

Illusion of control: Why sports fans prefer 'lucky' products

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Consumers engage in superstitious behavior when they want to achieve something but don't have the power to make it happen, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Preference for lucky products (those associated with positive outcomes) increases when a strong desire for control is combined with lower perceived ability to exert control. [Consumers](#) who make superstitious choices believe they will be effective in helping them achieve the desired outcome," write authors Eric J. Hamerman (Tulane University) and Gita V. Johar (Columbia University).

[Sports fans](#) are well known for their superstitious behavior. A current Bud Light commercial with the tag line of "it's only weird if it doesn't work" shows the odd ways in which NFL fans root for their teams. Robert De Niro's character in *Silver Linings Playbook* engages in deeply superstitious behavior that will supposedly help the Philadelphia Eagles win.

In one study, right-handed consumers played rock-paper-scissors. Those who won more often using their left (vs. right) hand preferred to continue playing with their left hand. This was more likely to occur among consumers with a stronger desire for control, and those who preferred to play left-handed after associating this hand with victory tended to believe they were more likely to win in the future.

Consumers can become conditioned to associate certain products with

success or failure. For example, a sports fan who was drinking a Dr. Pepper while watching his favorite team win a game might later drink Dr. Pepper—even if he would actually prefer a Coke—while watching future games in the hope that he's giving his team an extra edge.

"Conditioned superstitions are formed when consumers associate [products](#) with success or failure. Depending on how much they wish to control their environment—and their perception of whether they can do so—consumers who make these associations may be more likely to act on them, thereby creating an illusion of control over future outcomes," the authors conclude.

More information: Eric J. Hamerman and Gita V. Johar.

"Conditioned Superstition: Desire for Control and Consumer Brand Preferences." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2013.

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