

BALINESE COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF BALINESE SCRIPT ON MERCHANDISE PRODUCTS: AN ANALYSIS OF AESTHETICS, ETHICS, AND CULTURAL DESACRALIZATION

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Received: 7 November 2025, Revision: 14 November 2025, Publishing: 21 November 2025

Abstract

Balinese script is an intangible cultural heritage with historical, aesthetic, and spiritual value. In recent years, it has been utilized in merchandise design to strengthen Balinese cultural identity within the creative industry. However, its commercial use has sparked debates regarding ethics and public perception. This study examines public views on the use of Balinese script in merchandise design through surveys and interviews involving both younger and older generations of Balinese society. The findings show that the younger generation supports its use as a means of cultural preservation, while the older generation emphasizes ethical considerations, particularly concerning sacred characters such as Ongkara and Modre, which should not be used carelessly. The Balinese script is regarded as visually appealing but requires cultural education and respect for local norms. The study concludes that the Balinese script holds great potential in the merchandise industry if applied wisely.

Keywords: Balinese Script, Merchandise, Public Perception, Product Design.

INTRODUCTION

Merchandise refers to physical goods or products produced or sold by an entity such as a company, artist, brand, or organization. These items typically feature branding, logos, or designs associated with the producing entity. Merchandise is often used as a tool for marketing, promotion, and brand development. Its main purpose is to strengthen brand identity, build brand awareness, and support overall marketing success. Merchandise can include a wide range of products, such as clothing, accessories, electronic items, souvenirs, and many others (Diba, N. A. F. et al., 2022). Merchandise plays an important role in Bali's tourism sector and can incorporate designs highlighting local wisdom, one of which is the Balinese script.

Balinese script serves as a cultural identity. This culture represents a set of noble values and ideas that form the foundation of human thought and behavior—both individually and socially—in understanding and appreciating the world and their environment. The function of script in cultural continuity is as a tool for preserving sacred manuscripts that contain spiritual philosophy, literature, politics, and cultural teachings, which are rooted in religious values and ideas. Balinese script—especially sacred script—plays an important role as a medium for expressing Balinese culture. It is divided into two types: sacred script and common Balinese script. The script used in daily life is called Wre-Astra, which has existed since 78 AD. This marks the beginning of its use in the Caka calendar, which differs by approximately 78 years



from the Gregorian calendar. The characters introduced at that time were not individual letters, but syllabic characters, consisting of the syllables: ha, na, ca, ra, ka, da, ta, sa, wa, la, ma, ga, ba, nga, pa, ja, ya, and nya.

Sacred Balinese script (Aksara Suci) is a form of Balinese writing used specifically in religious, spiritual, or traditional contexts regarded as holy by the Balinese community, functioning as a medium that connects humans with the spiritual realm. It is primarily used for writing sacred lontar manuscripts, mantras, prayers, and religious literature such as Kakawin and Palawakya, and it holds deep spiritual significance closely associated with Hindu ceremonies. The writing process is carried out with great care and is often accompanied by sacred symbols such as modre, which serve as complementary marks in holy texts (Suwija, 2019). Sacred Balinese script follows strict grammatical rules and is usually written on sacred materials like lontar (palm-leaf manuscripts) or sacred cloth (such as prada cloth), which are believed to possess magical power, and any writing errors are thought to affect the outcome of rituals. This script must not be written or discarded carelessly, and if damaged, it must be destroyed through special ritual procedures. Examples of its use include Mantra Panca Yadnya (prayers in religious ceremonies), sacred manuscripts such as the Bhagavad Gita in Balinese or Old Javanese, and texts read by priests (pemangku or sulinggih) during ceremonies. Visually, sacred Balinese script is often more decorative and embellished with carvings or accompanying motifs.

Common Balinese script is a form of Balinese writing used for everyday purposes, such as recording general communication, folk literature, or even informational signs, and it carries no sacred dimension. Its main characteristics include its use for writing non-religious texts such as folktales, dramas, or daily notes as an ordinary means of communication within Balinese society. The writing style is more flexible, although it still follows the structure of Balinese script, and it is written on common media such as paper or wood, or even applied in modern design (signboards, graphic art). Because it does not possess any spiritual or sacred elements, its writing does not require specific rituals or ceremonies, although it is still respected as part of cultural heritage. Common Balinese script tends to appear simpler, without additional ornaments or sacred symbols.

In the present day, many merchandise products in Bali incorporate calligraphic styles, which are an art or skill of writing beautifully and aesthetically, typically involving handwritten lettering or the arrangement of characters with special attention to design, proportion, and artistic expression. Calligraphy has a long history and has evolved into a new form within merchandise products known as Baligrafi (nusabali.com 2021). Baligrafi is essentially an effort to preserve Balinese writing so that it remains protected and is not abandoned by the younger generation (baliexpress.jawapos.com 2020). It is created in such a way that it possesses its own aesthetic value, embedding Balinese script within its lettering while still presenting a distinct artistic nuance. While calligraphy is generally associated with Islamic artistic traditions, Baligrafi presents associations that reflect Balinese script and Hindu religious aesthetics.

The trend of Baligrafi has led to an increasing use of Balinese script in merchandise products throughout the community. Various commercial items have begun to appear, such as T-shirts featuring the Ongkara symbol, pendants shaped like Balinese characters, keychains, and many other products using Balinese script. The presence of these products has triggered debates about which types of merchandise are appropriate or inappropriate for incorporating Balinese script. On social media, this issue surfaced when a merchandise store posted products for sale, but the post received many negative comments from the public regarding the use of Balinese script, eventually developing into a broader controversy. There are concerns that a process of desanctification of Balinese script is occurring. Merchandise using Balinese script is seen by some as merely an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of Baligrafi, which, according to a survey by tatkala.co, has become a current trend. The use of Balinese script in



commercial products has generated diverse perceptions from both younger and older generations.

The younger generation in Bali seeks greater creative freedom in developing new designs within the Baligrafi trend, which contrasts with the views of the older generation, who believe that Balinese script should not be commercialized. This study aims to analyze merchandise designs that feature Balinese script. This phenomenon requires careful attention, making it necessary to conduct an in-depth examination of merchandise products that use Balinese script. Observations of the visual texts are carried out to reveal the meanings of the visual elements in these merchandise products, using the theoretical framework of visual perception, with further interpretation of meaning deepened through a desanctification approach.

METHODOLOGY

To address these issues, this research is structured based on a conceptual framework that begins with field data collection through observation, questionnaires, interviews, and literature studies. The collected data is then analyzed using perception theory and desanctification theory to understand the meaning and implications of designs that incorporate Balinese script, both sacred and non-sacred.

This study uses purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive technique is applied to select respondents who are considered to have knowledge of or direct involvement with the use of Balinese script in merchandise products, such as designers, creative industry practitioners, and consumers who understand Balinese culture. Meanwhile, the snowball sampling technique is used to expand the range of respondents through recommendations from the initial participants, allowing the study to gather more diverse perspectives from various groups within Balinese society, including both younger and older generations. This combined approach was chosen so that the collected data would be more representative of public perceptions regarding Balinese-script merchandise. The analysis aims to explain public perceptions and the impact of the commercialization of Balinese script, with a focus on cultural and ethical aspects. The findings are then reviewed and accompanied by suggestions, leading to final conclusions that provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. This research aims to offer insights into the use of Balinese script in merchandise design and the boundaries that must be considered in order to preserve its cultural value.

The research instrument used in this study is a questionnaire designed to measure public perceptions of merchandise products featuring Balinese script. The questionnaire consists of two question items referring to ten samples of Balinese-script merchandise products used as observation objects. Each item employs two rating scales, namely a scale assessing the aesthetic aspects of the design and another evaluating cultural relevance. The variable indicators in this study include three main aspects: the aesthetic value of Balinese script in the products, the public's understanding and respect for its cultural meaning, and the level of public acceptance toward the use of Balinese script in commercial contexts.

A quantitative descriptive analysis technique is used to interpret the questionnaire data. The data obtained from respondents are processed by calculating percentages, averages, and frequency distributions to illustrate the tendencies in public perceptions of merchandise products featuring Balinese script. This analysis is used to assess the extent to which respondents evaluate the aesthetic aspects, cultural values, and ethical considerations of using Balinese script in commercial contexts. The results of the descriptive analysis are then interpreted qualitatively to provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes and views of Balinese society across different age groups.



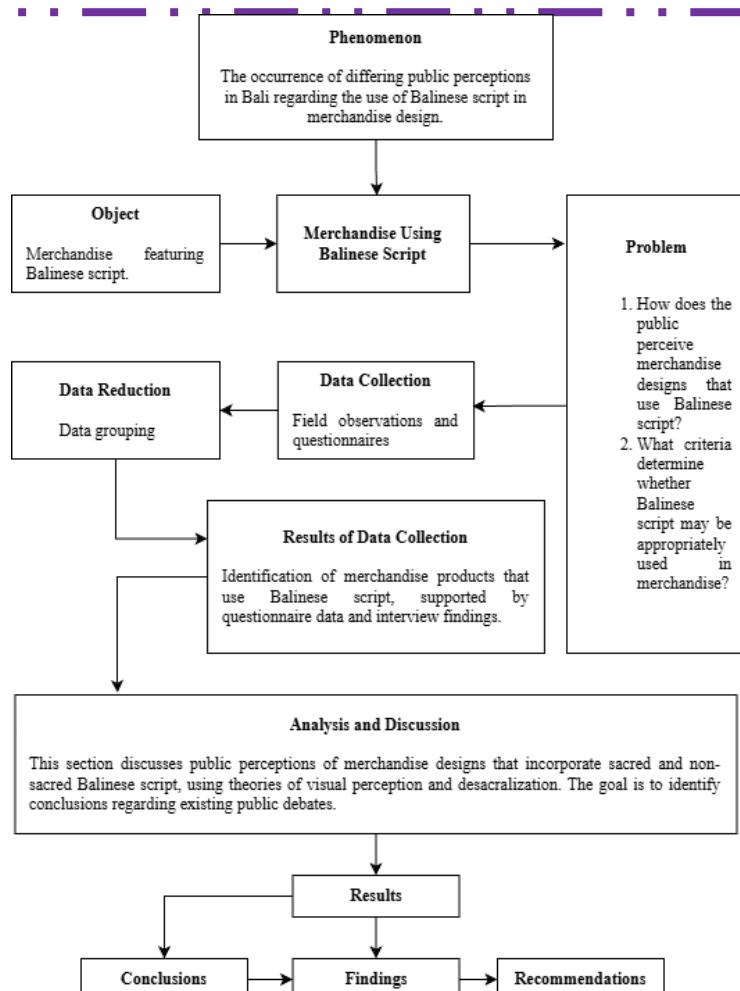


Figure 1. Research Flow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. RESULTS

Research Location

To collect the necessary data, the researcher determined the products, locations, and timeframe of the study. The following are several commercial products that use sacred Balinese script: T-shirts that feature sacred Balinese characters, sold at one of the branches of the "Oleh-Oleh Krisna Bali" souvenir store in Denpasar, pendants featuring Balinese script sold by the online shop "Ayu Chandra Alpaka Bali," which also serves as its production site located in Gianyar Regency, and keychains that use sacred Balinese script sold by the online shop "Puri Lontar," whose store and production site are located in Badung Regency.

The researcher also conducted observations at these locations from September 2023 to January 2025. The selection of these stores and producers as research sites was based on the availability of the products. These products were considered sources of information and evidence regarding the use of Balinese script in merchandise.

The researcher carried out direct observations at the Whisnu Utama Souvenir location to gather data relevant to the research objectives. During this observation process, the researcher examined various aspects related to the existence and business activities, including the types of products offered, the design and use of Balinese script in the merchandise, customer interactions with the products, and the marketing strategies employed.

The researcher also conducted direct observations at Surya Konveksi to gather supporting data related to the garment and clothing production industry in the area. The purpose of this observation was to identify several merchandise products that were currently in production.

Direct observations were also carried out at the Hurricane Custom Workshop to obtain data relevant to merchandise products featuring Balinese script. This observation involved examining various aspects of production, including the design process, material selection, printing or engraving techniques used for the Balinese script on the merchandise, and the finishing stages that determine the final quality of the product. The data obtained from these observations provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges and responses in developing Balinese-script merchandise, as well as marketing strategies that can enhance public appeal and appreciation of locally based cultural products.

This study used a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and circulated online, targeting the Balinese community. There were two types of questionnaires: one aimed at young respondents aged 17–30, which received 125 responses, and another aimed at older respondents aged 40–70, which received 110 responses. In total, 235 people participated. The main question posed was: “With the rise of the *Baligrafi* trend, more merchandise products now incorporate Balinese script. Do you agree with this collaboration?” The following are several sample products that have circulated.

Table 1 Questionnaire

No	Image	Parents		Youth		Description
		Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
1		23,6%	76,4%	87,2%	12,8%	The younger generation (87.2%) considers the design appropriate, while the older generation (23.6%) tends to reject it. This indicates a difference in perception between the generations.
2		68,2%	31,8%	78,4%	21,6%	Most respondents, both young (78.4%) and old (68.2%), consider the design appropriate. The design is viewed as acceptable across generations.
3		26,4%	73,6%	82,4%	17,6%	The younger generation (82.4%) is more accepting compared to the older generation (26.4%). This indicates a difference in aesthetic perception between the generations.

No	Image	Parents		Youth		Description
		Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
4		25,5%	74,5%	82,4%	17,6%	The younger group (82.4%) considers it appropriate, while the older group (25.5%) does not. The difference is influenced by cultural values and the symbolic meanings that are more strongly considered by the older generation.
5		22,7%	77,3%	83,2%	16,8%	Young people (83.2%) agree more compared to older people (22.7%). This indicates that the younger generation is more open-minded, while the older generation is more conservative.
6		77,3%	22,7%	85,6%	14,4%	The majority of young people (85.6%) and older people (77.3%) consider it appropriate. Both groups have a positive perception, although their levels of acceptance differ.
7		61,8%	38,2%	82,4%	17,6%	Both young people (82.4%) and older people (61.8%) consider it appropriate. The difference is influenced by their perceptions of traditional script.
8		63,6%	36,4%	81,6%	18,4%	Young people (81.6%) are more accepting compared to older people (63.6%). The difference is influenced by cultural values and generational understanding of symbols.

No	Image	Parents		Youth		Description
		Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
9		65,5%	34,5%	77,6%	22,4%	Both young people (77.6%) and older people (65.5%) consider it appropriate. The younger generation is more open to cultural symbols in the context of games.
10		40,9%	59,1%	88,8%	11,2%	Young people (88.8%) consider it appropriate, while older people (40.9%) do not. The difference is due to variations in cultural values and perceptions of the symbol's sacredness.

Findings on Visual Elements in the Product

1. Gold Necklace with Balinese Script



Figure 2. Necklace Product
(Source: Author, 2024)

Color	: The necklace and script are luxurious gold, contrasting with the dark background.
Shape & Line	: The pendant features Balinese script with curved lines, including a heart symbol as a decorative element.
Texture	: The gold necklace is smooth and shiny, while the background is blurred, keeping the focus on the necklace.
Typography/Symbol	: Balinese script with an added heart symbol.
Composition	: The necklace is positioned at the center of the image, serving as the main focal point.
Contrast & Focus	: The gold stands out prominently against the dark background.
Balance & Proportion	: The pendant is large but proportionate to the chain.

2. Wall Clock Product



Figure 3. Wall Clock Product
(Source: Author, 2024)

Color	: Light brown wooden base with dark brown numerals and black hands for contrast.
Shape & Line	: Circular clock with wood texture, numerals in traditional script; hands are straight and pointed.
Layout	: Elements are centered, numerals arranged in a circle with slight variations in size/orientation.
Texture	: Natural wood with visible grain, numerals are carved or painted, giving a handmade feel.
Typography/Symbol	: Numerals in traditional script with decorative elements.
Composition	: The necklace is positioned at the center of the image, serving as the main focal point.
Contrast & Focus	: Dark brown numerals contrast with the light wood, drawing focus to the center and unique numerals.
Balance & Proportion	: Circular arrangement is balanced; small variations in numeral size remain proportionate.

3. T-shirt Product



Figure 4. T-shirt Product
(Source: Author, 2023)

Color	: Black T-shirt with gold design and touches of red/orange, creating a luxurious and contrasting effect.
Shape & Line	: Front features a small mandala circle with the Om symbol, back has a large, complex mandala with Om at the center.
Layout	: Minimalistic front, back serves as the main focal point with a large design.
Texture	: Smooth cotton material, design appears screen-printed or digitally printed in gold.
Typography/Symbol	: Om as a spiritual symbol, mandala representing balance and tranquility.
Contrast & Focus	: Gold and red/orange stand out vividly against black, small focus on the front, main focus on the back.
Balance & Proportion	: Simple front, complex back—proportionally designed as the main visual attraction.

4. T-shirt Product



Figure 5. T-shirt Product
(Source: Author, 2023)

Color	: Army green T-shirt with contrasting black design.
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Shape & Line	: Front features the Om symbol, back has a heart-shaped ornamental design with text in traditional script style.
Layout	: Minimalistic front on the upper left back is large and serves as the main focal point.
Texture	: Lightweight cotton material, design is screen-printed without embroidery.
Typography/Symbol	: Om symbol, text in Sanskrit/Khmer/Thai style, and heart shape with spiritual meaning.
Contrast & Focus	: Black stands out against green, focus on the Om symbol at the front and heart design at the back.
Balance & Proportion	: Simple front, detailed back, yet proportionally balanced.

5. T-shirt Product



Figure 6. T-shirt Product
(Source: Author, 2023)

Color	: Khaki T-shirt with contrasting black design.
Shape & Line	: Curved lines and symbols resembling traditional script (Khmer/Thai).
Layout	: Small design on the front left chest, large design centered on the back.
Texture	: Soft cotton material with no additional accents.
Typography/Symbol	: Traditional-style writing or symbols in calligraphic form.
Contrast & Focus	: Black provides strong contrast, main focus is on the back design.
Balance & Proportion	: Minimalistic front, prominent back, yet proportionally balanced.

6. T-shirt Product



Figure 7. T-shirt Product
(Source: Author, 2025)

Color	: White T-shirt with light green text, black label adds contrast.
Shape & Line	: Simple T-shirt, text combines Balinese script and Latin letters with characteristic curved lines.
Typography	: Balinese script and capital letters "OM SWASTYASTU", brand "KUTASTREET" in modern style.
Texture	: Smooth fabric, green print appears neat, like high-quality screen printing.

Composition	: Text centered on the chest, Balinese script larger, brand label on the neck.
Contrast & Focus	: Light green contrasts softly with white, focus on the Balinese script.
Balance & Proportion	: Text size is proportional and balanced with the T-shirt.

7. Balinese Script Dice Cube



Figure 8. Balinese Script Dice Cube Product
(Source: Author, 2025)

Color	: Bright yellow on the cubes/cards with black Balinese script for contrast, white cards balance the composition, gray/white table provides a neutral background.
Shape & Line	: Bold yellow cubes with black script, simple, proportionate square cards.
Texture	: Rustic wooden table, smooth cubes and cards, rough-textured flower vase adds contrast.
Typography/Symbol	: Balinese script on cubes and cards, small text on cards provides additional information.
Composition	: Four cubes arranged symmetrically, front card serves as the main focus.
Contrast & Focus	: High contrast from yellow–black–white, focus on cubes and cards.
Balance & Proportion	: Cubes and cards are proportionate, arrangement is neat and harmonious.

8. Balinese Script Wall Decoration



Figure 9. Wall Decoration Product
(Source: Author, 2025)

Color	: Cream wooden boards with black text, dark brown frame and rope, golden nails, light blue background, green leaves as natural accents.
Shape & Line	: Three horizontal wooden boards with rounded edges, tied with rope, text follows the board curves, nails arranged symmetrically.
Texture	: Rustic wood, coarse woven rope, text appears carved or hand-lettered.

Typography/Symbol	: Local Balinese script in hand-carved style.
Composition	: Boards stacked from top to bottom, connecting rope creates a symmetrical structure.
Contrast & Focus	: Black text stands out against light wood, golden nails are prominent, focus on boards and text.
Balance & Proportion	: Board sizes are proportional, rope unites elements, creating a harmonious appearance.

9. Snakes and Ladders Game Board



Figure 10. Balinese Script Snakes and Ladders Game Board
(Source: Author, 2025)

Color	: Bright green-yellow title, light blue board, red/green/yellow squares, black Balinese script, white background for balance.
Shape & Line	: Square board with symmetrical grid, curved snakes, straight-line ladders, cube dice.
Texture	: Smooth board resembling paper/plastic, shiny dice and marbles.
Typography/Symbol	: Bold title, Balinese script in each square, snake and ladder symbols, social media icons.
Composition	: Clear grid, snakes and ladders distributed across the board, dice and marbles at the bottom.
Contrast & Focus	: Bright colors stand out against the blue background, main focus on title and snake/ladder icons.
Balance & Proportion	: Uniform squares, snakes and ladders proportionate, dice and marbles small but clear.

10. Balinese Script Pendant



Figure 11. Wall Clock Product
(Source: Author, 2024)

Color	: Predominantly gold, giving a luxurious and spiritual impression.
Shape & Line	: Octagonal pendant with curved Om symbol, edges engraved like radiating rays, chain clasp simple and elegant.
Texture	: Smooth, shiny surface, textured engraved edges, natural hand, jewelry store background slightly reflective.
Typography/Symbol	: Om as a symbol of spiritual awareness and cosmic energy.

Composition	: Pendant centered in the palm, blurred background maintains focus.
Contrast & Focus	: Gold stands out strongly against skin tone and muted background.
Balance & Proportion	: Small, proportionate pendant, centered in the hand for visual balance.

DISCUSSION

A. Misinterpretation of Balinese Script as a Whole

Balinese script is sometimes used without proper understanding of its meaning, or applied inappropriately or disrespectfully in merchandise, which can be considered a form of cultural desecration. This issue was highlighted in a discussion by Parwata (2021), noting that the context of Balinese script usage must be clear. Random or careless use can damage the image of brands incorporating the script in their products and may provoke social controversy. For example, the use of the Ongkare script on T-shirts representing the Almighty God is viewed casually by younger generations when applied to merchandise. This often occurs due to a lack of understanding or knowledge; some individuals have limited awareness of the cultural value and sacredness of Balinese script. Older generations, on the other hand, perceive it as a symbol that is either irrelevant or too sacred to be commercialized.

B. Conflict with Religious or Belief Values

Individuals or groups whose religious beliefs or spiritual values do not align with the use or veneration of sacred Balinese script may view such usage as a form of disrespect toward their beliefs or spiritual principles (I Wayan Parwata, 2021).

- Commercial Commodities

Some people view the use of sacred Balinese script in a commercial context, such as in merchandise or branding, as inappropriate commercialization of a sacred cultural heritage. This can trigger negative reactions, being perceived as cultural desecration or exploitation.

- Cultural and Identity Controversy

Especially in the era of globalization, the use of sacred Balinese script by individuals or entities outside Bali or Indonesia can spark controversy regarding cultural rights and identity. This can create tension between the desire to share Bali's cultural wealth and the need to protect and respect its sacredness.

- Uncertainty Regarding Improper Use

Even among those who value and study Balinese script, there is concern about its improper or disrespectful use. For instance, if the script is applied in inappropriate contexts or marketed insensitively, it can provoke negative reactions. Such responses to sacred Balinese script often reflect the complex interplay of culture, religion, and identity within an increasingly globalized society. Efforts to understand diverse perspectives and communicate openly and sensitively can help reduce conflicts and enhance appreciation for sacred cultural values.

C. The Role of Balinese Script in Balinese Society

The role of Balinese script is diverse and significant across several aspects. It carries rich cultural values and is an integral part of Balinese identity, with younger generations learning and using it to preserve and strengthen their connection to ancestral heritage. As a key element of the Balinese language and traditional literature, studying the script enables youth to develop a deeper understanding of Balinese language and classical literary works, allowing them to better appreciate Bali's literary and cultural heritage, as noted in a video discussion by the



Hindu Brahma Widya Theology Course (2023, July 13). Balinese script is also widely used in visual arts, performing arts, and other forms of creative expression in Bali, with young people often incorporating it into their artworks as a means of expressing cultural identity or conveying artistic messages. Despite being an ancient cultural heritage, it is increasingly applied in technological and digital contexts, with ongoing efforts to develop Balinese script fonts and tools for applications, websites, and other digital media, ensuring that the script remains relevant in the digital era.

Older generations, especially in Bali, have rich perspectives and experience regarding the use of Balinese script. For them, the script is a natural part of daily life, such as writing letters, family documents, or personal notes. Its use in everyday life helps preserve long-established traditions and practices. Balinese script is also frequently used in traditional ceremonies and religious rituals in Bali, where it plays an important role in cultural and spiritual activities.

Older generations often serve as custodians of these traditions, using Balinese script in mantras, prayers, and other ritual practices. The script is regarded as a means of communicating with deities and ancestral spirits. It is also commonly used in traditional Balinese arts, such as wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), dance, and gamelan music. Older generations understand and appreciate the symbolic value of Balinese script in artistic works and employ it in creative and artistic contexts. In terms of education and cultural transmission, older generations often act as protectors and teachers of Balinese culture, instructing children and grandchildren in the use of Balinese script as part of traditional cultural education.

CONCLUSION

Research on public perception regarding the use of Balinese script in merchandise design indicates that Balinese script has great potential to become an important element in the creative industry. The majority of young respondents support its use as part of preserving Balinese culture, especially in merchandise designs that can introduce Balinese script to a wider audience. However, the study also revealed differences in perspective between younger and older generations. Young people tend to be more open to innovative uses of Balinese script in commercial contexts, while older generations emphasize the importance of maintaining the sacredness of certain characters, such as Ongkara and Modre script, to preserve their spiritual value.

Older respondents and the opinions of several experts suggest that the use of sacred Balinese script can be carried out, provided it is not accompanied by rituals or mantras, in order to avoid activating its sacred elements. The values of the Balinese script are recognized as a key attraction in merchandise design. It is important to educate consumers about the meaning and context of the script used, so that Balinese script serves not only as a visual element but also as a means of honoring Balinese culture. Overall, Balinese script has the potential to bridge cultural preservation with commercial innovation. Its use requires a sensitive approach to local customs, ethics, and cultural norms. Collaboration between creative industry practitioners, traditional leaders, and the community is crucial to ensure that the Balinese script remains relevant, respected, and preserved amidst changing times.

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