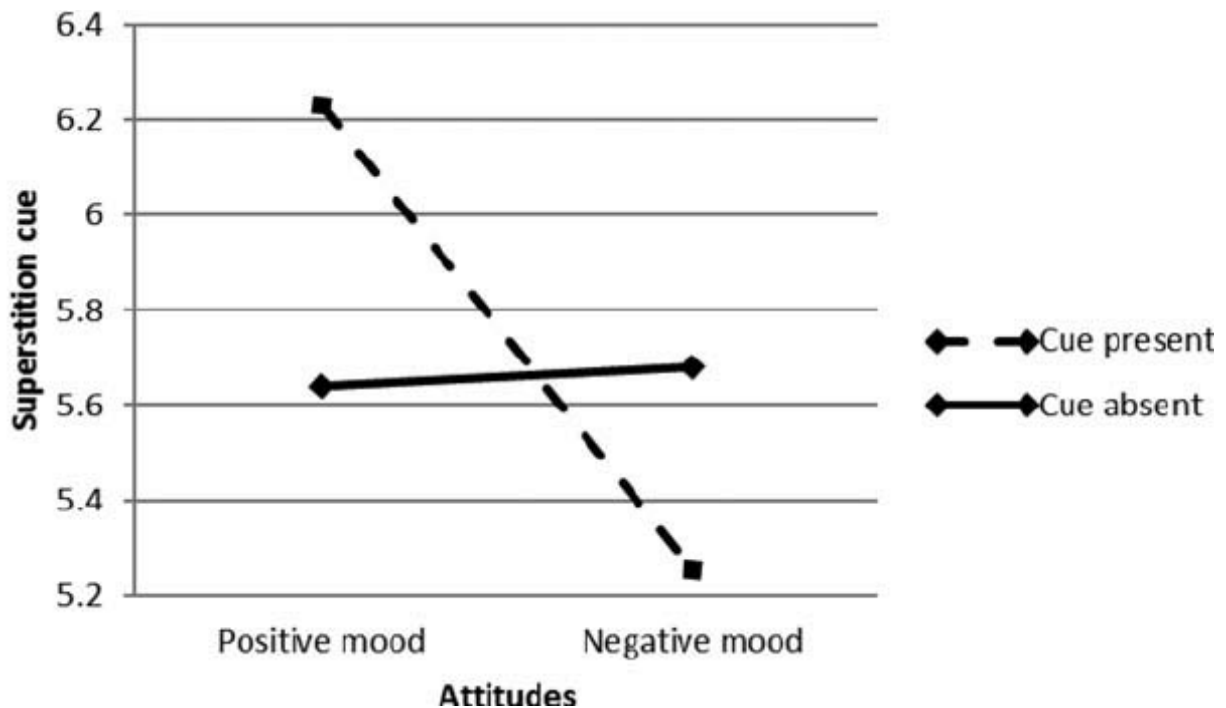


Figure 5: Attitudes of Participants

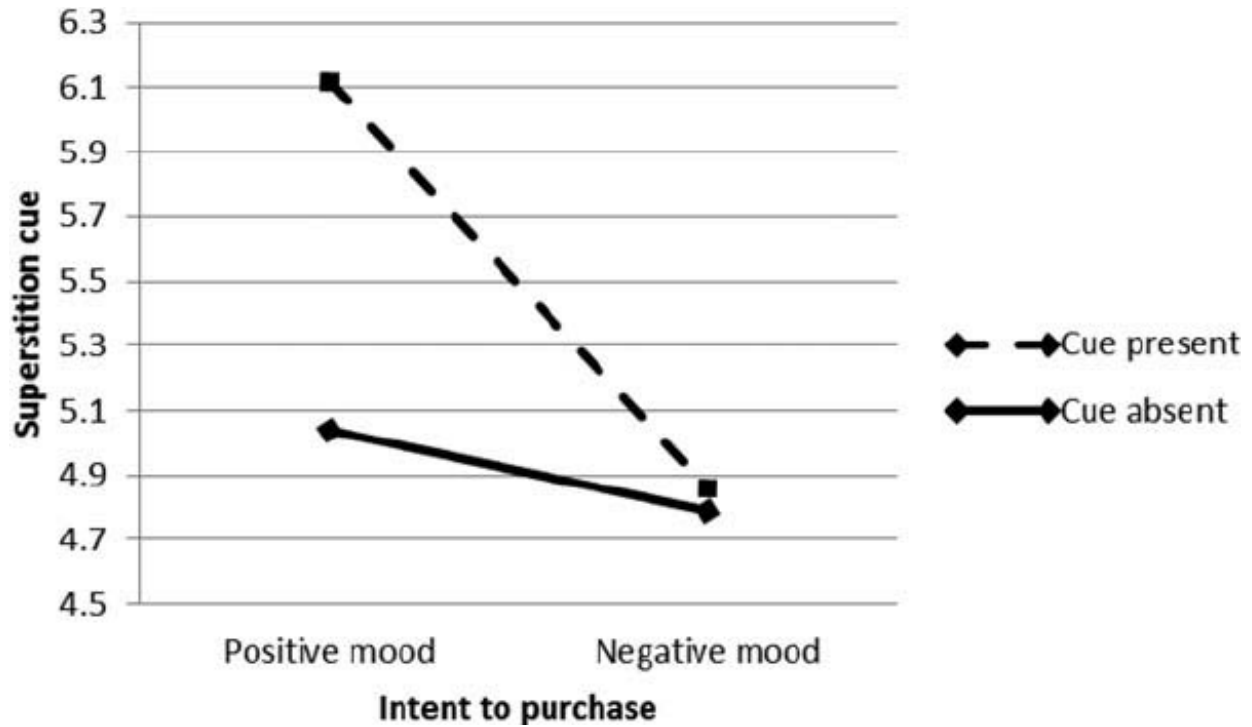


Figure 6: Participants Intent to Purchase

As expected, those participants who were exposed to a positive mood condition, held higher expectations for their team's performance, exhibited a positive attitude towards the bar, and developed a stronger intent to purchase products when the advertisements held the superstitious cue (McKinley & Zhang, 2015). Through this experiment, Zhang and McGinley were able to expand upon existing literature of superstitious consumer behavior and demonstrate that companies can not only use beliefs in superstition already held by consumers, but can also

induce superstitious beliefs among consumers through advertising, thereby influencing consumers purchasing decisions.

The last study which will be examined is the research conducted by Alexander Roorda and Bart L. Weathington on the superstitious behavior and ritualistic practices among former athletes. In this study, a survey was curated to assess an athletic identifying individual's success in the sport they practiced, participation in rituals, adherence to superstition, emotional value attached to ritualistic/superstitious practices, potential effects of having or not having completed individual rituals/superstitions on athletic performance, and on the possible continuation of ritualistic/superstitious practices (Roorda & Weathington, 2013). The results of the research indicated a positive correlation between participating in a superstition or ritual during and after an athletic event in an individual's athletic career. These findings exemplify that athletes who experienced much more success in their sporting careers had an increased proclivity to participate in rituals that affirmed their superstitious beliefs. Not only this, but those who practiced these rituals and superstitions were more inclined to perceive their success as a result, in part, of the ritual which further elevated their predisposition to performing such superstitious rituals through the duration of their event and sporting careers.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: BROADENING THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The reason continuing this research is so important is because to be a good marketer, it is very important to understand consumer needs and desires. It's not only important to pay attention to conscious superstitions but unconscious ones as well because different underlying perceptions can greatly influence how people react (Block & Kramer, 2008). The best way to understand what consumers want is to understand what influences those needs and desires.

It is clear that the belief in superstition can have an effect on consumer behavior and influence a consumer's choice to purchase a product. I postulate it would be beneficial for additional future studies to explore how to incite a superstition or "lucky" feeling among consumers from different cultures (specifically Indian culture and Western culture) to see how beliefs in superstition influence those consumers and their purchasing behaviors as a result. Each culture undoubtedly has their own unique differences and mentalities that get passed down to future generations. As such, it can be inferred that along with tales of heroes and tragedies, beliefs in superstition are passed down as well. As an Indian-American growing up in the United States, I have most certainly been exposed to various superstitious beliefs that have differed greatly across the two cultures I grew up in. Some of my favorite Indian superstitious beliefs include: you can't leave the house right away if you sneeze because it brings bad luck, if you step over someone's legs they will stop growing (if you do, walk back over them so their growth continues), an itchy right palm signifies incoming wealth while an itchy left palm signifies losing wealth, adding one dollar to a gift sum is considered auspicious, and my personal favorite, if you wear perfume at night then a witch will come and possess your soul.

These superstitious beliefs are most certainly different from any beliefs present in American culture. How might they influence consumer behavior and impact a consumer's purchasing decision? To answer this question, let us expand upon some of the Indian superstitious beliefs aforementioned above with real life examples. My grandmother and mother were heading out to the mall to shop for some last minute Christmas presents. The stores were set to close in about 2 hours and my grandmother was rather eager to get there with enough time to shop around. My mother was impatiently waiting in the car for my grandmother and right as my grandmother was about to sit in the car, she sneezed. My mother turned off the car and both

of them returned inside the house to wait a few minutes before attempting to leave again. This example illustrates the impact belief in a superstition can have on consumer behavior, because it depicts my grandmother and mother's willingness to delay a potential purchase, despite their haste and great need, for the sake of deterring bad luck.

Now let's look at an example of a belief in a superstition that could influence a consumer to spend more money, despite it going against rationale. Growing up, anytime my family gifted money to other family members for big events, they would always add an extra dollar to the total sum. For instance, regardless of what sum my parents gifted, be it \$30, \$50, \$100, or \$1000, they would always add an extra \$1 because it was said to bring good luck to the recipient. Adding \$1 might not seem like much, but it's the fact that my parents would be willing to spend more money, for the sake of attracting good luck, that shows just how much of an influence superstition can have on consumer behavior. Were companies to take advantage of the effect believing in this superstition has, they could influence consumers to spend more on products and services. Thus, leading consumers to abandon logic in preference of ambiguous beliefs.

For further research, it would be interesting to examine how these differences in superstitious beliefs affect consumers across each culture and the difference between the extent to which it affects consumers in each culture. Are some culture's consumer behaviors and purchasing decisions more susceptible to influence, due to these superstitious beliefs, than others? If so, how great is the difference across these various cultures? While some research has been conducted to answer questions such as these, this particular area should be further explored to deepen the understanding of how beliefs in superstition affect consumer behavior and their purchasing decisions.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this capstone project is to discuss how consumer beliefs in superstition affect consumer behavior and influence a consumer's choice to purchase or leave a product. Consumer behavior is a multifaceted category that aims to explore the various aspects that influence consumer needs and affect how they make their choices. The very notion of superstition carries many interpretations that can differ across culture. For the sake and simplicity of this capstone project, superstition sought to encompass all beliefs that defy all rational thought and conflict with accepted laws of nature, thereby invoking a sense of good or bad luck.

Not only did the research studies reviewed in this project demonstrate the importance and value of exploring the various aspects in which superstition can affect performance expectations and economic rationality, but one study expanded upon current research and imparted insight as to how marketing teams at different companies could manipulate advertisements and other marketing materials to induce superstitious beliefs among consumers. Highlighting the expansion experienced in this realm of research and how it can be used to influence consumer psychology exemplifies the importance of this multidisciplinary science to foster interest for students, academics, and researchers investigating this area of research in the present and the future.

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