

Superstitions and Residential Property Buyer Decision Making in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the influence of superstitious beliefs on the residential property buyer's decision-making in Sri Lanka. Despite plethora of research devoted to study superstitious beliefs affecting residential property prices, limited studies are available discussing the effects of superstitious beliefs on the entire buyer decision-making process. Besides, no studies are dedicated to discuss the issue pertaining to the Sri Lankan residential market. Rooted to Vastu, Almanac, and Islamic discipline, superstitious beliefs on the residential property exist in Sri Lanka. These superstitious beliefs, on the whole, concentrate on the design, shape, alignment, size, location, and structure of residential properties. Superstitious beliefs of buyers become a factor affecting their problem recognition, an insight for the information search, a criterion for evaluation of alternatives, a critical factor to make a purchase or purchase intention decision, and measurement of satisfaction of the residential property purchased. These findings are based on in-depth interviews with twenty (20) residential and community experts and thirty (30) residential buyers. John Dewey's five-stage buyer decision-making process is employed as a theoretical framework for data analysis. This examination provides useful insights on the behavioural aspect of the residential market in Sri Lanka for its market actors including real estate developers, agents, businesses, and real estate planners.

Keywords: Superstition, residential property, residential market, buyer decision-making process, Sri Lanka

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Economic theory defined rational and irrational behavior of consumers (Appelrouth & Edles, 2010; Simon, 1955) and its influence on the residential property market as an established research area in housing studies (see for example, Agarwal et al., 2014; Fortin et al., 2014; Shum et al., 2014). Superstitions are generally recognized as one such 'irrational' factor influencing residential buyer decision making (Grønhaug et al., 1987; Hawkins et al., 1992; Vyse, 2013). According to the dictionary by Merriam-Webster, the origin of the word superstition comes from the Latin word 'super-stare' - a global phenomenon that is culturally and geographically bounded (Keong et al., 2019; Kramer & Block, 2008). Here, we mean superstitions as the beliefs commonly practiced by people based on the old ideas of magic or ideas evolved as common practices which are not explicitly grounded on scientific and human knowledge at a given time (Carlson et al., 2009).

Superstitions about residential property in Sri Lanka are rooted to Vastu, Almanac ('Manaiyadi Sastra') and that are related to Islamic discipline. Belief in these superstitious ideas are often linked to the community's ethno-religious backgrounds; Sinhala-Buddhist, Sinhala-Catholic, Tamil-Hindu, Tamil-Catholic and Muslims. Buying a house for a household is a lifetime investment (Khezr, 2015; Grønhaug et al., 1987) and an important household decision, thus it demonstrates a peculiar buying process that might comprise both so-called rational and irrational factors (Grønhaug et al., 1987; Koklic & Vida, 2011). This is particularly relevant with the Sri Lankan housing market where households have a very strong bond with their house and in most cases buying or building houses to live in their lifetime (Ariyawansa, 2009; Dayaratne & Kellett, 2008). Thus, the buyer behavior for residential property falls into a complex and dissonant zone which is meant to be with high involvement of decisions due to high risk and the complexity that a purchase decision by nature may possess (Kotler, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2008).

Accordingly, this paper investigates how contemporary superstitious beliefs that exist within the Sri Lankan communities are influencing their residential property buying decision-making process. Here, residential buying refers to purchasing land to build one's own housing or buying a house in a landed property under the market conditions. For this, widely adapted, John Dewey's five-stage buyer decision-making process: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior (Dewey, 1910; Kotler, 2012) is employed as the theoretical framework to analyze data. Despite the plethora of literature available, investigating resident's superstitious belief's impacting on housing prices (outcome), there are only limited studies available that explain the causation to such relationship. Employing qualitative methods which allow a study to mobilize in-depth analysis (Lelissa,

2017; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015), the study first investigates contemporary superstitious beliefs that are embedded within the Sri Lankan communities with respect to residential property. Subsequently, it seeks to understand how those influence the residential property buyers at each stage of their buying decision-making process. Twenty experts in the field of housing (housing agents, architects, religious leaders, construction engineers, valuers, etc.) and thirty residents representing different ethno-religious backgrounds in Sri Lanka who had been involved in home buying during the last five years and are of different belief sets were interviewed for this purpose. The findings of the study improve the academic literature on the influence of superstition on the residential property market with respect to reasoning aspect, more particularly, and literature on housing studies and consumer behavior in general. Moreover, it provides useful insights for developers and investors about factors influencing residential property markets in Sri Lanka.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Superstition

The attempts to describe the concept of superstitions recognizes that superstitions are beliefs, ideas or theories (Foster & Kokko, 2009; Vyse, 2013) that prevail in human society for a prolonged period (Carlson et al., 2009) with respect to actions directly influencing on the occurrence of desirable outcomes or the avoidance of undesirable outcomes (Carlson et al., 2009; Ternosky, 2019) when, in fact, the actions are not causally related to the outcomes as per the *known laws* of nature or what the society generally considers 'rational' or scientific in a given time (Carlson et al., 2009; Foster & Kokko, 2009). It manifests in various forms such as in numbers, colours, charms, birds, animals, etc. (Carlson et al., 2009; Kramer & Block, 2008; Lip, 1992; Timberlake & Lucas, 1985). For instance, people avoiding certain symbols or actions to succeed in their life (Carlson et al., 2009; Vyse, 2013), individuals tending to be more risk-averse on Friday the 13th (Kramer & Block, 2008), while Chinese people believe number eight (8) brings good luck so that they started the Olympics they hosted in 2008 at 8pm on the 8th of August (8/8/2008) (ibid), sportsmen wearing lucky ornaments as a paranormal means to win (Carlson et al., 2009), etc. Also, it is observed that when some old superstitions vanish, new superstitions keep developing, while other beliefs persist (Keinan, 2002; Ng et al., 2010).

Superstitions correlate with religion, astrology, culture and interconnect these elements in a complex manner (Carlson et al., 2009; Gallup & Newport, 1991; Kramer & Block, 2008; Mowen & Carlson, 2003). Thus, an identification of a particular superstitious idea per se would be difficult (Aarnio, 2007; Ternosky, 2019; Vyse, 2013). Both superstitions and religions deal with beliefs in the supernatural realm thus relate to each other in an infinite way (Aarnio, 2007). According to Aarnio (2007), superstition and religion can have both positive and negative relationships. The individual's level of religiousness can determine the relationship between religion and superstition (Aarnio, 2007; Mcpeake, 1998). Astrology is the belief that the alignment of stars and planets at the time of a person's birth affects every individual's mood, environment, and personality (Humphreys et al., 2019). Both astrology and superstition involve beliefs that are inconsistent with the known laws of science at a given time and used in the hope of influencing outcomes. Thus, superstitious individuals are more likely to believe in astrology (Carlson et al., 2009). Even though superstition is a universal concept within human society, what is believed as superstition is also often culturally specific (Carlson et al., 2009; Kramer & Block, 2008). For example, the Chinese consider number 4 as unlucky (Ang, 1997; Kramer & Block, 2008; Simmons & Robert, 2003; Yardley, 2006) but for Americans, the unlucky number is 13 (Carlson et al., 2009; Kramer & Block, 2008).

Studies have shown that superstitious beliefs have psychological effects (Keinan, 1994; Malinowski, 1948; Vyse, 2013). Despite people are unaware about the reasoning behind their superstitious beliefs and practices; the fear they hold in life for the loss of wealth, health, life motivate them to believe in such superstition as a risk-averse strategy (Aarnio, 2007; Malinowski, 1948; Ng et al., 2010) and will transfer such beliefs to their future generations (Aarnio, 2007; Vyse, 2013). The negative and uncontrollable life events or actions are the motivators of paranormal and superstitious beliefs (Ng et al., 2010; Vyse, 2013). People behave more superstitiously when they experience bad times (Ng et al., 2010). When circumstances are uncontrollable or where uncertainty and risk are high, people engage in superstitious acts as a means to influence and control these outcomes. For instance, Malinowski (1948) found that the Melanesian islanders whom he observed were engaged in magical rituals when sailing in the open sea and being exposed to the dangers of gusty winds and high waves but not when fishing in closed and safe lagoons. People behave superstitiously when they are disturbed psychologically. For instance, Keinan (1994) found that superstitions and magical beliefs are more prevalent among people living in regions exposed to missile attacks (high-stress condition) than among those living in regions not exposed to such attacks (low-stress condition).

2.2 Purchase Decision Making of Consumers

The purchase decision of consumers is a vital part of economic transactions (Koklic & Vida, 2011). The residential property would be the most important durable good or capital investment of a household (Koklic & Vida, 2011). It is inherently a social activity that involves setting goals, discussing and negotiating family needs, interacting with exchange professionals (information intermediaries), imagining modifications to potential purchases and interpreting market trends (Levy et al., 2008). Among several buyer behaviors include complex, dissonance, habitual and variety seeking (Kotler, 2012), buyer behavior for residential property falls into complex and dissonance zone which is meant to be high involvement decisions due to high risk and complexity that a purchase decision by nature may possess (Grønhaug et al., 1987; Koklic & Vida, 2011). Consequently, households who engage in a residential property transaction uses a strategic decision-making process (Grønhaug et al., 1987) - a process of decision making when buying strategically important goods, such as a house, car, etc. and would include several important decisions such as allocation of the household budget, categorization of alternatives and decision making within the defined product category.

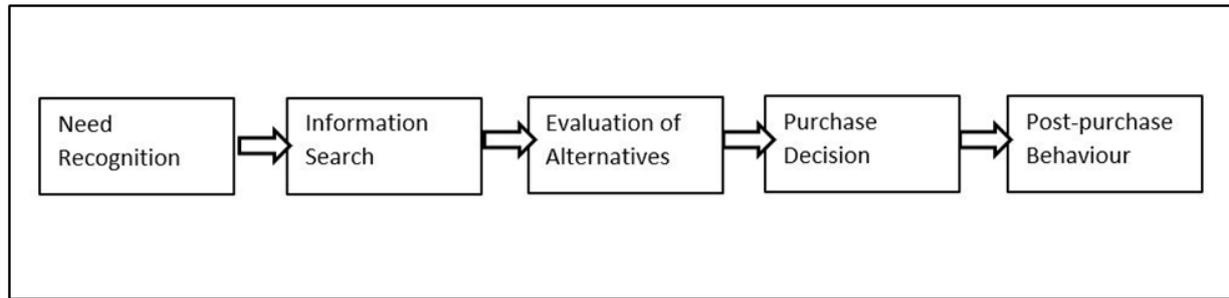


Figure 1 Five stage of buyer's decision-making process
(Source: Adopted from Kotler, 2012)

Research on consumer behavior has a long-established common consensus that the purchase decision-making process of buyers has five stages (see for example, Kotler, 2012; Hawkins et al., 1995; Stanton et al., 1994) (Figure 1). This five-stage process is first introduced by John Dewey in 1910 in his book 'How we think.' Accordingly, the first stage of any purchase decision is the need recognition. It is where the buyer recognizes a need or a problem to address (Kotler, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). A need arises when the satisfaction level of a person is unmet by present consumption (Munthiu, 2009). Such need is influenced by both internal stimuli such as feeling, hunger, thirst, etc. (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009) and external stimuli such as advertisements, discussion with a friend (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). The second stage of the purchase decision-making process is the information search (Kotler, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Munthiu, 2009). The information provides the basis for purchase decisions and has two levels. The first level is the heightened attention where the buyer becomes receptive to all information regarding the needed product or services and the second is the active information search level where the buyers look for all possible sources such as materials, discussion, internet, etc. The active information search leads to internal and external research. Researching the information stored in the mind is internal and information from personal (family, friends, neighbours), commercial (advertisements, web sites, salespersons, dealers, displays), public (mass-media) and experiential sources (handling, examining) are external (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009).

The third stage is the evaluation of alternatives. This is the place where the mental or the other forms of evaluation of the existing alternatives begin (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). The evaluation process is subject to the consumer's experience, the importance of the product or service considered, the cost of making a bad decision, the complexity of the evaluated alternatives and the urgency with which the decision must be taken (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). The success of the evaluation processes heavily depends on the attributes of the product and on the beliefs and attitude of a buyer. Belief is a descriptive thought a person holds about the attributes of a product. Attitude is a person's enduring favourable or unfavourable evaluation of a product (liking or disliking, moving toward or away) (Keong et al., 2019; Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). Fourth is the purchase decision. This is the result of the evaluation process. Here, the buyer may decide either to purchase or non-purchase or else to expose the purchase intention. The attitudes of others (someone important to the buyer) and the unexpected situational factors (economy of the buyer suddenly turns worse, etc.) can cause a change between purchase intention and the final decision (Kotler, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2008; Munthiu, 2009). On the basis, that buyer decision-making is not simply linear which has a definitive end, but cyclical (Hawkins et al., 1995), the final stage of the process is agreed to be the post-purchase behavior stage. In this stage, the consumer analyses the extent to which his or her purchase decision is 'good' or 'bad,' thus would lead to either consumer satisfaction (expected benefit is achieved) or dissatisfaction (expected benefit is received in the actual consumption) (Anderson, 1973; Kotler, 2012; LaBarbera & Mazursky, 1983).

2.3 Superstitions and Residential Property Buyer Decision Making

Studies on effects of superstition on residential property buyer decision making have established the phenomena that superstitions that the residents hold do affect their decision making on residential property buying (see for example, Agarwal et al., 2014; Antipov & Pokryshevskaya, 2015; Humphreys et al., 2019; Keong et al., 2019; Shum et al., 2014). However, the focus of those studies is primarily around impact of superstition on residential property prices (the effect aspect). For instances, Agarwal et al. (2014) studied that the Chinese superstition of number 4 as unlucky (death) and number 8 as lucky (prosperity) have affected on higher demand for houses with number 8 and the houses in 8th floor, thus houses with number 4 are sold at the market with the discount rate of 1.1% while number 8 was sold with 0.9% premium. Similarly, Humphreys et al. (2019) studied the Chinese superstitions in the Seattle Washington housing market, stated that the buyers paid less to the properties with digit 4 in their addresses and paid premiums for the houses with digit 8 in their address. Further Antipov and Pokryshevskaya (2015) studying the Russian housing market stated that the Russian numerological superstitions are likely to influence the price and the choice of residential real estate (Burakov, 2018). Limited studies recently emerged discussing the reasoning or causation aspect of superstitions affecting residential property buying decision making. For example, Keong et al. (2019) studied the effects of superstitions in the Chinese community of Malaysia and found that buyers' attitude, belief and perceived behavioral control towards superstitious belief affect the buyers' purchasing intention. Yet, no studies are devoted to study the Sri Lankan residential market context and one that explains the effects of superstitious beliefs on the entire buyer decision-making process.

■ 3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Context

Sri Lanka is an island with a mixture of several ethnicities and religions. As reported by the Department of Census and Statistics (2012), the population of Sri Lanka is around 20,400,000. The Sinhala-Buddhists together with Sinhala-Catholic are the largest ethnic group among them which comprises 74.8% of the total population. Tamil-Hindus and Tamil-Catholics are the second major ethnic group which comprises 11.2% of the total population. The primary concentration of them exists in the northern part of the island. Muslims comprise 9.2% of the total population and a higher concentration of them exists in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka. Besides, Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country with a GDP per capita of USD 3,852 (2019) (World Bank, 2020). The study takes the context of 'residential property buying' as either purchasing bare land to build one's own housing or buy a house in landed property under the market conditions. This is the context, representative of popular residential buying in Sri Lanka for all types of ethnic-religious communities (see for example, Dayaratne & Kellett, 2008). A lesser proportion exists in the housing market in Sri Lanka where residential property buying can refer to buying apartments, buying subsidies houses from government-led projects in urban areas, etc. in which this study limits to not taking such context into consideration.

3.2 Method

This research is an exploratory study (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) needing behavioral data such as different superstitions that prevail within the Sri Lankan communities and how those influence the buyers who believe in them when they engage in residential property buying decision-making. It aims at analytical generalization (*generalizing to a selected theory*) (Yin, 2003), i.e. to understand the buyer decision-making process as a theory (Dewey, 1910) in the light of residential buyers possessing superstitious beliefs. Accordingly, the study adopted a qualitative approach collecting data via in-depth interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lelissa, 2017; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). First, twenty experts linked to the residential property market and communities: architects, astrologers, residential brokers, religious leaders, valuers, and academics were selected on a purposive manner. They were interviewed to investigate the superstitions that exists in the contemporary Sri Lankan residential property market. Second, thirty (30) residential buyers were selected purposively who have gone under a residential buying process within the recent five years (2015-2020), who tend to believe in superstitions and are representative of different ethnic-religious backgrounds. To fulfill the latter, they were selected from Galle (South of Sri Lanka), Jaffna (North of Sri Lanka) and Batticaloa (East of Sri Lanka) areas that demonstrate the relatively greater concentration of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim population respectively. Interviewees were of different age groups (from 20 to 60), educational qualification (Ordinary level, advanced level, graduate & post-graduate), and were of different occupational profiles (farmer, labour, government employee, academics & professionals). Recruitment strategy followed snow-balling (Cooper & Schindler, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) and the number of interviews was decided on the saturation level of responses where they tend to become repetitive (Grønhaug et al., 1987; Saunders et al., 2018). The collected data was coded and analyzed thematically (Gray, 2014). The themes looking at different superstitious beliefs prevailing among Sri Lankan residential property buyers emerged from data (Bryman, 2016) of expert interviews. The coding of data for the rest of the themes aiming to understand those superstitions influencing the residential property buying decision making followed, widely applied, five stages buyer decision-making process (Figure 1). The plethora of literature in the field of marketing, psychology, housing, business, management, etc. have employed this five-stage decision-making process (as a theory) in understanding the buyer behavior (see for example, Carlson et al., 2009; Keong et al., 2019; Kotler, 2012).

■ 4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Superstitions on Residential Property

The expert interviews reveal that superstitions in Sri Lanka are rooted to Vastu, Almanac and Islamic discipline. As they state, Vastu principles are based on the analyses of five sources of energy (earth, water, fire, air, space) and their correct utilization for the health and wealth benefit of the household. The belief is around the directions of these energy sources to avoid negative merits. For residential properties, Vastu deals with the directions of land, slopes, location of access roads, formation of house, doors and windows, roofs and other key elements. Vastu is prevalent in Sri Lanka for more than several centuries and superstitions rooted to vastu are primarily believed by the Sinhalese middle or lower-income communities. Vastu experts – 'Vastu Sastri' provides consultancy for people in applying these ideas into their residential properties. A considerable amount is paid for the consultancy of these experts. The Almanac has a close relationship with Hinduism whilst communities influenced by it primarily includes Tamil-Hindus. Often, the influence of Almanac can be seen among Sinhalese communities also. Almanac is based on three benefits; heavens good luck (the astrological bodies' placements at birth), earth's good luck (past life or Karma) and human's good luck (benefits obtained from other humans). Almanac and households' horoscope are taken into consideration to decide the site selection, structuring and designing, soil testing and planning of all types of houses while it also provides remedies and rectifications. The consultancies on Almanac are provided by 'Manaiyadi Sastri'- expert in Almanac. Muslim communities' superstitious beliefs about residential property are often linked to their 'Islamic Discipline'. According to religious leaders (Imam), Islam recognizes that there are superstitions in houses that can cause impacts to humans, thus follow disciplines when orienting the direction of property elements to Qibla (where Mecca is situated).

The content analysis of different superstitious believes in Sri Lanka rooted to Vastu, Almanac and Islamic discipline are shown in the Table 1. It shows that these beliefs are clearly ethnically bound. Yet again, those altogether highlight two common features. First, those which are conveyed around a residential property's shape, design, structure, alignments, locations (directions), sizes (numbers). Second, these superstitions, on the whole, are retrospective of residential property - the physical structure has a direct influence (effect) on the household's health, life, and wealth (outcome).

Types of Superstitions	Rooted to Vastu and believed mostly by Sinhalese of Sri Lanka	Rooted to Almanac and believed mostly by Tamils of Sri Lanka	Rooted to Islamic Discipline and believed by Muslims of Sri Lanka
Shape / Design / Structure	Three doors in one linear alignment will cause loss of wealth & health to the household.	Fixing a twin door for the pooja room (Hindu prayer room) will bring gods blessings in abundance.	Designing a kitchen without having a connection to the visitor's hall will help to avoid family problems.
	Arrangement of front and rear doors in one linear alignment will cause loss of wealth.	Arrangement of the front and rear doors in one linear alignment will cause a loss of wealth.	Fixing rafters for the joint where the hip rafters and ridge is met will cause harm to the household.
	Having cross pillars in the house generates a weaker point and would bring bad luck to the household.	Constructing three rooms at a stretch or in a linear arrangement will lead to loss of health and might bring death to the household.	
	The ridge plate of the house facing the doorway will bring deaths to the household.	If the pooja rooms of the neighboring houses align with the new house, then it will cause calamity in the household.	
	The main roofing pillar of the house going through the master bedroom will bring bad times for the owner of the house.		
Direction	Building the toilet in south-east direction will cause death to the breadwinner of the house.	Keeping access/gate on the south will bring death to the household, as it is believed that the south gate belongs to the God of death.	Main door should not be placed in the direction of "Qibla" (direction of Mecca) because it will disturb worshiping method of Allah and will lead to harmful effects.
	Two folded roofs facing the east and west side will increase prosperity and good health. If not, the house will become cheerless and unwelcoming.	The kitchen chimney facing east will reduce accidents and demerits.	Toilets should not be placed in the direction of "Qibla" (direction of Mecca). Because it will disturb worshiping method of Allah and will lead to harmful effects.
	A house located right in front of the T-junction will bring bad luck and loss of peace to the household.	Keeping the kitchen outside the house and not cooking meat dishes are mandatory for homes with east gates. This will help them to avoid demerits and to receive abundance blessings from God.	
	House constructed in the north-west will bring family separation.	Building a house or small hut in the southern direction of the Mansion will bring destruction to the mansion.	
	House constructed along west will increase sexual desires.		
Land	Lands with lower slopes in the north & east, and higher slopes in the south and west are suitable for residents and will bring prosperity.	Land sloping towards north and northeast is good and will bring wealth and comforts.	Not identified.
	Lands with higher slopes in the north and east will bring financial losses, loss of profit, and an ill omen for male children.	Land sloping towards the south is inappropriate and will bring deaths.	

	Lands with lower slopes in the southeast will bring financial losses, ill health and fire hazards.		
	Land sloping towards the west will bring financial losses, displeasure and unsuitable for male children.		
	Land sloping towards the centerline is good but depression in the center will cause mental stresses and multiple sicknesses.		
Numbers	Having the door count in odd number and windows in even number will prosper the households.	Having the door count in odd number and windows in even number will prosper the households.	
	Number 13 is assumed to be bad luck and will bring deaths to the household.	Number 13 is assumed to be bad luck and will bring deaths to the household.	
		Constructing a room with nine 9ft length or width will bring harmful effects to the household.	
		Constructing a room with 16ft length or width will increase the wealth of the household.	
		Constructing a room with 12ft length or width will bring infertility to the household.	
		Constructing a room with 13ft length or width will bring deaths to the household.	
		Constructing a house 22ft long will bring a loss of peace within the household.	
		Constructing a house 30ft long will bring diseases to the household.	
		Constructing a house in 33ft long will induce the owner to have 2 spouses.	
		Constructing a house 40ft long will lead to a woman's leadership in the household.	
Constructing a house 46ft long will make it an abode of devil.			
Constructing a house 47ft long will support and bring witchcraft effects to the diseases in the household.			
Household's action	Thursday is a bad day to start a construction project.	Organizing special pooja (Hindu prayer) to cast out the evil God in roof structure known as <i>Thachchan Kaali Kalithal</i> will help the household to avoid demerits and losses.	A person should continually stay at the construction site to avoid the dwelling of evil spirits.
	Offering to God of wealth before construction will help to finish the project successfully.		Credit should not be used to building houses.
Size	Not identified.	The width of the other rooms in the house exceeding the width of the pooja room will cause a loss of wealth.	Not identified.

Table 1 Superstitions related to residential property in Sri Lanka
(Source: Authors' compilation)

Table 1 identifies superstitious beliefs that are most commonly prevails in Sri Lanka based on expert interviews. Nevertheless, those may vary from one individual to another.

4.2 Influence of Superstitious Beliefs on Residential Property Buyer's Decision Making in Sri Lanka

4.2.1 Need Recognition

Superstitions being socially constructed as reasoning for cause and effect of an outcome (Carlson et al., 2009; Ternosky, 2019) are both external and internal stimuli to residential property buyers. It is an external stimulus when they “*have been advised by several people - father-in-law, friends and neighbors regarding these beliefs prior to the purchase of the house*” (Respondent No. 11 - Sinhala, Businessman). Should the resident buyers believe or internalize such superstitions, lead those to become an internal stimulus for them to recognize his or her need for residential property. Some related responses from homebuyers in this respect are, “*My husband committed suicide on a 7ft coconut tree in the house where we lived as tenants. I believe that the previous house is the reason for it. Now me and my children are living happily in this new house*” (Respondent No. 12 - Sinhala, Housewife), “*The previous house didn't allow us to live a peaceful life. It almost killed my family. Two of my sisters died in it. So, we built this new one*” (Respondent No. 1 - Tamil, Self-employed) and “*This property has access from the north which doesn't suit our horoscope...so, we will demolish and rebuild*” (Respondent No. 2 - Tamil, Farmer). The bad life experiences drive the superstitious beliefs of residents to become an internal stimulus wanting them to buy, reconstruct, alter land or housing. For those buyer's residential property is not only a product providing the utility of living but also as an object that *affects health and wealth for life*.

4.2.2 Information Search

Heightened attention and active information search (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009) with internal and external research for information – whether residential property intended to construct, purchase or rent aligns with the respective beliefs was observed with interviewed residential buyers. For example, buyers who tend to believe in superstition thoughts stated:

“Before I started buying my house, I got advice from parents because they have experiences in such thoughts [Almanac]. Then, I invited a Shastri and got advice on the important elements of the house relating to my horoscope. I did everything, according to Shastri's advice” (Respondent No. 3 - Tamil, Teacher)

“When I start searching for houses and gather information, I looked into the Almanac. Because it is a general practice in our society and an element of our religion” (Respondent No. 4 - Tamil, Accountant)

“We chose an architect who knew Vastu well when buying land and designing this house” (Respondent No. 13 - Sinhala, Government Officer)

“I took my house plan to Imam (Islamic priest) to make sure that its directions are not contradicted with Qibla” (Respondent No. 21 - Muslim, Businessman)

Residential buyers invest their time and cost to look for information and developing insights as to what superstitions they should follow. When they find that different opinions were expressed by experts (priests, architects, etc.) for a given residential property, instead of *refrain from believing, it increased the tendency to seek better opinions*, because the residents believe it is a decision *about their healthy and prosperous of life*.

4.2.3 Evaluation of Alternatives

Different superstitious beliefs that the households possess are found to be a key criterion that buyers employ to evaluate buying alternatives for residential property together with other evaluation factors such as construction quality, location, price, design, size, facilities, legality, neighborhood, surrounding, etc. “*My evaluation begins with my budget then definitely the almanac*” (Respondent No. 5 - Tamil, Housewife). Since households link superstitious beliefs on housing with *their wealth, health, life*, etc. buyers employ this as an evaluation criterion with the stance of “*better to follow them to live a peaceful and prosperous life*” (Respondent No. 23 - Muslim, Businessman). In other words, to avoid the cost of making bad decisions (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). It applies as a risk management strategy in life. Particularly, it's a criterion for shortlisting or omitting inappropriate alternatives (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009): “*I rejected many house plans as they didn't have front door towards East and was not towards Qibla (West)*” (Respondent No. 22 - Muslim, Businessman). In certain other cases, it's a criterion for perfection (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009). For instance, a Tamil Hindu Accountant (Respondent No. 4) stated “*I have designed my house by positioning the front door in the east, but the priest decided to keep it in the south. So, I was forced to keep it according to priest's decision to avoid demerits in future*”. Thus, it certainly limits or streamlines the choices that buyers have. Negative life experiences that one has or seen with others intensify the buyers' beliefs in these superstitions further and priorities that as a primary criterion in house buying evaluation of alternatives. This is evident through responses such as, “*We have witnessed the hardships faced by our neighbors because of not following such beliefs. So, I take them [superstitions] as my top priority*” (Respondent No. 6 - Tamil, Driver) and “*Because of my past negative experiences, my prime focus of doing this house was the Vastu. I am okay to do it at any cost*” (Respondent No. 9 - Tamil, Farmer). Nonetheless, urgency of home buying or renting can shift superstitions as a less important criterion, “*since we have to vacate the previous house immediately, [...] though it didn't suit our horoscope, we had to move in*” (Respondent No. 14 - Sinhala, Farmer).

4.2.4 Purchase Decision

Buyers possessing superstition beliefs had expressed their purchase and purchase intention decisions for the residential property or the plan to build when such property or building plan aligns with such beliefs together with other housing attributes such as preferred location, prices, etc. As stated by interviewees, *“This property perfectly matched with our horoscope. So, we bought this unit”* (Respondent No. 15 - Sinhala, Retired Government Staff). Similarly, another respondent stated, *“I would say that the Vastu is the reason to arrive at my decision to construct my own house, even though it cost a lot”* (Respondent No. 16 - Sinhala, Clerk). Buyers pay additional prices for residences aligning with their respective beliefs. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that residential property design having the flexibility to change them as per the particular set of beliefs also led buyers to determine to purchase the said property. For instance, a Tamil businessman stated *“Initially we rejected the house because it didn't suit our horoscopes, but later accepted it [purchased it] since it can be rectified with alterations”* (Respondent No. 7) shows that purchase and purchase intention are expressed not only when the required superstitions were met by the selected alternative but also when there is a possibility for alterations or rectification.

Further, in between the final purchase decision and intention to purchase, influences to the buyers or unexpected situations can result in a delay or postponing the purchase decision. For example, a Tamil Hindu self-employed woman said, *“I postponed the purchase due to an unexpected dismissal of my husband. My parents said it's a bad sign and I too believe it a negative sign/time”* (Respondent No. 8). Here, the buyer's purchase intention decision was changed due to the unexpected situation of the husband's death followed by the influence of the parents. Besides all, the housing purchase decision itself involves the buyers performing several ceremonial and superstitious acts such as sacrifices to the evil spirits and religious rituals to make sure that they make the correct decision and that remains as the correct decision-no demerits experienced whilst living in the house. A Sinhala Buddhist businessman stated, *“From laying the first stone to the completion of the construction I followed Shastris instructions on auspicious time to avoid demerit and delays in construction”* (Respondent No. 17). Another example was a Tamil Hindu Housewife who shared, *“It is vital to do a pooja to cast out the evil god in the roof. So, I did it and it cost a lot”* (Respondent No. 5). It highlights that in addition to paying an additional price to the housing that aligns with their beliefs, buyers also incur a cost for the act of purchasing.

4.2.5 Post-Purchase Behavior

The expected outcomes of superstitions – health and wealth of households is a factor influencing the residential buyer's post-purchase satisfaction of residential property that they purchased. Residential buyers analyze the extent to which their purchase decision is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ from the day the deed is signed. Buyers consider no additional superstitions when households do not experience ‘bad’ times with respect to their health and wealth: *“We have built this house according to Vastu therefore we haven't faced any issue so far. So why checking further?”* (Respondent No. 18 - Sinhala, Government Employee). Certain households have experienced ‘bad’ times even after attempting to align the house purchase or construction with their respective beliefs. In such instances that had influenced the buyers to be ‘dissatisfied’ about the house despite the *price of the resident purchased was reasonable and was located in a good location*. Households have further attempted to rectify such residents as per their beliefs investing more money on residences: *“I have considered the Almanac with reference to my wife's horoscope in building my house...but soon as we moved to our house, she died. So, I'm making some more rectifications though it is a huge cost to me”* (Respondent No. 2 - Tamil, farmer). In certain instances, residents would incur costs to complete the demolition of the house. For example, a Tamil Hindu businessman stated, *“The priest said that the location of this property is a threat to us and will bring deaths. So, we demolished and rebuilt this new plan without rectifying it,”* (Respondent No. 7) and a Sinhala Buddhist self-employed woman stated, *“After instructed by my mom and the priest, I spent 15 lakhs which is a big amount to me to completely alter the front side of my house”* (Respondent No. 19). Not achieving expected outcomes of adhering to respective beliefs wouldn't stop the household from believing them. Instead, it leads the households to incur more cost on housing until the expected outcomes of those are achieved.

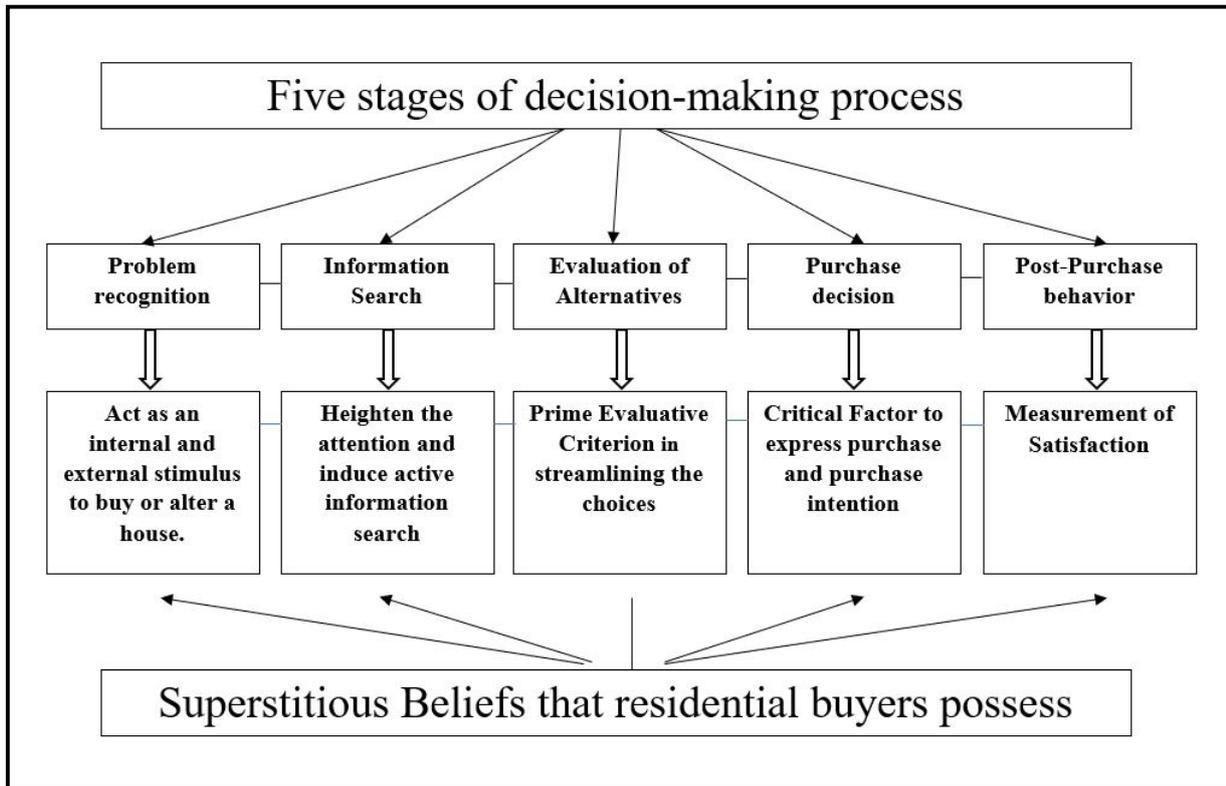


Figure 2 Superstitions and residential buyer decision-making process
(Source: Authors' construct)

5.0 DISCUSSION

This study aims to explain the way in which the Sri Lankan buyers' residential property buying process is influenced when they possess superstitious beliefs. Superstitions as a global phenomenon are culturally and geographically bound (Kramer & Block, 2008; Vyse, 2013) and is referred here as a set of beliefs commonly practiced by people based on the old ideas of magic or ideas that evolved as common practices which are not explicitly grounded on scientific and human knowledge at a given time (Carlson et al., 2009). The context of residential property buying in this paper refers to either a resident purchasing bare land to build their own housing or buying a built-up house in a landed property. Interviewing different experts in the housing market in Sri Lanka such as architects, astrologers, residential brokers, religious leaders, valuers, and academics, the study first investigated different types of superstitions that can prevail among the Sri Lankan residential property buyers. Secondly, the study investigated how such beliefs can be possessed by the buyers affecting their five-staged buying decision-making process for residential property. For this, data were obtained from in-depth interviews with 30 (thirty) buyers who tend to believe in superstitions on residential property, representative of ethno-religious backgrounds of Sri Lanka, and involved in the residential buying process between the years 2015-2020.

In the context of residential property, the superstitious beliefs embraced by people in Sri Lanka are ethno-religion bounded (Aarnio, 2007; Mcpeake, 1998). Sinhala-Buddhist, Sinhala-Catholic, Tamil-Hindu, Tamil-Catholic and Muslim communities rooted to their respective religions, Vastu and Almanac principles can be subjected to follow different superstitious beliefs irrespective of their age, occupation and education. As per the experts interviewed, Vastu principles are about how residents would capture the five forces of energy (earth, water, fire, air, space) for better health wealth and life of the households. Similarly, Almanac is about receiving good luck from heaven, earth and human beings for the betterment of households. Also, Islamic principles emphasize following certain discipline in building certain elements of the house in relation to the direction of Qibla (where Mecca is situated). These in common are conveyed around residential property's directions, size, shape, structure, counts and designing of certain housing elements.

Buyers who believe in these see housing as a physical object that can capture different energy forces in the universe to optimize the life and living conditions of households. In that light, superstitious beliefs provide certain guidelines for residential buyers when purchasing or constructing houses with respect to its directions, size, shape, structure, counts and designing of certain housing elements. Superstitions are socially constructed as causation – residents complying with these beliefs affect households – receiving good health, wealth and long-life vice versa.

Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2, for buyers who believe in respective superstitious ideas, those become an external and internal factor that stimulates a need to purchase, rent or alter existing housing. They also demonstrate the highest attention and invest both time and cost to search information on housing or its plan being in complete adherence to those beliefs. When evaluating buying alternatives superstitious belief is a primary criterion for those who believe in them to streamline their choices. In such case, superstition is a criterion either to limit household's choices or make the choice perfect with their needs. However, the "urgency to buy" can distort the usual importance given to superstitious beliefs as an evaluation criterion irrespective of the buyer possessing such beliefs. For expressing the purchase or purchase intention decision, property being in line with their superstition beliefs is a primary factor for such buyers. Such buyers would also express their purchase or purchase intention decision for properties having flexible structures or design to alter as per their beliefs though the houses were not initially in line with their respective beliefs. For those buyers, the act of purchasing itself is a life event significant enough to incur both time and costs to hold various rituals that connect with superstitions on households (Table 1). It is also noteworthy that in between purchase intention and actual purchase, the buyers' influencers (close family member, close friend) opinion of the residence; regarding those not being in line with the certain beliefs can become a factor for the buyer to change the final decision – i.e. refrain from purchasing what he or she would initially intended to. At the post purchasing stage, the outcome expected of superstition – health, wealth and long-life is a primary criterion to measure the buyer's satisfaction of the residence. Should the buyers not receive the outcome expected, it leads to the breakdown of their superstition beliefs; it leads to recreate a need for the households to buy, rent or alter the existing house. Altogether the findings also revealed that respective superstitious beliefs can lead to incurring additional housing costs for buyers who believe in them. Those may be incurred in the areas of (i) paying a premium on residential property price (ii) acquisition cost on housing-search information, paying consultants such as Sastri, conducting rituals at the purchase, etc., and (iii) altering existing properties.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study complies with many other studies on superstitious beliefs and the residential property market (Agarwal et al., 2014; Antipov & Pokryshevskaya, 2015; Humphreys et al., 2019; Keong et al., 2019; Shum et al., 2014). This is on the line that the former influencing the shaping of the latter. However, what it finds more is that the superstitious beliefs that Sri Lankan residential property (in this case landed property) buyers hold is significantly influencing all the stages of their purchase decision making (need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior). Thus, should the home buyers possess superstitious beliefs to a significant extent, they can have several market implications such as (i) those can become a factor to create demand for residential property, (ii) add actors to the residential market such as consultants who provide advice on properties being in adherence with these beliefs (iii) contribute to the buyer's behavior on housing to fall in the zone of high-involvement (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009), complex and dissonance (Kotler, 2012; Munthiu, 2009) decision making. For Sri Lankan buyers who believe in superstitions, the utility of the residence is not limited to providing them shelter. They connect the utility of a house to providing them health, wealth and life (Vyse, 2013). The superstitious beliefs do exist among Sri Lankan communities bound by their ethno-cultural backgrounds. Hence, these are useful insights for professionals, marketers and developers to shape the supply side of Sri Lankan residential markets accordingly. In complementary to this study, we suggest further empirical research in Sri Lanka with respect to quantifying the extent to which these superstitions are believed by the population in general, superstition's effects on residential property market prices, and how it had shaped the residential property development.

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