



## RESEARCH PAPER

# Mediatized Projections: Ritual Transformation, Consumer Culture, and the Political Economy of Weddings in Today's Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving rituals and symbolism in Pakistan today. It is an attempt to elucidate the transformation of matrimonial ceremonies due to rapid social, economic, and technological changes. How weddings rituals and symbols are being modified due to globalization, social media in Pakistan's urban centers. Weddings have always been a projection of cultural tradition and symbolism. It is a festivity through which familial, religious, and societal values are passed on to the next generation. 10 newly married persons, 10 wedding planners, and 5 elders in urban centers of Karachi, Lahore, Gujrat and Multan were studied employing qualitative methodology. The research reveals a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Younger generation's primary drive remains social visibility. Weddings are a classic show of social status and cultural capital. Resultantly, lavish expenditures impose economic burdens to uphold prestige. It also highlights the contrast between ritual preservation and generating new interpretations in modern Pakistani weddings. The study recommends adopting sustainable practices and further research on rural contexts to compare ritual transformations in Pakistan.

**KEYWORDS** Pakistani Weddings, Rituals, Symbolism, Cultural Capital, Symbolic Interactionism, Modernization, Social Media, Gender Roles, Commodification, Family Traditions

## Introduction

Weddings have always played a central role in Pakistani society not just as private family events but as deeply communal, symbolic, and ritualized performances that reflect broader social values. Conventional marriage rituals, such as the Mayun, Mehndi, Nikah, Rukhsati and Walima, are filled with religious, cultural, and family meaning (Mann, 2015). Nevertheless, the last twenty years have seen a dynamic change in these traditions, influenced by urbanization, exposure to the outside world and wedding trends in general, consumerism, the power of social media and the growing demand by the young generation to either customize or contemporary their weddings (Durrani & Khan, 2014; Auhad et al., 2024). Weddings in Pakistan are all about mixing the traditional and the latest trends with customized bridal entrances, pastel colored decoration and professionally choreographed dancing as well as using Instagram hashtags. The Rukhsati, which was traditionally an immensely emotional ritual marking the shift of a family member to a new one, has been re-framed as a more light-hearted feature of celebrations in some urban contexts (Bloch et al., 2004; Fatima et al., 2022).

The present study seeks to explore how rituals and the symbolic meaning of weddings in Pakistan have changed through a qualitative interpretivist approach. It also looks into the lived experiences and perceptions of persons that are involved in planning and celebrating modern weddings as well as couples, family members and organizers of the event. It applied theoretical knowledge of symbolic interactionism and theories of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu to deconstruct the process by which weddings are turning into performances of social distinction. The paper is part of an emerging literature on cultural change in South Asia and relates to a timely and socially relevant issue: the dialogue of tradition and modernity in a society that struggles with economic inequality, generational change, and saturation of media.

### **Literature Review**

Weddings in Pakistan have traditionally been rich with rituals that represent religious devotion, family bonds, and social hierarchy. Every ceremony, especially the Mayun, Mehndi, Barat, Nikah, Rukhsati, and Walima ceremonies, is full of symbolism that is associated with cultural heritage (Muzaffar et al., 2018; Bibi et al., 2020). The Mayun ritually prepares and purifies a bride and symbolises her metamorphosis, whereas the Mehndi is filled with colours and music to celebrate fertility and joy (Yasmin et al., 2019; Malik, 2024). The Barat, in which the groom goes in a procession to the house of the bride, is a sign of the families joining and becoming allies (Rishta, 2024). These rituals have always been communal rituals that maintain the social organizations and group identity.

These rituals though, have changed significantly over the past decade. Pakistani weddings have been affected by the process of globalization and increased exposure to Western wedding traditions, especially in the major cities of Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. These types of fusion weddings have come to include western-style bridal white dresses along with traditional wear, reflecting the dual identities most urban Pakistanis identify with (Awan & Abid, 2020; Rashid & Niazi, 2020). The increase in social media platforms has accelerated this process, where weddings have become highly aesthetic occasions whose aim is to garner attention online (Javed, 2021).

The commercialization of weddings is another prominent trend in Pakistan. The wedding industry has expanded dramatically, with lavish expenditures on venues, designers, catering, and entertainment becoming status symbols (Hameed, 2025). This growing tendency has economic consequences, usually stretching budgets and creating unmanageable debt in some cases. Critics argue that such commercialisation diverts attention from the meaning and social nature of marriage, instead becoming entangled in a consumerist spectacle, reflecting the broader neoliberal shift in culture (Gilani & Bhinder, 2024; Javed et al., 2019).

The shifting symbolism of rituals is also evident. The Rukhsati, which was a solemn departure, is now usually a joyful occasion with music and photo sessions, which reflects a changing emotional experience due to modern media (Batool et al., 2021). Some scholars believe that this shift is an instance of a struggle between preserving valuable traditions and adapting to the dynamic lifestyles and requirements of modernity (Mokua, 2023). Moreover, there is evidence of intergenerational variations in attitude toward weddings. The older generations are concerned with the path of losing their traditional values and increasing indulgence, whereas the younger couple prefers to individualize, be inclusive, and escape their traditional customs (Rehman and Shafqat, 2022; Javed, 2021). This division covered the larger components of social development as

modernization, urbanisation, and some scholars refer to changing gender roles. How symbolic interactionism will influence the deconstruction of these new practices. The rituals are not regarded as something continuously evolving but as a social construct, and are being negotiated and reconsidered by the participants (Mehmood, 2018). The cultural capital concept introduced by Bourdieu is applicable in explaining expenditure patterns and wedding style as social indicators of status and prestige in the Pakistani stratified society.

Literature has proved that Pakistani weddings are still culturally important. However, their practice and meaning are changing due to globalization, financial transformation, and social change. These changes are complex because they carry the pulls of tradition to modernity, community to individualism, and cultural preservation to innovation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Culture, identity and power make up an effective theoretical framework explaining the dynamic nature of rituals and symbolism of contemporary weddings in Pakistan. The two theories adopted in this paper, Symbolic Interactionism and a Theory of Cultural Capital by Pierre Bourdieu.

Symbolic interactionism, based on the thoughts of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), underlines the fact of social life. It is constructed through the meanings people assign to symbols, actions, and interactions. Certain rituals, such as weddings, are not fixed but are continually interpreted and reinterpreted in a context by participants. This theory made it possible to examine how modern Pakistani couples and their families attempt to establish the meaning of wedding rituals in the conditions of high tempo social transformation. For example, although the Mehndi ceremony is historically associated with fertility and the celebration of community, younger generations might perceive it as a (personal or social media) form of expression. The Rukhsati, which earlier was a serious ritual of sending off the bride, can now be reconceptualized as a cheerful performance complete with photoshoots (Ahmed, 2021). Symbolic interactionism assisted in revealing these changing meaning and their effect in affecting social behavior and the development of identity.

### **Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explored cultural capital, which defined the intangible resources that enable social moves i.e. education, style, and cultural knowledge. Weddings are an occasion of flaunting cultural capital as families demonstrate their social standing and their good taste via expenditure, location, designer gowns and guest lists. In Pakistan, this display is amplified by the competitive nature of weddings, where social expectations and peer pressure often drive families to escalate costs to assert their social standing (Werbner, 2014). Bourdieu in his framework offers considerable insight into how weddings attribute performances of exclusivity to distinction, and as social capital generated by economics begins to mediate the cultural preferences and performances. It also focused on commodification of rituals and are used to speak class positions by over consumption and expenditure.

The meanings can be investigated by studying the cultural capital theory through symbolic interactionism. This paper investigates the micro-level as it is theorized by individuals. The social forms as theorized by such meanings at the macro-level. This

comparative and two-way research approach highlighted the strain between personal and individual agency in the environment of structural constraint where the practices and celebrations of marriage in modern-day Pakistan reflect the aspirations of individuality as an individual and those of conformity as social. Through the practical application of these theories, the study tried to interpret the changes in wedding practices. The changes are not only in practice but also as profound changes in the meaning of culture and social class and power relations.

### **Material and Methods**

A qualitative research was conducted in order to learn about the new rituals and symbols that are part of the Pakistani wedding today. It was appropriate because the actual nature and definition of the participants is achievable via the interpretation of their experience of living and perceptions that have significance in explaining a cultural and social event such as weddings (Creswell, 2013). It examined an interpretivist paradigm to reveal the ways people who participate in wedding celebrations make sense of and negotiate evolving rituals and symbols. It used semi-structured interviews and participant observation as primary data collection methods.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich insights into the research questions. 25 interviews were conducted, comprising 10 recently married individuals (within the last 2 years), 10 wedding planners with extensive experience organizing weddings in these cities, and 5 family elders (parents or grandparents) from urban centers of Karachi, Lahore, Gujrat and Multan. Representing the older generation with traditional views on weddings. Participants were recruited through personal networks and snowball sampling. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, achieved when no new themes emerged during interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and online. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Interview questions focused on participants' experiences of wedding rituals, perceptions of changes over time, emotional meanings attached to ceremonies, and views on commercialization and modernization. Participant observation took place at two weddings with consent, focusing on rituals, decor, guest interactions, and symbolic elements.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. This method enabled the identification of key patterns and themes related to ritual changes and symbolism. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, allowing themes to emerge inductively while guided by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and cultural capital.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to international ethical standards while remaining sensitive to Pakistani cultural norms. Informed consent was obtained from participants to withdraw at any stage, and confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms, by removing identifiers, and with utmost care during handling visual as well as digital data.

Explicit permission was sought before recording rituals, and researcher reflexivity was maintained regarding class, gender, and insider-outsider dynamics. Cultural practices such as hospitality were studied without coercion. Digital ethics were ensured by employing secure storage and anonymity, recognizing that public visibility on social media does not equate to scholarly consent. The study balanced global frameworks (ASA, 2018) with culturally attuned practices to protect dignity, autonomy, and social sensitivities of participants.

## Results and Discussion

### Ritual Reinterpretation and Personalization

Many participants described age-long traditional rituals such as Mehndi, Baraat, and Rukhsati being actively re-innovated while fitting in contemporary hallmarks. A recently married bride from Lahore described:

*"Our Mehndi was less traditional rather themed around having more fun and creativity. We had a pastel theme; we had a live band, and decor that gave the modern-day look. It felt like a party, not a ritual."*

This is indicative of a larger trend toward individualized practices as opposed to community-based practices. According to symbolic interactionism, this redefinition happens as the participants work on how to interpret the meaning of rituals in the new social environment (Blumer, 1969). Young married individuals tend to use rituals as platforms of self-expression and social media broadcasting, as opposed to cultural relays.

Moreover, wedding planners highlighted that customization is often driven by consumer culture and digital trends. One planner from Karachi noted:

*"Clients come with Pinterest boards and Instagram references. They want their weddings to be unique, memorable, and visually stunning, even if that means changing traditional elements."*

This represents a change of rituals to performances, in which symbolic performances are modified and adjusted to modern social elites. Nonetheless, there was concern among the elders who believed that the changes would remove the depth and critical meaning of the rituals.

### Commercialization and Status Performance

Expenditure on weddings emerged as a central concern. Participants across groups acknowledged the increasing cost and scale of ceremonies. Many viewed lavish spending as a way to demonstrate family honor, social status, and cultural capital. As explained by a wedding planner:

*"Weddings have become competitions. Families try to outdo each other in venue, outfits, and guest lists. It's not just a celebration but a display of wealth and prestige."*

This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, where weddings become a site for symbolic capital accumulation. The analysis shows how the commodification of rituals shifts the focus from spiritual or familial significance to status signaling. However, some participants noted the financial strain this causes. One bride's mother from Islamabad exclaimed painfully:

*"We spent saving from years, and still, it felt like we must borrow more to keep up the image. The pressure is immense."*

Such information highlighted the strain between societal expectations and economic realities. An experience also noted in Siddiqui's (2019) work on economics of weddings in Pakistan.

### **Changing Gender Roles and Emotional Dynamics**

The Rukhsati traditionally is a very touching occasion on the Bride side. When the bride moves out of her parents' house, the focal point of discussion. Participants who were newly newlyweds attributed it less seriously and more theatrically. Dancing to tunes of wedding music, photo taking and even laughing have turned the tide of The Rukhsati.

*"I was nervous, but the mood was light. Instead of sadness, there was excitement, selfies, and family jokes. It felt like a new way to say goodbye" (P 11, Islamabad).*

This shift indicated changing emotional expressions and gender norms. Symbolic interactionism helps us understand how the meaning of rituals is renegotiated to reflect evolving attitudes towards female agency and familial bonds. Yet, some elders expressed nostalgia, emphasizing the emotional gravity that modern celebrations seem to lack. This intergenerational gap in rituals of marriage leads to a more general shift in gender roles and emotional expressions.

### **Media Influence and Social Validation**

The social media platforms became influential in determining the new rituals adopted in weddings. Participants were asked about their intentions to plan and spread weddings to receive social media attention and approval. This further influences the staging of rituals. One of the planners noted, *"Many clients wait and design 'Instagrammable' moments. Rituals have become photo-ops, choreographed dances are presented, or performances are designed to go viral and gain online popularity."*

The transformation of symbolism can be seen in this medialization of wedding rituals. It has made individual incidents into social circuses. It is also affecting identity construction whereby participants act in contradiction to culturally accepted versions of modernity and status online in nations such as Pakistan.

### **Intergenerational Negotiations and Cultural Continuity**

Friction between the desire of younger couples to be innovative and the focus of the elders on the preservation of the culture was a repeated theme. Parents and grandparents are gatekeepers of tradition, and they negotiate the degree of evolution to be adopted. What can be changed and what has to be preserved. One Lahore father clarified: *"We had negotiated that we would allow them to have the choreographed dance but I insisted that the Nikah would have to be performed like in the old days. There are things which cannot be changed"*. This is an expression of how families strike a balance between evolution and continuity, with the older generations positioning themselves as the guardians of legacy continuation. This negotiation can be explained by the concept of habitus introduced by Bourdieu (1986): practices are reproduced using embodied dispositions, in spite of the fact that the younger generations want to become flexible.

Meanwhile, younger respondents were irritated by such a generational backlash. A bride from Karachi commented:

*"It felt like I was fighting for every decision. My parents kept saying, 'What will people say?' when I wanted a simple Barat. The whole process became a tug-of-war between their traditions and our choices."*

This explained wedding is a challenging cultural event where generational identities, power, and memory intersect.

### **Emotional Labor and Hidden Struggles**

Behind the spectacle of weddings, several participants highlighted the unseen stress, emotional labor, and strain that families especially women shoulder in organizing and performing rituals.

*"On the outside, it looked like a grand celebration, but inside, I was exhausted. Coordinating relatives, managing guests, worrying about money it took such a toll" (P5, Multan)*

*"I was smiling in all the photos, but honestly, I was over exhausted. It felt like the wedding wasn't for me to enjoy rather a confirmation for for everyone else's expectations." (P 17, Lahore)*

This theme revealed how weddings, while framed as joyous events, often mask layers of emotional burden. Hochschild's (1983) concept of *emotional labor* is useful here, as families manage not only logistics but also feelings ensuring rituals appear harmonious. Even when stress and conflict dominate behind the scenes.

For some participants, the emotional labor even overshadowed the symbolic meaning of rituals. One Participant noted:

*"By the time the actual Nikah happened, I was too drained to feel its significance. It felt like just another step in the checklist." (P8, Gujrat)*

This underscored how the commercialization and social pressures reshape weddings into emotionally taxing performances, raising questions about the sustainability of these evolving practices. The findings illustrated how Pakistani weddings today function as dynamic sites of cultural negotiation. Rituals are neither lost nor static but continually reimagined to balance tradition with modern aspirations. According to symbolic interactionism, these processes can be described as: how participants attribute new meanings and create new rituals in situational surroundings that are altering (Mehmood, 2018). Simultaneously, the Bourdieu theory explains that weddings are cultural capital display zones, where the growing consumerism contributes to the ratification of social stratification. The relationship between agency and structure was present and observed through couples. Who wanted to adopt rituals to display individuality, but had to be bound by norms, financial restraints, and generational assumptions.

### **Discussion**

Pakistani marriage has been the center of an expression of a mix i.e. eastern and Muslim culture. It is not only the continuation of value systems, religious traditions, and a sense of common identity but also it is a union of two individuals. However, these rituals have changed substantially in the past decades. Weddings have been redefined

by globalization, digital media and consumer culture. The results of this paper have shed some light on the intriguing relationship between tradition, modernity, and social stratification in modern Pakistani weddings.

### **Negotiating Tradition and Modernity**

Among the most obvious observations is the all too common stress between modernity and tradition. The personalization of rituals, i.e Mehndi and Rukhsati can be seen as a re-interpretation of cultural norms amidst a broader cultural stress studied by scholars examining South Asian societies in transition (Zakaria, 2021). These traditions are not rejected but are adapted accordingly to the contemporary tastes, the impact of the media and personal preferences.

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes this dynamism by observing that rituals do not include hard and fast rules but these are socially constructed and are open to negotiation (Blumer, 1969). It is through social media that the younger generations are exposed to Pakistani marriage, and this not only creates a voice multiplicity due to the process of depopulation of the cultural field but also propagates commercialization of that cultural field. This implies that the culture permanence and variation co-exist and that rituals co-exist in the sense that they maintain their symbolic functions along with change in their nature and form of occurrence in the same ritual continuum.

### **Weddings as Performances of Status and Cultural Capital**

The commercialization and status competition of weddings stressed the reality of cultural capital displayed. Bourdieu's framework helped to comprehend how wedding ceremonies become arenas where the modification between social classes presented and reinforced by consumption behaviors, selection of venue, and ritual excess (Muhammad and Zahoor, 2013). This phenomenon relates to global tendencies of conspicuous consumption and it is localized by Pakistani social-cultural demands.

Economic budget as expressed by participants the dual sides of cultural capital. Splendid weddings may enrich family stature, but might also carry in unjustifiable financial burdens, which point to structural inequalities. This echoes with the outcomes of studies that indicate how the wedding industry is becoming a contributor to economic force on many families.

### **Gender, Emotion, and Changing Social Norms**

The history of the Rukhsati festivity is one of the most interesting predetermines of the changes in the relationships between genders and the tendencies of showing affection in the Pakistani community. The ritual conventionally saturated with patriarchal and family level to surmount by a more novel, imaginative and more social feast. As such, envisioning a new female agency and expanded affective openness (Ahmed, 2021).

The metaphor of the socio-cultural changes that occurred because of urbanization process. These forces applied to assault those normative positions already in place and create new forms of tolerance in society. Within the symbolic interactionism approach, meaning making describes how partakers renegotiate the affective scripts within Rukhsati rites and thus create stories that inculcate and render current values readable.

### **Media's Mediating Role in Cultural Change**



The powerful effect of social media as a vehicle in modifying the wedding practices introduces new permeations of performance and social vanity. Weddings that used to be a small family event have transformed into a massive public spectacle created to be a never-ending digital tale as appealed to peers (Javed, 2021). This mediatization shifts the process of rituals towards visual spectacle and acquisition of social capital. Although this move can allow people to create more individual identities, it also threatens to trivialize practices and prioritize looks over content. The conflict between authenticity and performance is one of the promising topics of the future research, because it echoes the discussions of the outcomes of digital culture in the traditional practices all over the world

### **Implications for Cultural Preservation and Social Policy**

These insights have important implications for cultural preservation and social policy. Policymakers and community leaders might consider strategies that support sustainable wedding practices, balancing cultural significance with economic feasibility. Educational campaigns could emphasize the value of ritual meaning over material display, fostering awareness about the social and financial impacts of extravagant weddings. The reported generation gap in the data points to the significant establishment of communication between the older and the younger generations. That made it possible to identify a solution to the production of collective cultural heritage and creative adaptation. These aspects ensure that culture is maintained and the social transformations. Those that are demonstrated in the Pakistani weddings today. It was produced and recognized as an example of the contradictions and opportunities that have been influenced. The features of matrimonial rituals as elaborate social phenomena in the present study are described. All of which are frequently revised through negotiation with tradition, identity and degrees of social order. The agency of individuals, structural forces, media discourse, and economic constraints generates a controversial dynamic space. In which Pakistani society's values are intertwined in emergent action scripts.

### **Conclusion**

This paper investigated the contemporary Pakistani weddings as a multi-faceted event of cultural negotiation. It contributes to sociological debates on cultural change. Crossroads of tradition and modernity, economic forces and demands, gendered discourses and pressures of the media. Results showed that the ritualistic values of weddings were socially constructed. Consumers and families are renegotiating their modern milieu. Therefore, creates and affects new values and ideas. This study on the younger generations in the brave new world also observes that these rituals are increasingly becoming individual or structural. The culture has evolved but not disconnected from the traditions. The gendered commencement of the modern initiations, e.g. Rukhsati to legitimise the natural changes in the emotional manifestation. It is a testimony of the transformed social role introduced by the effects of globalization and the restructuring of social norms and values. The other intermediated process of these rituals is the social media, that the weddings have become a performative spectacle. It is a display of social status revolving around individual identity. Through the theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and Bourdieu's cultural capital, the paper elucidates how weddings serve as sites of cultural negotiation, identity construction, and social distinction. Overall, this study serves as a model of the sociological study to legitimize the nature of weddings. Such as the forums of integrative cultural meaning, social distinction processes, and forums of conflict regarding the issue of continuity and

change. The study proposed a moderate approach to cultural continuity that reinterprets the meanings of the past, but also must understand that society is changing.

### Recommendations

Policy makers should regulate awareness campaigns on unnecessary and extravagant expenditures to protect families from economic strain. Educational and media initiatives should highlight the significance of historical and cultural value of marriage beyond making it a spectacle. Community and religious leaders can promote collective and modest ceremonies to preserve social cohesion rather than status competition. Such steps will help parents not say, "What could we have done- We had to spend to remain respectful in society". Findings of further studies from rural areas would show the impact of evolution and hype in cultural behavior influenced by social media in Pakistan. Further studies should ponder upon to examine diverse socio-economics contexts to broaden the understanding of ritual change.

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