Consumption in the Marriage Rituals: A Qualitative Study on the Meaning of Consumption in Wedding

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Abstract

Over the last years, there has been an increasing body of research on consumption rituals. From among different rituals, wedding ceremony is considered as one of the most consumerist ones that has been scarcely addressed by researchers despite its importance and prevalence. The present study set to examine and interpret consumption in Iranian wedding ceremonies. The study aims to address the question: 'how do the participants and organizers of wedding ceremonies perceive and interpret consumption and consumption behaviors?' The research was conducted using the qualitative method due to the complexity and depth of the subject. In this regard, the subject of interest was examined in the light of interpretive paradigm. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with the brides and grooms. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Eventually, five themes and key concepts were obtained including ritualism, memory, distinction, display and taste. In other words, consumption and consumerist behaviors in wedding ceremony are closely tied to these concepts and experiences. Accordingly, such interpretations lead to consumption choices, practices and preferences.

Key Word: Consumption, Ritual, Wedding Ceremony, Bride and Groom, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

Based on consumption studies, marriage is considered as a unique and special ritual. Marriage entails specific formality and manners. Successful and acceptable display of such formality and rituals bear costs, commodities and specific services. Managing the costs and requisites for holding wedding rituals is one of the grand plans in people’s life, which requires sound planning and good preparations. Goods, commodities, foods, gifts, clothes and plans all suggest the consumerist nature of wedding. The importance of consumption in marriage rituals dates back to primitive eras, and thus it is not a new phenomenon. What currently crystallizes marriage as a special event is the increasing multiplication of consumerist choices, behaviors and activities. Excessive consumption and the increasing importance of consumption behaviors in marriage denote the emergence of a new era in the consumption history. Highly ceremonial weddings with great delicacies require high expenditures, considerable time and great efforts. Therefore, consumption and consumerist behaviors are closely associated with marriage so much so that all social, cultural and economic aspects of marriage can be analyzed from a consumption perspective.
However, one should notice that, from among all aspects of Iranian life that is tied to consumption, little attention has been paid to the relation of consumption with specific rituals and customs or, in other words, ‘consumption rituals’. The researcher primarily faced the question: ‘what is the Iranian people’s attitude and meaning once they engage in consumption actions in holding various national and religious rituals?’ In fact, the researcher came up with the idea to study consumption and consumerist activities in a certain ritual. Having brainstormed this initial idea, the researcher only needed to dart a glance to find out one of the most consumerist rituals, marriage, that was surprisingly left unnoticed despite its complicated dimensions and deep engagement in consumption.

Research Questions

- What is the people’s interpretation and experience of marriage as a consumption ritual?
- What are the people’s reasons for consumerist behaviors and actions in the marriage rituals?
- How does the system of shared consumption meanings develop among people in the marriage culture?

Literature review

Extensive studies have been conducted on consumption rituals. Examples are studies on the meaning of Halloween (Belk, 1990; Levinson et al., 1992) and Thanksgiving celebrations (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Consumption researchers have applied the concept of ritual in interpreting various dimensions of consumption phenomena (Rook, 1985; Ottes et al., 1993). Rituals are typically associated with celebratory events such as graduation or wedding ceremonies as well as the consumption of goods and services in any culture. Rituals as instances of symbolic consumption have been addressed in various studies on consumption rituals, particularly in the marketing literature (e.g. Sherry, Wallendorf & Belk, 1989; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Most of these studies have addressed the nature of consumption in ritual events. For example, Sherry (1983) studied the relationship between consumption and Christian rituals. Wallendorf and Arnold (1991) studied the relation of Thanksgiving and consumption. In her book ‘consumerism, romance and wedding experience’, Boden (2003) analyzed the phenomenon of consumption in marriage rituals. As a qualitative and interpretive work on consumption in marriage, the book examines commercial wedding and the role of new industries in consumption behaviors in wedding. In a study entitled ‘a consumer good in the ritual process: the case of the wedding dress’, Friese (1997) interpreted wedding dress as one of the vital goods in marriage. She set to examine the symbolic meaning of wedding dress and consumption experience of brides during the selection and purchase of wedding dresses. Rook (1985) contends that consumption events are valuable for study since the consumers typically spend considerable time and energy to buy goods and services in order to have a significant participation in the events. Tetreault and Kleine (1990) suggest that the ritual power should be given the priority in consumption studies as an analytical issue. Consumption rituals refer to specific opportunities and events such as holidays, marriage, giving gifts and other ceremonies that characterize heavy consumption, abundant goods, services and experiences. In such events, people are engaged in the consumption and behaviors that are formal, serious and intense. Miles (2001) asserts that consumption clearly plays an important role in the daily construct of social life; consequently, the increasing trend of consumerism as a concern voiced by many social theorists is evidence for that claim. Miller (1995: 3) observes that the relationship between people and consumption turned out to be a sociological issue in the post-war period since consumption constitutes the essential part of people’s life. Van Gorp (2006: 128) believes that an analysis of life in the contemporary world requires a certain view of life as a set of issues that should be interpreted in a line liked to consumption.

Thorstein Veblen believes that wealth is not enough to distinguish the rich from others; rather, it is the display of wealth that makes the distinction. In other words, upper social classes tend to distinguish themselves from other social groups through excessive consumption in an ostentatious manner so as to
demonstrate their higher status and reveal their distance from other social groups. Veblen calls this behavior ‘conspicuous consumption’.

The French scholar, Pierre Bourdieu, has introduced one of the most commonly-addressed views in this regard. According to Bourdieu, consumption is class-based so that the class status of people creates distinctive habits and cultural preoccupations, which in turn results in different lifestyles (Seidman, 2004: 201). Bourdieu reasons that people who are closely tied to a social milieu have many similarities though they may never meet. They have similar experiences and lifestyles. Put it simply, people who live in a similar social atmosphere have similar tastes. This analysis is indicative of Bourdieu’s structuralist view toward consumption and lifestyle.

Although art is the broadest domain for the demonstration of aesthetic tastes, current stylistic life and priority of form over function is evident across all domains of human action such that nothing is more distinctive than the ability to attach aesthetic significance to ordinary objects. In other words, this has to do with the ability to apply aesthetic principles to the choices in daily life such as cooking, dressing, decoration and so on (Bourdieu, 1999: 29). Art and cultural consumption are likely to assume social functions in order to legitimate social differences. According to Bourdieu, aesthetic taste is one of the aspects of distant relationship with the world of others. This taste results from social conditioning and is related to certain existential conditions. Therefore, aesthetic taste tends to both integrate and distinguish. Colin Campbell is one of the consumption theorists who tried to extract the historical foundations of consumption society in his well-known book ‘The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism’.

According to Campbell, a consumerist society represents the dissatisfaction of realities. Consumption makes us believe that we can fulfill our fantasies and desires. However, actual pleasures derived from consumption are always less satisfactory than we originally dreamed of. We are discontent of reality and thus capture whatever opportunity that consumption offers. We consume in order to contribute to our dreaming rather than meet our physical needs. A consumerist society will always frustrate us.

Methodology

The present study was carried out using interpretive approach and qualitative method. In this regard, the data was collected through in-depth interviews with the couples who had held their wedding ceremonies and were engaged in consumption activities, actions and choices in Isfahan city, Iran within the past ten years. A number of 17 people were individually interviewed, and their interpretations, meanings and reasons for holding wedding ceremonies at such level of consumption were investigated and analyzed. The participants were selected using purposive sampling method. That is, the interviewees were considered as well-informed people who held their wedding ceremonies with consumerist behaviors. The participants were accessed through snowball method so that every interviewee helped the researcher locate the next one who satisfied the inclusion criteria. When the interviews were completed, the recorded audio files were transcribed, and the tape scripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. In this regard, the terms, words, sentences and paragraphs were analyzed and coded in a three-stage coding process. In the first stage, primary and descriptive codes were extracted followed by the second stage where the primary codes were categorized based on similarities, distinctions and mutual relations. Therefore, the codes were developed to a higher level of abstraction in the second stage. Eventually, the codes were integrated as far as possible to extract a few major themes in the third stage.

Results

Ritualism

This theme marks the existence of binding traditions, customs and strict manners. It deals with the meticulous details and events that should be observed exactly. Most of the couples voiced their grievances about such rituals and confessed that they were reluctant to follow all traditional rituals; otherwise, they had
to bear the pressures from their parents. In fact, families stressed the observance of all cultural traditions and made the young couples include all such items in their wedding ceremony. Holding traditional rituals entails considerable costs and financial pressures. Still, since parents and particularly fathers undertake the wedding costs, they oblige the couples to observe traditional rituals.

Interviewee 1 reported, ‘I did not like many of the old traditions, but I got no way. We had to do it.’

Interviewee 4 voiced his/her discontent in a different way, ‘many of such customs are out-dated but they are still observed, and I cannot understand them at all’.

Interviewee 5 said, ‘my mom and dad insisted a lot on having this custom followed. So they would get annoyed had we not maintained it.’

Interviewee 9 reported, ‘no way! You cannot overlook it since it would bring about many adverse outcomes.’

Centrality of taste and aesthetics

It is quite attractive and pleasurable for people to have the best opportunity to display their aesthetic taste in the marriage rituals. No event in the contemporary life is more tied to the display of taste than marriage. From the beginning to the end, marriage rituals assume a great importance in terms of aesthetics and form. Thus, the main actors are involved in selecting the most elegant and best choices from among the available alternatives such as the selection of what hairdresser’s, dress, design, color, model, banquet hall, garden, time and details. The importance of taste and aesthetics leads to more consumerism in marriage rituals since holding a magnificent ceremony requires high expenditures, energy and time. Analysis of the interviews revealed that the couples were busily engaged in the selection of styles, models, designs and aesthetics so much so that they invested considerable time and costs to satisfy their aesthetic desires.

Interviewee 2 said, ‘it was important to me to buy something stylish. I mean the style was important to me. I did not want them to be very expensive but I had to pay for many things myself.’

Interviewee 6 related, ‘I wanted to have a simple makeup. I liked the European wedding dress more though I knew it was too expensive. But I wanted to get it done anyway.’

Interviewee 6 said, ‘I was thinking of how to hold our wedding ceremony for long. I liked it to be very elegant and fantasy.’

Interviewee 3 stated, ‘I always dreamed up of a brilliant ceremony. I always followed the latest designs and styles in the magazines.’

Seeking differentiation

People with high economic and cultural resources would seek a specific taste. Their major goal in holding a ceremony is seeking differentiation and distinctiveness. They want to hold a ceremony totally peculiar and distinctive. Therefore, they interpret wedding ceremony as distinction. For such couples, distinction is the key meaning in a ceremony. They well understand the common taste and know what process to follow and what alternatives to select. Their distinction constitutes two mechanisms: choosing the totally-different alternatives and rejecting the common ones. Indeed, aesthetic taste plays a dual role here. In some cases, selecting extremely luxurious alternatives of which the common folk have no access can indicate their distinction. On the contrary, their avoidance and over-simplicity can mark their difference as well.

Interviewee 8 said, ‘I always wanted to have a different ceremony.’

Interviewee 15 reported, ‘nowadays, all fashions are repetitive and I do my best to hold a special ceremony.’

Interviewee 16 asserted, ‘all brides put on the same makeup. So I may have a simple makeup and do not go to the hairdresser’s.’

Interviewee 10 said, ‘I would like to have a dress sent to me from Europe because the wedding dresses have only repeated styles here.’

Interviewee 11 reported, ‘we decorated our car with red and green pepper. Well, I guess it looked quite different.’
Making a memory

Marriage vow or wedding ceremony is a set of events meant to constitute the sweetest memory of a couple’s life. In fact, many would perceive marriage rituals as a memory. Wedding ceremony is a memory that we create for others and ourselves. Since we know we are making a memory, we have to record these sweetest and most exciting moments in films and photos. Interviewee 13 said, ‘all ceremonies are forgotten after all except for the films and photos that remain. At least, the memories remain.’ Interviewee 17 asserted, ‘it is the night of memories! Neither the bride nor the groom would notice what is happening as they are too busy, overstressed and engaged. So when the film is ready, they would watch and notice what had happened and what the ceremony was like’. Interviewee 5 said, ‘because I like memories a lot and attach great importance to the things of the past, I take and collect a lot of photos because photos are the only things remaining from the wedding ceremony that one can show his/her children.’ Interviewee 4 stated, ‘I thought it was necessary because films and photos are the only things that remain from the wedding ceremony. They are reminiscent of memories. So we went to the best studio in Isfahan.’ Interviewee 3 said, ‘I was very eager to go to the studio. I still regret why we did not and I have no photo of that night. If we were to go back to the same situation and had the same problems, we might only go to the studio because a photo was very important to me.’

A Desirable show

Display is another meaning closely linked with marriage rituals. The presence of the guests has a determinative role in wedding ceremony. They give the ceremony a formal, serious form and make everything important. In fact, couples know that spectators and audiences are present at the party and watch their behaviors. Thus, they try to have the best display and performance. Wedding ceremony is an occasion for the most important show in life. Hence, it should be performed in the best way. Therefore, the couples undertake heavy costs and efforts to perform beautifully in the ceremony since there is no room for a mistake. Some would interpret marriage as a show and display and organize their activities, actions and preferences based on the display concept.

Interviewee 8 said, ‘that night, everybody looks at the bride and groom. So you must be the best.’ Interviewee 6 stated, ‘I am under critical lenses, particularly by the traditional families. So I must be very careful about my behavior to get everything done well.’ Interviewee 7 observed, ‘my main concern is that the guests should enjoy themselves and be treated and received very well.’ Interviewee 7 said, ‘my dress should be really good because everybody looks at it. I cannot be indifferent.’

Discussion and conclusion

The results revealed that the couples perceive their wedding ceremonies through such concepts as distinction, memory, display, taste and rituals. In other words, these are the core concepts through which the couples interpret wedding ceremony. Distinction indicates that couples would like to hold a unique, special ceremony and seek to mark their distinction. Such distinction is highly associated with the concept of identity. Thus, the form of wedding ceremony marks the identity dimensions of brides and grooms. The couples introduce themselves to others by the way they hold their wedding ceremony.

Memory is another theme through which some couples interpret marriage. Everything in the ceremony becomes a memory for them to review and cherish the memorable night later. They do their best to create a retentive memory. Display is also considered as a key concept since brides and grooms interpret wedding ceremony as a theater where they should put on the best performance. In fact, one may contend that these couples observe the presence of spectators and audience and attach the highest importance to the wedding audience.
For some, marriage rituals are a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate their aesthetic taste. In other words, people are involved in applying their taste from the beginning to the end of the ceremony. Marriage rituals are considered as a work of art. Thus, they try to create the best and most adorable work. They show great sensitivity to aesthetic details such as style, color, design and elegance of the ceremony. Thus, successful observation of the rituals depends on the fulfillment of their aesthetic desires.

Finally, some brides and grooms perceive wedding ceremony through the lens of customs and traditions. They feel obliged to observe the customs, and their main concern is the flawless observation of traditions. They understand the adverse outcomes of disregard for customs and try to follow all traditional formalities.

References

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