

The science of studying the effects of extraordinary beliefs on consumer behavior

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The study of superstition and other extraordinary beliefs in the marketplace brings challenges and opportunities for the enhancement of consumer well-being. In "Superstition, Ethics, and Transformative Consumer Research," published in the October issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, Stuart Vyse examines the ethical issues involved in research on consumer superstitions and how the principles of Transformative Consumer Research can be applied to this area of investigation to promote consumer welfare and sustainability.

Transformative consumer research (TCR) refers to an initiative proposed by marketing scholar David Mick, wherein investigations are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity and strive to respect and improve life for [consumers](#). For instance, studies adopting the TCR approach might focus on vulnerable consumer groups, gambling, product safety, or financial and medical decision making.

Vyse explores some of the implications of applying utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethical standards to superstition in the marketplace. He notes that when it comes to homeopathic medicine, for instance, the FDA has adopted a utilitarian risk-based philosophy "that takes no moral stand on the acceptability of medical treatments based on unsubstantiated theories of disease," contrasting to a moral approach that would prioritize truth and evidence in the marketing of goods and services—"but as of this moment, such rules are generally lacking," he writes.

Invalid claims from marketers offering superstitious products (from rabbit's feet to spell kits to psychic readings) are not disallowed by any regulatory agency, and the exploitation of customers' superstitious beliefs for financial gain does not run afoul of deceptive advertising standards. The TCR virtue ethical approach, Vyse says, assumes that if a society based on reason is more sustainable than one based on superstition and unscientific thinking, questions arise as to whether there is an obligation for researchers and policy makers to discourage the role of [superstition](#) in the marketplace.

Vyse suggests that researchers should more specifically identify irrational behavior. "Avoiding a hotel room because it is on the 13th floor or being attracted to an airline because their company number is made up entirely of lucky numbers is not rational," he says. Instead of assuming that everyone recognizes rational vs. [irrational behavior](#), research in this area may more constructively affect consumer well-being if the rationality of the behavior in question is assessed and clearly stated.

More information: Stuart Vyse, Superstition, Ethics, and Transformative Consumer Research, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1086/698869](https://doi.org/10.1086/698869)

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