



Thought piece

The strange non-appearance of the iPhone 9 and other numerological oddities

Why a cultural understanding of numbers adds up

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Fly with some of the world's biggest airlines and you won't find yourself seated in row 13. Take the elevator in certain parts of Asia and it's unlikely you'll be stepping out on level 4. And some of the world's largest tech companies seem to have deliberately avoided bringing out version 9 of a longstanding product series. Why? Because astute businesses are aware that the numerological world with all its regional connotations is by no means culturally neutral.

Skipping a generation: the iPhone “X” factor

Precious little is left to chance when the world’s biggest brand launches a new flagship product. So, as devotees queued round the block on 3 November 2017 to buy the new iPhone X, you might have been forgiven for asking: did someone forget about the iPhone 9?

Coming less than two months after the launch of the iPhone 8, the arrival of the iPhone X (pronounced “ten”) took the market by surprise. With the entry of new models normally preceded by months of growing media speculation and consumer buzz, Tom Cheshire, the Technology Correspondent for Sky News, seemed flummoxed by the atypical speed of the new product launch this time around, calling it “the most unApple of iPhone launches”¹.

The unexpected timing of the new arrival certainly helped to generate headlines. While some marvelled at (literally) eye-catching new features such as facial ID recognition and wireless charging, others questioned how much appetite there would be for a smartphone retailing at one dollar short of \$1,000. But, amidst the hoopla, the name of the new phone was also something of a shock. Why had Apple leapfrogged number 9 and forged ahead with a Roman numeral?

Long-suffering number 9

The tech giant has remained tight-lipped on the subject, and as yet there has been no official confirmation or denial that the iPhone 9 will never hit the shelves. But from a marketing point of view, common sense would suggest a retroactive backfill is highly unlikely. Apple has not elaborated on the reason for the break in naming protocol either.

Some commentators suggested the name was a way to celebrate the ten-year journey since the launch of the first iPhone back in 2007. This is certainly possible, but it’s also worth noting that Apple is not the first tech giant to display a noted aversion to post-8 numerological convention. Describing it as its “most comprehensive platform ever”, Microsoft launched Windows 10 onto the market as the direct successor to Windows 8. Blackberry also bypassed version 9 (and indeed version 8) of its mobile phone operating system when it launched its OS10 as the follow-on from OS7.

¹ <https://news.sky.com/story/what-happened-to-the-iphone-9-11033377>

For those wanting to make a statement, the move to double-digit versions clearly suggests a disruptive technological leap forward. Some analysts, however, have questioned whether certain cultural connotations regarding the number 9 might have influenced the decision to omit it: in Japan, the number nine is pronounced “ku” or “kyu”, which to Japanese ears sounds very much like the word for “torment” or “suffering”. In a market where iPhones represent 60% of smartphone sales, it’s worth considering that Apple may have deliberately avoided any negative cultural baggage associated with the number.

Fear of 4

If it sounds far-fetched that the mighty tech giants of Silicon Valley and beyond could be swayed by numerical superstitions, we need to understand just how ingrained some numerological traditions are in cultures across the world. For example, should you ever have the chance to visit the Alpha office in Seoul, you will notice as you take the elevator to level 6 that the Gangnam Mirae Tower has no level 4. Why? Because in Korea, like a number of East Asian cultures, the number 4 is pronounced as “si”, a homonym for the word for “death”. This means there is a huge amount of cultural baggage attached to what sounds like an innocent and indeed rather “square” number, to Western ears at least.



In fact, tetraphobia² is a recognised term which means fear or avoidance of the number 4 (rather than the anxiety induced by the difficulty of opening a particular kind of milk carton packaging). In certain East Asian countries, it’s a cultural phenomenon that can be seen in multiple aspects of daily life. Some hospitals, hotels and apartment blocks in countries such as China, Malaysia, Singapore and beyond have floor plans which jump from 3 straight to 5 in order to avoid numerical bad karma on the fourth level.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetraphobia>

In Hong Kong, some high-rise apartment blocks such as The Arch and Vista Paradiso skip the entire range of floor numbers from 40 to 49. Even hard-nosed military top brass are not averse to the superstition. Seeking to avoid choppy waters, the navies of both the Republic of China (Taiwan) and South Korea avoid using the number 4 when assigning pennant numbers to their ships.

Global manufacturers also take notice of the power of tetrophobia to influence consumer choices. Finnish telecommunications giant Nokia has at times chosen not to release software or products beginning with the number 4 "as a polite gesture to Asian customers"³. Meanwhile, the Chinese smartphone manufacturer OnePlus produced a product line which goes from 3 and 3T to 5 in its efforts to avoid any negative associations with the number 4. And, without giving any overt reason, the Canon Powershot G series went straight from the G3 model to the G5 with the G4 nowhere to be seen.

Number 13: unlucky for some

The level of aversion that can be found in the East to the number 4 often surprises those not familiar with Asian culture. However, Westerners are prone to their own numerical superstitions. The most well-known of these is, of course, the association of bad luck with the number 13.

No one knows for sure where this tradition originated, but one theory connects it to the Last Supper in the Christian tradition, where Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Christ, was the 13th person at the table. Others have pointed to a more celestial influence. In the middle ages, monks usually planned the arrangement of yearly church festivals according to the normal 12-month lunar cycle. Every 3 to 4 years, however, there are 13 full moons in a calendar year, which would involve significant rescheduling. Perhaps it was the complications that ensued that led to the number being associated with monastic animosity and a general sense of spiritual foreboding.



³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetrophobia>

Whatever the origin, the “unluckiness” of 13 has become an accepted part of Western popular culture, with many hotels and tall buildings lacking an explicitly named 13th floor, opting to jump from 12 straight to 14. In a bid to allay the worries of passengers who experience triskaidekaphobia⁴ (fear or avoidance of the number 13), airlines including Air France, Iberia, Ryanair, AirTran, Continental Airlines and Lufthansa all refrain from including a row 13 on their in-flight seating plans. From buildings to aeroplanes, it seems that numerical superstition is more likely to affect people in high places.

The graveyard of unlucky numbers

While the numbers 4 and 13 are commonly associated with misfortune across broad geographical regions in Eastern and Western cultures respectively, some countries have developed idiosyncratic numerical aversions that seem to be unique within their own borders.

In Italy, for example, the number 17 is considered so unlucky that both national airline Alitalia and neighbouring German carrier Lufthansa omit a row 17 on their flights. At the 2006 Winter Olympics held in Turin, the 17th turn on the track used for the luge and bobsleigh events was known simply as “Senza Nome” (no name).

Although impossible to verify, some have attributed the origin of this superstition to a quasi-classical source. When viewed in Roman numerals, 17 is written as XVII. These can be anagrammatically rearranged to spell “vixi”, meaning “I have lived” in Latin – the sombre epigraph found on many Roman tombstones. Regardless of its source, the perceived negative connotations were enough to persuade French car manufacturer Renault to rename its R17 model R177 for the Italian market.

Back in Asia, meanwhile, other numbers acquired a negative mythology of their own among certain nationalities. In Vietnam, for example, one numerical superstition takes the maxim that “two’s company, three’s a crowd” very seriously. According to some Vietnamese, if three people are photographed together, the one in the middle will die first⁵. Tourists taking selfies with locals in Hanoi have been duly warned.

In Afghanistan, the number 39 has become associated with prostitution and pimping in the popular imagination, for reasons which remain distinctly unclear. Subjected to abuse on the roads, car owners with registration plates ending in 39 have resorted to selling their undesired vehicles at prices considerably below market value or paying to get a new registration number issued⁶.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triskaidekaphobia>

⁵ http://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Vietnam/sub5_9d/entry-3381.html

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/15/afghanistan-curse-of-number-39>

Crunching the numbers: the final countdown

In a global marketplace, the ability to adapt products, brands and communications to reflect the values and traditions of local cultures is immensely valuable. When it comes to language, most successful international businesses understand that the nuances of cultural understanding need to be handled with care and respect so that the meaning is not misconstrued or lost in translation.

Perhaps less well recognised is the fact that the world of numbers, our universally understood sequential system, is also laden with cultural significance that varies greatly from region to region. From naming products to delivering advertising campaigns, it is always worth checking with native experts that any numbers involved are not considered high-risk in local markets. Because when it comes to good localisation, playing your numbers right shouldn't be left to chance. And, with that in mind, don't hold your breath for the launch of the iPhone XIII any time soon.

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