

**TEACHING THE INFLUENCE OF SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS ON CONSUMER DECISION-  
MAKING:  
FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE HARRY POTTER WORLD**

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Introduction

There are several less researched but increasingly more relevant concepts creeping into the lexicon of factors which affect consumer behavior. Marketing educators must find creative techniques to present such topics in ways that students can readily comprehend. This paper presents a classroom exercise to teach one such topic, namely, superstitious beliefs and their influence on consumer decision-making. It is inspired by the popular *Harry Potter* series of books and movies that revolve around magic, wizardry and superstitious beliefs (Rowlings, 1998).

“Superstitions are beliefs that are inconsistent with the known laws of nature or with what is generally considered rational in a society” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). Wikipedia describes superstition as “a credulous belief or notion, not based on reason, knowledge or experience.” Levitt and March (1988), studying superstition in an organizational setting, defined it as a compelling subjective experience of learning with loose connections between actions and outcomes. There seems to be a rise in superstitious beliefs and activities in the United States (Smith, 2003).

A recent a Yankelovich Poll found that a third of Americans believe in ghosts and UFO's, while 48 percent indicated they believe in extrasensory perception (Barrick, 2007). A recent AP-Ipsos poll found that one in five people say they are at least somewhat superstitious (Ap-Ipsos Poll, 2010). Seventeen percent of respondents believed that finding a four-leaf clover to be

lucky and 13 percent dread walking under ladders. Other superstitious activities/items noted were the groom seeing the bride before their wedding, black cats, breaking mirrors, opening umbrellas indoors and the number 13/Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Moreover, popular media increasingly provides evidence of growing attention paid to the paranormal, spiritual beings, and forces that are unseen but affect everyday lives. The data shows a marked increase in belief for all concepts listed. This reflects an overall trend identified by Tobacyk and Milford (1983). Popular culture has advanced the movement through television shows like the "Ghost Whisperer," "Long Island Medium," "Fast Forward," "Fringe" and shows on the Travel Channel and the Syfy Network dealing with Haunted Houses, "Ghost Hunters" and destinations, as well as, A&E channel's "Psychic Kids: Paranormal Children."

Block and Kramer (2008, 2009) are among the very few available studies to systematically link superstition to consumer behavior. According to the Block and Kramer (2008, p. 783) study, "Superstitious beliefs have a robust influence on product satisfaction and decision making under risk. However, these effects are only observed when superstitious beliefs are allowed to work nonconsciously. Using a process-dissociation task, we further demonstrate the distinct conscious versus nonconscious components of the effect of superstition on decision making under risk." In this study Block & Kramer provided anecdotal connections between superstitious beliefs and consumer decision making and behavior. They pointed to marketing campaigns which succeeded or failed due to their connection with superstition:

- Icelandair's successful promotion allowing customers to add on excursions for \$7 each, provided they booked by 7/7/07.
- Wal-Mart's successful "Lucky in Love Wedding Search," promotion which granted seven couples a free wedding ceremony and reception for 77 guests on the lucky date.
- Decrease in sales revenue of hundreds of millions of dollars on Friday the 13th because people are reluctant to leave the house and shop less and fly less.
- Success of the *Friday the 13th* movies released on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> which earned \$350 million.

In a more recent study, Block and Kramer (2009) linked superstitious beliefs as a basis of product performance expectations and their impact on initial purchase likelihood and subsequent satisfaction. They “demonstrated instances when superstition-driven expectations cause consumers to make purchase decisions that run counter to economic rationality.” They found that Taiwanese consumers are relatively more likely to purchase a product with positive superstitious associations based on its “lucky” color, and are more likely to purchase and are willing to pay more money for a product with a smaller but “lucky” number of units contained in the package (e.g., eight tennis balls compared to ten). In contrast, consumers who do not hold such superstitious beliefs adhere to the more rational choice paradigm (p. 161).”

Most of the literature regarding the impact of superstitious beliefs comes from psychology and relates it to anxiety and psychological distress (Zebb and Moore 2003). Several studies examined issues relating to luck (Darke and Freedman 1997; Keinan, 2002; Hergovich, 2003; Wiseman and Watt 2004) while other studies have associated self-efficacy with superstitious behavior (Bandura, 1997; Damisch, Stoberock and Mussweiler, 2010).

#### Objective and Description of the Pedagogical Exercise

This paper describes an experiential exercise that marketing educators can use to raise the awareness of college students on their own level of superstition. In order to engage students, the authors incorporated characters from the popular *Harry Potter* series.

Students were asked to respond to a survey based on a scale of superstitiousness by Zebb and Moore (2001) which deals with Western superstitious beliefs. Then, based on these responses, students were categorized into a taxonomy based on *Harry Potter* (Rowlings, 1998). Students can be grouped into one of three categories, based on their scores in the scale.

These include:

- Wizard (most superstitious) born from two magical beings with magical powers
- Mudbloods (moderately superstitious) born from one magical being and one muggle (human)

- Muggle (least superstitious) most rational no magical powers

Items were included that reflected a variety of behaviors and tendencies that may impact behavior. The respondents indicated their level of agreement according to a 6-point Likert scale. Respondents also provided demographic data such as their age, gender, ethnicity, and level of acculturation in the United States and years living in the United States. Items in the scale included the following:

I have a lucky number.

I believe that seeing a black cat brings bad luck

I believe that walking under ladders will bring bad luck.

I avoid walking under ladders.

I believe that the number 13 is unlucky.

I believe that opening an umbrella inside is bad luck.

I avoid opening an umbrella inside.

I avoid stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk for fear of bringing bad luck.

I believe that finding a four leaf clover brings good luck.

I believe that picking up a penny brings good luck.

I believe that wishes made in a well while tossing coins in a fountain will come true.

I believe that knocking on wood will prevent the undoing of something good I just said.

I knock on wood to prevent the undoing of something good I just said.

I believe that fortune tellers can predict the future.

If I went to a fortune teller and that person predicted something, it would come true for me.

I do something special to bring good luck.

I do something special to prevent bad luck.

I have a superstition not listed here.

Harry Potter Taxonomy Outcomes

In order to test the exercise, it was administered to a sample of 122 students in a Marketing Principles class. Of those who specified their gender, 45 percent were males and 48 percent were females. Of these, there were 42 percent Asians, 26 percent were Caucasians, 15 percent Hispanics, two percent African Americans, three percent were “others.” According to their level of acculturation, respondents were asked if they were non-residents, first generation, second generation, third generation, more than three generations, and don’t know. This sample contained 37 percent from the first generation, 22 percent from the second and third generation, 16 percent were more than three generations in this country and 9 percent who “don’t know.” Only five percent were non-residents.

The Zebb and Moore Superstition Scale contained items that were considered Western superstitious beliefs. Results showed that overall, respondents were not wizards. Among the items were beliefs followed by corresponding behavior. Some respondents did not agree with beliefs but engaged in action to ensure good luck. For example, although only 10 percent agreed or strongly agreed that walking under a ladder was bad luck, 30 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they avoided walking under a ladder.

Using the Zebb and Moore Superstition Scale, responses to the first 17 and the last questions were added up to form a “superstition score.” Based on responses, students were classified as either Wizards (70-90 points), Mudbloods (41-70) and Muggles (0-40).

There were no respondents scoring 70 or above. Of all the respondents, 25 percent were classified as Mudbloods, and 75 percent scored 40 and below and were thus considered Muggles. In keeping with findings in the literature, there were more females who were Mudbloods compared to males (38 percent of females to 13 percent of males). In classifying respondents according to ethnicity, 27 percent of Asians were Mudbloods compared to 19 percent of Caucasians and 17 percent of Hispanics.

Of the items included on the Zebb and Moore (2001) scale, strongest agreement were found with items like belief in finding a four-leaf clover brings good luck (mean = 2.67),

“knocking on wood” where believing that it would prevent the undoing of something good (mean = 2.38) and actually knocking on wood “to prevent the undoing of something good I just said” (mean=2.39), and having a lucky number (mean=2.34). The weakest beliefs were in seeing a black cat brought bad luck and that a fortune teller’s prediction will actually come true. The lowest response for behavior was avoiding stepping on cracks in the sidewalk for fear of bad luck (mean = .43).

Several items were added to the Zebb and Moore (2001) scale to examine behaviors that may have a relationship to purchase. Of those, the strongest reaction was to wearing certain colors to funerals (mean = 3.29). This may have less to do with superstition and more to do with tradition. Other items that respondents reacted to were the belief in what they read (mean = 2.68) and the belief that there is truth in every rumor (mean = 2.63). The weakest were on avoiding scheduling events on Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> (mean = .92), belief in lucky items of clothing (mean = .89) and eating certain food during holidays for good luck (mean = .76).

Table 1  
Superstitiousness versus Beliefs and Behavior

Beliefs/Behaviors	Mudbloods (%)	Muggles (%)
I would avoid scheduling a special celebration on Friday the 13 <sup>th</sup>	32	9
I believe everything I read	79	60
In a hotel, if I was assigned Rm. 666, I would ask the front desk for another room	58	22
I avoid owning a black cat	55	22
I have a lucky item of clothing	24	11
I believe some items bring me luck when I play competitive sports	57	21
I follow a routine when I go shopping	48	22
I follow a routine when I play video games	34	15
I have a good luck charm	44	1
I eat certain foods on holidays for good luck	34	8
There are certain colors I would never wear to a funeral	83	69
I think there is truth in every rumor	83	59

After classifying respondents on the Zebb and Moore (2001) scale as Mudbloods and Muggles, Table 1 shows the cross tabulation of this with the other beliefs and behavior. The table shows significant differences between Mudbloods and Muggles respondents in their belief and behavior. For this tabulation, all the positive sections of the scale indicating agreement were added up to compute the percentages.

### Implications

Marketers have long suspected a relationship between superstitious beliefs and consumption behavior, but studies have only recently attempted to connect investigations done in Psychology to Marketing. This exercise provides a technique that incorporates the concept of superstitious beliefs into the classroom in a compelling way. In this classroom of students, however, there were no respondents who fell into the category of wizard. This could be the result of the diversity of students in the sample because the scale was based on Western beliefs and 42 percent of the students identified themselves as Asians.

This exercise shows promise. Students had fun and it was simple enough for the instructor to administer. However, in the future, it can be enhanced by asking students to predict ahead of time where they think they would fall in the taxonomy and comparing the results. Further, future research should examine both antecedents and marketing outcomes of superstitious belief. It would also be interesting to measure individuals' level of uncertainty avoidance (Jung and Kellaris, 2004) and investigate how uncertainty avoidance is related to superstitious behavior. Specifically, we expect that the more individuals want to avoid uncertainty, the more likely they are to exhibit superstitious behaviors in the marketplace. In addition, future research can examine how superstitious belief might influence consumers' confidence in marketplace activities (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose, 2001) such as gathering information about a product, forming a consideration set, decision-making, ability to resist persuasion attempts by salespeople, and asserting consumers' concerns and rights. Giving students an opportunity to think about interconnectedness of various constructs related to

superstitious belief and consumer behavior in a classroom can serve as a fun tool in demonstrating how values and beliefs influence consumer behaviors.