



The shift of superstitious behavior: Do the Balinese believe in lucky and unlucky numbers?

¹Ni Putu Luhur Wedayanti, Ni Luh Putu Ari Sulatri² and Ketut Widya Purnawati³

Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia

Email : luhur_wedayanti@unud.ac.id

Article info

Received Date: 14 Oktober 2024

Accepted Date: 12 December 2024

Published Date: 31 January 2025

Keywords:*

superstitious belief, Balinese
unlucky number perspective,
Balinese people's concepts of time.

Abstract*

This study is motivated by the avoidance of unlucky numbers in some areas of Bali. This is not in line with the beliefs of Balinese people who generally don't believe in unlucky numbers. This study aims to analyze the causes of the phenomenon using a qualitative research approach. Data were collected using direct observation, questionnaires, and interview responses. The results of the data analysis show that there are groups of people who know of the existence of unlucky numbers, but only a small proportion believe in it. The phenomena of unlucky number avoidance could be concluded as a business strategy.

1. Introduction

Belief concepts such as myths, superstitions, taboos, and prohibitions are unique phenomena that grow and are maintained continuously in most societies in the world. Although declared as beliefs that are not based on scientific studies, these belief concepts are not only believed by traditional groups in rural areas far from modern civilization. Research revealed that educated, intelligent, and stable emotional individuals also tend to believe in some superstitions around them (Gallup & Newport, 1991, p. 137), despite their tendencies to disclose or feel shameful about their belief in superstition (Faiza, 2018, pp. 1–2). Carlson et al expressed a similar opinion that consumer beliefs in superstitions identified by producers become sales targets in the trade of goods and services. Take jewelers who sell jewelry as good luck charms, they deliberately insert certain superstitions or myths to attract consumers to increase sales (Carlson et al., 2009, p. 709; Wiseman & Watt, 2004, pp. 291–292). Beliefs about myths and superstitions have become commodified by capitalizing on consumer beliefs. Just as jewelry has a story to tell as a protective charm, there are also beliefs about numbers in East Asia. The number four is avoided because it is homophonous with the word *shi* which is the root of the Japanese word *shinu* meaning 'to die; to pass away; death' (Ignatieva & Trazanova, 2022, p. 3; Nishiyama, 2013, p. 1; Suhartini, 2019, p. 10). As such, it is quite difficult to find items with sets of four, especially items intended as gifts to others in Japan. Gifting items with sets of four to Japanese people, who already have a perception of four as an unlucky number, can lead to

misunderstandings. The sender of the gift may be perceived as wishing bad luck on the person receiving the gift.

In other parts of Asia, specifically Southeast Asia, and more specifically in Bali where the majority of the people are Hindu, there is a belief in taboos that govern the daily religious life of the people. Balinese people have beliefs related to things that bring fortune and misfortune that are very close to the teachings of Hinduism. However, in a globalised age where foreign influences are hard to contain, it is difficult for such traditions to survive unaffected. Perhaps there are no longer any beliefs that are as pure as they were originally. What we encounter today is a form of belief that has been mixed and undergone various adjustments with the times. The reality that is often seen today in Bali is the behaviour that shows the avoidance of numbers that in other cultures are considered to bring misfortune. In this regard, this study tries to formulate a problem to be analysed, that is the perception of Balinese people towards things that are believed to bring good luck and bring bad luck or misfortune. Another problem formulated is the possibility of a shift in beliefs towards things that are believed to bring good luck or bad luck. The objectives of this study are to reveal the perceptions believed by Balinese people with a focus on the value manifested in behavior and speech to avoid things that are considered to bring bad luck and do things that are considered to bring good luck. With these objectives, this study is expected to benefit the wider community by identifying Balinese perceptions of superstitions.

1.1. Reality of Superstition in Society

In premodern times, when sophisticated equipment and disaster management systems had not yet been invented, humans became increasingly aware of the natural forces that could bring disaster to their lives. Nature that was considered to have power, such as strong winds, uncertain seas, towering mountains, or other parts of nature, became cult objects in the hope that nature would not unleash its power to destroy human life. These beliefs assume that nature has rules and desires that must be fulfilled. As a result, the concept of behaviour or habits in society is then manifested in order to do things in accordance with what is perceived as the will of nature and to avoid things that are imposed by nature so that humans can avoid disaster or misfortune.

Among the beliefs in society, there are superstitions, myths, taboos and others. Carlson, Mowen and Fang summarised the meaning of superstition as a belief or unit of belief scope whose specific actions can directly affect the expected results or can help avoid unexpected results, even though in reality the actions taken because of belief in superstition are not causally related to the results (Carlson et al., 2009, p. 691). It is also added that superstition is a belief that arises in society because of the expectation that action can affect the final result as expected, and the belief in superstition is based on mysterious or unknown forces, and is not consistent with scientific studies in culture.

Myths, on the other hand, are defined as stories about ancient gods and heroes, containing interpretations about the origin of the universe, people and nations, and containing profound meanings expressed supernaturally; stories about Gods that have functions and meanings about the events of human origins (Izzuddin et al., 2022, pp. 1–2; Singh, 2021). Myths are defined as those related to primitive beliefs about unseen natural life that arise from human efforts, unscientific and not based on real experience to explain the world or nature around them (Partanto & Al-Barry, 2001). Usually, myths involving supernatural or fancied persons (Fieldhouse, 1995, p. 155) and, are followed by both awe and fear which gave rise to a cult of worship and adoration. This worship is then preserved in the form of religious ceremonies which are held periodically at certain times. Some are in the form of speech conveyed from mouth to mouth throughout the ages, from generation to generation which are now recognised as folk tales.

Most people in the world make death a fear that has given rise to many superstitions to avoid this misfortune. Pregnancy and childbirth were also considered very close to death by premodern societies, so there were many traditions to separate women who were approaching childbirth from their groups (Thorgeirsdottir, 2014, p. 16; Wedayanti et al., 2023, p. 7). Fear of misfortune such as death, illness and things that are considered inappropriate, are avoided to be spoken explicitly and some euphemism strategies are used when having to say these topics (Hysi, 2011, pp. 378–379). In Balinese society, pregnant women must be treated with great care and their biological, psychological, social and spiritual needs must be met. Many traditions centred on myths and superstitions revolve around pregnant women, in the hope of keeping the mother and the unborn baby healthy and the baby is born as a *suputra* (smart and wise) child. Pregnant mothers are forbidden to attend wedding ceremonies and death ceremonies. The do's and don'ts in Bali vary depending on the village where the pregnant woman lives. In the Kintamani Batur area, there are even written rules in *awig-awig* for pregnant women (Bhandesa, 2021, pp. 430–442). However, in some places there are also adjustments to the current modern situation. Like what happens in Japan with families who have pregnant women, some families simplify or adjust the rules and ceremonies that must be performed. However, some of them still try to adhere to the rules that they have known for generations with the hope that the mother and the baby in the womb will remain healthy and happy (Thorgeirsdottir, 2014, p. 5).

In addition to these superstitions, there is also a number that is considered unlucky, i.e. the number 13, especially the number 13 that falls on Friday (Friday, 13th). To emphasize how the 13th was unfavoured, especially when comes to Friday, Danish tend to avoid holding a wedding and birth timing on that day (Antipov & Pokryshevskaya, 2020, p. 761). It is considered an unlucky number, and quite a several people are affected and worried about experiencing misfortune on Friday the 13th. The concern about the number 13 also has implications for the economic sector. People in America are also said to refrain from playing stocks for fear of experiencing bad luck and getting losses on Friday the 13th. Even luxury hotels also generally do not have the 13th floor (Huang et al., 2023). Carlson, et al, mentioned there is a tendency for people to avoid travelling or working on Friday the 13th because it causes economic losses in the range of 800-900 million dollars (Carlson et al., 2009, p. 690). In line with Carlson's research, there is also research on the influence of Friday, the 13th in Finland. Nayha mentioned there is speculation that traffic accidents experienced by women in Finland increased by about 63 per cent on Friday the 13th. Nayha's research alludes to the psychology of women who are more affected by superstitions of bad luck that may occur on Friday the 13th. It is likely that women especially those with anxiety disorders feel excessive worry and can reduce focus which causes negligence in driving on the road (Näyhä, 2002, p. 2111).

Contrary to numbers that are believed to be unlucky, there are also beliefs about numbers that bring good luck. Some people in America, favour the number seven because they believe it brings good luck. Many businesses have exploited this irrational belief. For example, on 7 July 2007, The Ritz Carlton Hotel New York offered a wedding ceremony package for \$77,777 with a seven-tiered wedding case and seven-diamond wedding rings from a famous diamond company (Block & Kramer, 2009, p. 161; Huang et al., 2023, p. 399). Similar to this example, for the Chinese, eight is believed as the luckiest and is adulated for its power to bring fortune and general wealth (Tse, 2015, p. 7). Chinese in Singapore are willing to pay more to own a home on the eighth floor of an apartment (Agarwal et al., 2020, p. 5). Taiwanese people choose to buy a package of eight tennis balls in a tube, even though it is more expensive than a package of ten tennis balls due to the belief that the number eight brings good luck (Block & Kramer, 2009, p. 164). Zhang and Zhang mentioned that Asian countries such as Japan and China have a wide

range of superstitions (Zhang & Zhang, 2015). Despite the advancement of technology and modernisation in Japan, people still try to respect the beliefs about taboos in their society (Zhang, 2017). In Korea, it is even mentioned that the people tend to be practical when dealing with faith, that is to say, the people tend to perceive any religion in terms of fortune or misfortune. This mindset is strongly influenced by muism or shamanism as a deeply rooted belief on the Korean peninsula (Wroblewski, 2017, pp. 157–163).

1.2. Functions of Superstitious in Human Life

Experts argue that belief in superstition is a result of a one's personality traits. The myths/superstitions believed by some people are motivated by various reasons. Shavitt divides a one's motivation to believe in myths into two classifications (see. Vaidyanathan et al., 2018, p. 457). The first reason is the existence of certain needs that lead a person to believe in myths. The latter suggests that psychic processes create changes that are able to fulfil these certain needs. In other words, there are personalities that are prone to superstition. Control illusion is the belief of one that they are able to influence the outcome of an endeavour even when that influence does not exist. The causes of this belief or control illusion are: 1) disposition, 2) failure of reason, and 3) coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms are strategies that people employ when faced with situations that are uncertain or beyond their control. In the context of myth-believing habits, Vaidyanathan divides the functions of superstitious behaviours or habits into three groups, i.e. the function as an instrument or intermediary tool, the function as a protective medium, and the function of the habit as a medium to adjust to the environment (Vaidyanathan et al., 2018, pp. 457--461).

a. Superstition as an intermediary tool

In the context of attitudes, Katz mentioned that the instrumental function of motivation is “one of achieving desirable ends or avoiding undesirable ends” (see. Vaidyanathan et al., 2018, p. 457). In other words, a person believes that their actions (doing things according to superstition) will directly affect the outcome of an endeavour. So one believes strongly that if they bring their lucky charm, they will pass the exam. They believe that the charm is the cause of their passing of the test.

b. Superstitions motivated by the desire to have a protective medium

The protective function of superstition is referred to as a one's strategy to calm themselves down from various internal conflicts that occur within them. They act believing even though they continue to get disappointing results in the end. One's failure to change habits makes them feel less guilty if they get unexpected results. That attitudes are fuelled by the need to protect oneself from ego-defeating emotions such as fear and regret.

c. Superstitions that serve to adjust to the environment

It is a function that underlies one's superstitious attitude to be able to better adjust to be accepted in the group or community they favour. Although these types of people do not actually believe in superstitions, but because of the desire to be accepted and not excluded by the group, they begin to follow the habits and mindset of most people from the group.

2. Research Methods

This research is a qualitative study that focuses on the phenomenon of the perception of society, especially Balinese people, towards superstitions that are considered capable of influencing the final result, becoming expected or unexpected things if done by the rules in the superstition. This research uses a qualitative approach because this study examines the context or setting of the research subject, focusing on a phenomenon that grows or already exists in society

so that the values of a society can be revealed (Creswell, 2014). Collection of data for this research was carried out by collecting qualitative documents related to the research. The qualitative documents in question are in the form of research results with topics related to the topic of the present research. This research was conducted in Bali and the researcher conducted qualitative observation by directly observing the behaviour of Balinese people in their daily lives in Bali. The research location was limited to the Denpasar area, Bali, by taking a sample of 50 local Balinese, who were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The distributed questionnaire contained 15 questions, which asked about superstitions about numbers that bring good luck and bad luck. The questions emphasised whether the respondents were aware of lucky or unlucky numbers. The questions were also aimed at ascertaining whether the respondents, who were aware of such beliefs, also believed in and adhered to the rules of abstinence to avoid unlucky numbers. The respondents who were given the questionnaire were differentiated in age by those above 30 years old and those below 30 years old. The purpose of this differentiation is to get a variety of answers about the dynamics that occur in Balinese society today. Some responses were also reconfirmed by conducting structured interviews, so that richer and more accurate data for analysis could be obtained.

Interviews were also conducted with staff of the *SAMSAT* (One-stop Administration Services Office) as well as staff of hotels in Bali's tourism centres to look at the practice of treating numbers that are generally known to bring misfortune. Interviews with staff of the *SAMSAT* were conducted in only one area in Klungkung, as the rules in that city were confirmed to be the same, not only throughout Bali but also throughout Indonesia. The data having been collected were then analysed using the concepts that have been presented in the literature review section of this paper. Using the concept of motivation for superstitious attitudes, the behaviour of Balinese people was analysed. Then conclusions regarding Balinese perceptions of things that are considered to bring bad luck and bring good luck are drawn.

3. Result and discussion

3.1. Results

From the responses of the respondents through the questionnaires distributed, there are differences in responding to superstitions concerning lucky numbers and unlucky numbers in Bali. From 30 responses, which is half of it are participants over 30 years old, and remain are under 30 years old. In general, although respondents are aware of the belief in certain numbers, they, especially respondents who are over 30 years old and have been involved in the community, are more trusting and always obey the *wariga* and *wewaran*. From the answered questionnaire there were showed that the participants over 30 or under 30 are less likely believed in lucky or unlucky number. There was always fewer number for answer believed about superstitions in number, despite their knowledge of some superstitious number.

From the interviews with One-stop Administration Services Office staff in Klungkung region, it was also found that there is no phenomenon of denial or avoidance of certain numbers for vehicle number plates, although vehicle number plates cannot be requested, because if people want certain numbers for vehicle plates, they must go through official procedures that have been regulated in the Perka Polri (Regulation of National Police Chief of the Republic of Indonesia). The tendency of people to choose a particular number for their licence plate is largely because the number is meaningful in their lives. In addition, the selection of certain numbers is done because of the belief that a number brings good luck (not avoiding unlucky numbers, but the perspective is looking for luck and safety). There is also a penchant for showing creativity in language with

word games that mix and match numbers and their pronunciation to refer to certain words. Such as the vehicle number, 1305, which can intuitively be read as BOS, numbers with sequences that are considered ‘pretty numbers’, and other exclusionary reasons.

3.2. Discussion

A. Belief of Balinese in Fortune and Misfortune

Balinese people in starting some stages of life, or when doing important work, strongly take into account the good and bad (or *divasa*). Information about good days and bad days that cover almost all aspects of Balinese life is quite commonplace, as it is easily available in everyday scenes. It starts from the interlude of information obtained when watching regional television programmes, which informs the *divasa* for good and bad days to do something. The phenomenon of Balinese beliefs is closely related to Hinduism, which is the religion embraced by the majority of the people. As explained in the literature review section of this paper, Balinese people do not have the bigotry to strongly favour or strongly avoid a certain number. However, there are also certain numbers that are considered more powerful than others. Balinese diviners tend to give advice related to numbers, showing odd or prime numbers.

In addition, there is also a strong belief in days that bring bad influence and bring happiness or luck. Balinese people have knowledge of the existence of good and bad days, times or moments in their lives in this world called *wariga*. This knowledge are mentioned based on *Jyotisha*. *Jyotisha* translate as the science of the movements of the heavenly bodies and divisions of time dependant thereon, astronomical science, astronomy or mathematical, astronomical, and astrological science, astronomy science (Monkiewicz, 2021, p. 244; Suamba & Mudana, 2018, p. 2). In Bali, *Jyotisha* well known as *wariga* *Wariga* is a science that studies the good and bad of the day so that it can be distinguished between bad, less good, good and best days (Bhattacharya et al., 2019, p. 287). *Wariga* together with *Wewaran* (a system which divided day in to ten categories of day) has also become a tradition of Hindus in their daily lives, can be used as a guide in life, especially in the implementation of rituals or *yajna*. Activities of the East Amlapura in east Bali market by studying its traffic characteristics based on *Tri Wara*. It is stated that the densest activity occurs on *Beteng* day at 06.30-07.30 Central Indonesian Time, with the highest peak hour traffic volume at the Pasar operating at 435, 25 PCU/hour occurs on *Beteng* day. Followed by a lower volume on *Pasah* Day amounting to 392, 45 PCU/hour at 06.30-07.30 Central Indonesian Time (Septanata, 2022).

Tri Wara is part of *wewaran*, which consist of *beteng* day that literary could be translated in to ‘full; plenty’. So, this day considered “good day” for its association with plenty in meaning. In the past, there were rules that regulated people’s markets to be opened on certain days and opened alternately from one place to another. There are several considerations underlying the opening of the market at a certain time, one of which is that it was believed to provide an opportunity for farmers to harvest the results of their fields or rice fields on time when they were ripe. In addition, the opening of the market in different places provided a fair distribution of economic transactions in the surrounding community. At that time, most people would come to the market to sell or buy their needs on *Pasah* day. *Kajeng* day is define as ‘high pressure’ and more likely to belief as a good day to fix or organize something (Pranata, 2022). The habit of the community is proof that even today, Balinese people still believe and carry out activities based on good days to perform something. The belief to always consider good days is also very serious consideration when carrying out human activities and *yajna*.

B. The Shift in Balinese Perception of Lucky and Unlucky Numbers

The daily attitudes and habits of Balinese people therein are a reflection of their belief in religious teachings as well as a manifestation of local wisdom that has been inherited from generation to generation. Related to this, regarding superstitions concerning numbers that bring bad luck and those that bring good luck, its existence in Bali may be believed in different forms. Balinese people in general do not have much concern about unlucky numbers or lucky numbers. The existence of individuals who believe in it is most likely due to external influences, for example having the knowledge of the existence of the unlucky number 13 from their surrounding environment.

In everyday life, it is quite difficult to resist or avoid situations related to numbers. For example, in sorting room numbers in hotels, rented rooms (boarding house rooms), or rooms in hospitals, which are usually quite large in number. In hotel rooms, there are generally three numbers used, i.e. the number indicating the floor of the room, a zero number, followed by the room number. Thus, for a room with the number 13, it would not be just the number 13, but plus another number indicating the floor of the room. The strategy is expected to alleviate consumers' worries about the bad luck they might face if they got a room number 13. Rooms for rent that do not have as many rooms as occupancy in hotel rooms generally prefer to use the alphabet in numbering rooms. This is to avoid the number 13 in certain rooms. Numbering a room with the number 13 creates concerns from both the room owner and the tenant about the possibility of bad things happening. The avoidance of numbers that are considered unlucky is very much tailored to the consumer market of the hotel and rental rooms. According to one of the hotelier staff in the tourist area in Uluwatu, hotels classified as city hotels in Denpasar do not generally have rooms with number 4 or number 13. Sometimes the strategy used is to add the letter A or B to the number, or even sometimes the room with number 4 is left absent and the next room number from number 3 is 5. This is because the target market of city hotels in Denpasar is Asian tourists who have strong beliefs in lucky and unlucky numbers. However, such a phenomenon is not found in villas with a more global market in the area around Jimbaran.

Hospitals in Bali generally do not use numbers to number their rooms. Hospitals are places for sick people, whose days are often filled with worry that something bad will happen to their patients. Also, the hope is that the hospitalized patient will recover soon. The uncertainty of the situation that occurs in hospitals generally makes hospitals very devout in avoiding obscenity, for fear of cursing, or misfortune. Instead, hospitals apply certain strategies to avoid things that are taboo in their society. For example, they do not use certain numbers to number the rooms, but instead use flower names, beautiful bird names, or other names that have a positive interpretation and help calm the patient psychologically while in the hospital. The strategy used in naming the room can be seen as a form of avoidance of certain numbers. The avoidance of unlucky numbers that do not exist in Balinese culture is a form of shifting perceptions of good and bad through coping mechanisms. This mechanism is applied when one party wants to have a little control over the many uncertainties in a very vulnerable hospital situation.

4. Novelties

This research found that Balinese people do not clearly show a preference for certain numbers that are homophonous with words that have unfavorable meanings. However, in some places, especially businesses that target consumers who believe in lucky and unlucky numbers, numbers that are considered to bring bad luck will be avoided and replaced with other names to avoid consumers' worries about bad luck.

5. Conclusion

The Balinese tradition of always taking *wariga* and *wewaran* into consideration is a local wisdom that has been closely attached to the archipelago. As an area where the majority of the people are Hindus, attitudes and behaviours that reflect of Hinduism in Bali can be clearly seen in the daily lives of its people. Certain calculations of existing days are strongly believed and used as a basis in determining the organisation of an activity, both large and small scale. By choosing a good day, the Balinese believe that what is done will definitely run smoothly. There are several countries that have a belief in numbers that bring good luck and bad luck. Additionally, it is mentioned that human will naturally always strive to avoid misfortune and seek happiness, one of which is through coping mechanisms. With coping mechanisms, people try to have control over the outcomes they expect in the future time. Despite having a strong belief in good days and bad days, in some tourism areas which are the main economic commodities of the island of Bali, there is an avoidance of unlucky numbers. For example, city hotels target Asian guests who do have this belief. Hospitals in Bali avoid using numbers to number rooms and replace them with flower names, bird names, or other names that can have a calming effect on patients.

6. Acknowledgment

This research was supported by DIPA PNPB for PUPS Grant year 2023 from Udayana University.

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Biography of Authors



Ni Putu Luhur Wedayanti is a lecturer at the Japanese Department, Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University. She is interested in researching the correlation between language and culture.

Email: luhur_wedayanti@unud.ac.id



Ni Luh Putu Ari Sulatri is a lecturer at the Japanese Department, Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University. She was the Chair of the Department of Japanese at Udayana University from 2014 to 2018 and is currently completing her dissertation there. She is interested in cultural studies.



Ketut Widya Purnawati is Lecturer at Udayana University since 2001. She was the Chair of the Department of Japanese at Udayana University in 2010-2014. Currently, serve as Chair of the Department of Master Program in Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University. Her research interest was in the field of linguistics focusing in syntax, typological linguistics, and landscape linguistics.