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ARTICLE

Life As a Soap Opera: Imaginaries of Romance and Social Prestige among Young Brides in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines the recent transformation of marriage rituals in Turkey from the perspective of young brides. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Istanbul and Bursa in 2017–19, it discusses how young women construct their marital imaginaries through extravagant ceremonies and festivities such as proposals, photographs, henna nights, and weddings. Drawing from the theory of ritual economy, the article argues that their gendered desire for lavish spending does not position brides as victims of either traditional Turkish customs or the consumer market. Rather, the article emphasizes young women's aspirations to romance and a sense of uniqueness, and their desire to feel as if they are "living a fairy tale." These bridal imaginaries reflect the rise of neoliberal individualism, upward social mobility, and status-seeking in Bourdieu's sense. The article's findings contribute to the hitherto limited scholarship on changing marriage rituals and the wedding industry in Turkey.

Keywords: brides; consumerism; female subjectivity; marriage rituals; romance; social status; tradition; Turkey

> One of my brides told me she had received her marriage proposal at the Trevi Fountain in Italy. While thinking about what the wedding theme should be, I suggested we go with a Roman theme. She replied, "How are we going to create the Fountain of Love? It's impossible." I said, "Of course it's possible. I'll build a special fountain with a pool. Tell me whether you have a budget. Because the creative idea and its organization involve financial costs." She said she had a budget. And indeed, a 3.5-meter pool was made. The water flowed profusely, and the guests could hear the mesmerizing sound of the water. To give it a full Roman look, we also covered the ballroom with textured Roman-themed wallpaper. It didn't end there. There needs to be continuity between the stage and the guests' seating area. Walkways were prepared as sidewalks. The edges of the paths were decorated with artificial grass. Detail after detail. . . . I also needed to integrate the fountain with the tables, but how? I designed the wedding favors as napkins. Fountain images were embroidered on the napkins. Another detail also came from the Trevi. You know, people make wishes at the Trevi and throw coins into the fountain. I sent my team to Eminönü [famous shopping district in Istanbul]. I told them, "You find me foreign coins. I can't put in a Turkish lira, it would ruin the concept." I had them find these coins, and I glued them to the menu cards with a note: "Throw this coin into the

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Figure 1. Roman-themed wedding event, October 2019, Istanbul. Photograph courtesy of Aslı, interlocutor.

> fountain and make a wish." All the girls tore the coins off the menu cards and threw them into the fountain and made a wish.[1]

Aslı, a businesswoman with extensive experience in the hospitality sector, owned her own events company. The company had a strong reputation in the Turkish wedding industry because of its famous henna nights and wedding events tailored for young couples, especially brides. The Roman-themed wedding described above, which catered primarily to upper-class taste, beautifully illustrates the transformation of the Turkish wedding industry over the past decade with regard to both materials and performance (Fig. 1). This transformation aligns with the phenomenon of the "big fat wedding"—a global trend for extravagant marriage-related events. Having initially emerged in the United States and the UK, the trend has become prevalent in both Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, South Korea) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as among diaspora populations from those regions.[2] In Western contexts, the

[1] Interview with Aslı (pseudonym), 23 October 2019, Istanbul.

[2] Laurel Kendall, *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Sharon Boden, *Consumerism, Romance and the Wedding Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Ikran Eum, "The Revival of Henna Night in Cairo," *Isim Newsletter* 13, no. 1 (2003): 28–29; Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Mona Abaza, *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Bonnie Adrian, "Geographies of Style: Taiwan's Bridal Photography Empire," *Visual Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2006): 73–85; Jyotsna Kapur, "An 'Arranged Love' Marriage: India's Neoliberal Turn and the Bollywood Wedding Culture Industry," *Communication, Culture and Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 221–33; Thierry Kochuyt, "Making Money, Marking Identities: On the Economic, Social and Cultural Functions of Moroccan Weddings in Brussels," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 10 (2012): 1625–41; Dana Kaplan, "Food and Class Distinction at Israeli Weddings: New Middle Class Omnivores and 'The Simple Taste,'" *Food, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (2013): 245–64; Wijdan Tawfiq, Mary Lynn Damhorst, and Eulanda Sanders, "Getting Ready for a New Life: Saudi Bride-to-Be Shopping Experiences,"

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extravagance is typically associated with weddings and bachelorette parties. In non-Western countries that already have their own elaborate marriage-related rituals and traditions, the rise of global consumerism around marriage and romance has added new dimensions to traditional rituals, such as the request for the woman's hand in marriage (*kız isteme*); a reciprocal exchange of gifts between the families (*bohça*); the display of the trousseau (*çeyiz*); the engagement ceremony; the henna night; and the wedding celebration.[3] Many of these rituals are now celebrated with meticulously designed events, taking on particular significance in the imaginary worlds of young brides.

In this article I examine bridal fantasies around these newly popularized marriage-related rituals in Turkey to explore how young women connect the idea of romantic love with marriage. Both tradition and the market actively shape brides' lifestyles and expectations during the marriage preparation process. This includes the influence of conventional and social media. Turkish soap operas, for example, have a broad reach—from the Balkans, through Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Spain, to North Africa—and they are key in promoting and commodifying the idea of romantic love, thereby shaping gendered desires around romance and marriage.[4] It is against this backdrop that I investigate the social meanings of marriage-related rituals for young women, how those rituals shape lifestyles and expectations, and how women imagine themselves through them. I aim to answer the following questions: What do gendered desires around extravagant marriage rituals reveal about young women's subject-formation process? To what extent do commodified marriage preparations and expectations represent individual self-expression for young women, and to what extent do these rituals perform social distinction and status-seeking in Bourdieu's sense?[5]

The continuation of lavish spending on marriage rituals despite Turkey's post-2016 economic crisis, which shrank the middle class, signals a discrepancy with the classical rational-choice model, which supposes that individuals make economic decisions by balancing their expenditure against their income. I suggest instead that the marriage preparation process should be understood through McAnany and Well's theory of ritual economy.[6] This theory emphasizes that individuals are influenced not only by the strictly economic parameters of the classical model, but also by noneconomic factors such as custom, tradition, and consumerist desire—all of which form part of young couples' imaginaries during the marriage process.

Building on this perspective, I develop a framework I call "the ritual economy of marriage." This framework stresses the reciprocal relationships behind young women's complex decisions, which are simultaneously shaped by the market, media representations, and traditional forces. Rather than viewing young couples in general, or young brides in particular, as victims of tradition or consumer culture, I examine how women form their subjectivities in relation to various traditions and consumerist imaginaries that they dynamically revive and interpret. I argue, therefore, that the desire to be a princess in one's own love story is not only about keeping pace with neoliberal individualism and

International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings 75, no. 1 (2018): 1–3; Martha Woźniak-Bobińska, "Big Fat Assyrian/Syriac Weddings: Rituals and Marriage Traditions among Middle Eastern Christians in Sweden," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 16 (2018): 2684–700.

[3] Merve Kütük-Kuriş, "The Ritual Economy of Marriage and the Making of Bridal Subjectivity in Turkey," in *Poetics and Politics of Islamic Imaginaries*, ed. Sertaç Sehlikoglu, Sumrin Kalia, and Fatemeh Sadeghi Givi (London: UCL Press, forthcoming).

[4] Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, "Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera 'Colonialism,'" *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2361–85.

[5] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[6] Patricia A. McAnany and E. Christian Wells, "Toward a Theory of Ritual Economy," in *Dimensions of Ritual Economy*, ed. E. Christian Wells and Patricia A. McAnany (Leeds, UK: Emerald, 2008), 1–18.

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cosmopolitan consumerism. I analyze marriage-related rituals such as engagement ceremonies, henna nights, and weddings as performative arenas through which young brides and their families aim to showcase their social position—whether to announce newly acquired class status, or to maintain long-standing social prestige and reputation.

Navigating the World of Bridal Fantasies

The initial inspiration for this research stemmed from my own experience of preparing for marriage in the late 2010s. This process provided an ethnographically rich and critically reflexive vantage point to observe the reciprocal relationship between young brides' aspirations around marriage-related rituals and the role of professionals in Turkey's growing wedding industry. As a prospective bride at the time, I navigated a field shaped by professionals, including event organizers, venue managers, photographers, hairdressers, makeup artists, dance instructors, florists, bridal shop owners, and trousseau boutique owners, who reinforced a consumerist discourse centered on individuality and emotional fulfillment. Marketing slogans such as "making you feel special on your big day" were frequently employed to cultivate a particular affective economy around bridal consumption.

This period also coincided with a broader shift in popular culture. Women's daytime TV programs increasingly featured what I define as "bridal content." One notable example is *Gelin Evi* (Bride's House), a show in which newlywed women compete by showcasing their home decorations, trousseaus, and marriage-related ceremonies such as engagements, henna nights, and weddings. Social media platforms, especially Instagram, also became saturated with content creators sharing advice and experiences related to these increasingly popular rituals.

These encounters prompted the central questions that shaped the focus of this study: To what extent do traditional and market forces shape and constrain young women's desires and choices? Can the elaborate performances surrounding marriage be understood solely as the products of consumer culture, or do they also reflect complex negotiations of aspiration, class, and gendered agency?

My discussion is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Istanbul and Bursa between 2017 and 2019. As Turkey's financial and consumerist capital, Istanbul plays a central role in shaping the imaginaries and consumption practices available to brides. Bursa, with its industrial economy, strong textile sector, and Ottoman legacy, served as a second field site, a place where traditional rituals are preserved but increasingly reconfigured through the lenses of individualism and global consumerism.

The research employed multiple qualitative methods. I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with professionals in the sector, beginning with contacts I had made during my own marriage preparation and expanding the network using snowball sampling. I also carried out fourteen in-depth interviews with brides. Except for five former *Gelin Evi* contestants—whom I contacted via Instagram and recruited through convenience sampling—all informants were reached through snowball sampling. The brides were between twenty-four and thirty-one in age. All but one of my interviewees were university graduates. Half of them were active in the labor market, including an industrial engineer, a civil servant, an executive assistant, a dental receptionist, a party venue manager, and a social media content creator. Most came from middle-class families; two were from the Islamic bourgeoisie, and one from the lower class. Despite their different income levels, they all had shared desires for their marriage preparations.

Interviews were conducted in locations preferred by the interlocutors, typically in the welcoming atmosphere of their homes, offices, or favorite cafés. All interviews were audio-recorded. Only the sections directly related to the study's core themes about bridal desires—

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such as the trousseau, henna night, bridal hammam, and the marriage proposal—were transcribed. I undertook all transcription work myself, without the use of specialized software or research assistants, ensuring close engagement with the data. To protect informants' anonymity, all names used in the study are pseudonyms.

Participant observation was also central to the study. I attended marriage-related rituals organized by young women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including trousseau-making preparations, marriage proposal preparations, photo shoots, henna nights, and wedding ceremonies—primarily in Istanbul. These observations were complemented by an online ethnography, focusing on bridal influencers on Instagram and YouTube who regularly produce and spread content about marriage-related rituals aimed at women across class lines.

The Politics and Socioeconomics of MENA's Changing Marriage Culture

There is a substantial body of scholarship on marriage preparation processes in MENA and its diasporas. This scholarship began before the spread of capitalist consumer culture in the 1980s, focusing primarily on the Islamic practices of dowry (*mehir* in Turkish, *mahr* in Arabic) and trousseau-making.[7] The dowry refers to the groom's (or his family's) obligation to provide goods and/or money to the bride upon entry into matrimony, or in cases of divorce or widowhood. The trousseau encompasses a range of material possessions classically passed down through generations, such as handcrafts, furniture, household appliances, jewelry, and clothing, provided to the bride by both her own and the groom's family. The scholarly literature emphasizes that the dowry and trousseau not only ensure the bride's economic security but also confer symbolic power on her: as economic transactions based on extensive negotiations, often conducted by elderly family members, these practices certify the bride's dignity and honor, thereby enhancing her family's reputation and social status. This early scholarship effectively underscores that marriage is a social phenomenon with cultural, economic, and sociopolitical dimensions.

Some of these early studies focused on trousseau-making in Turkey, arguing that the trousseau was losing importance among the urban elite and middle classes. This change was mainly due to the early Republican efforts to regulate the use of both tradition and religion in the public sphere, in accordance with the secular nation–state's mission of modernization and Westernization. This resulted in a decline in the popularity of marriage-related customs in urban centers.[8] The rationalization of marriage traditions was achieved through pedagogic methods: for example, the Republican elite sought to set an example by having simple wedding ceremonies attended by guests of both genders. Nevertheless, marriage rituals such as the preparation of the trousseau, the henna night, and the big wedding did not disappear completely, especially in rural settings, and waves of internal migration in the 1960s reintroduced these rituals to urban life.[9]

[7] Annelies Moors, "Women's Gold: Shifting Styles in Embodying Family Relations," in *Family History in Middle Eastern Studies: Household, Property and Gender*, ed. Beshara Doumani (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 101–19; Sabiha Allouche, "Love, Lebanese Style: Toward an Either/And Analytic Framework of Kinship," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (2019): 157–78; Jihan Safar, "Dower (Mahr) and Wedding Ceremony among the Shiʿa of Oman: Religion, Class, Ethnicity," in *Global Dynamics of Shiʿa Marriages: Religion, Gender and Belonging*, ed. Yafa Shanneik and Annelies Moors (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 59–84.

[8] Nancy Lindisfarne, *Elhamdülillah Laikiz: Cinsiyet, İslâm ve Türk Cumhuriyetçiliği* (Istanbul: Iletişim, 2002).

[9] Carol L. Delaney, *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Özlem Sandıkçı and B. Ece İlhan, "Dowry: A Cherished Possession or an Old-Fashioned Tradition in a Modernizing Society?" in *Contemporary Consumption Rituals: A Research Anthology*, ed. Cele Otnes and Tina M. Lowrey (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003), 149–78; Emine Gürsoy-Naskali and Aysel Güneş, eds., *Düğün* (Istanbul: Libra, 2018).

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The Republican efforts also mean that there are limited studies on marriage-related rituals in modern Turkey. Following the foundation of modern Turkey as a secular nation–state, which abolished the role of shariʿa law in legislative matters, a stigma became attached to certain practices, such as the dowry. Although secularization did not lead to the complete disappearance of the practice, young urbanite women today often have negative perceptions of it. Many see it as reducing marriage to a financial transaction, thereby undermining the idea of marriage as a relationship based on trust. As young women often say, they do not wish to be seen as "demanding"—and thereby lose their status as respectable candidates for marriage—when the heart of the matter should be romantic love. In modern Turkey the dowry is seen as beyond the moral boundaries of female propriety.[10]

Turkish women's negative assessment of the dowry compared with their counterparts elsewhere in MENA can be understood in light of the rise of consumer culture in Turkey since the 1980s. Research on changing marriage rituals across the region shows that in addition to the surge in lavish events such as henna nights and weddings, young women's trousseau expectations have shifted toward high-tech home products and personal feminine items such as clothing, cosmetics, and lingerie.[11] In the case of Turkey, although classical trousseau practices have waned and young brides are reluctant to ask for a dowry, they feel less constrained about adopting market-driven expectations. Brides are now eager for stylish weddings, henna nights involving multiple costume changes, and modern homes decorated to their own taste. This shift is closely related to the post-1980s era, when marriage traditions became commercialized and commodified as Turkey adopted a neoliberal economic model and developed an ever-growing wedding industry similar to its Western counterparts.[12] Throughout the 1990s, carefully planned weddings in five-star hotels were widely available to affluent (and often secular) Turkish families.

What has changed in the last decade is the further intensification of Turkey's neoliberal economic program under the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party). Particularly during its first decade in power, the AKP was oriented around consumerism and favoritism, resulting in the expansion of the middle class as well as the rise of an Islamic bourgeoisie that introduced niche tastes into the consumer market.[13] The effect of these developments on the wedding industry led to its quick and spectacular growth. If we adopt Veblen's theory of emulation, we can see the middle class and Islamic bourgeoisie selectively imitating the tastes and lifestyles of the secular upper class, aspiring to upward social mobility and social prestige.[14]

The Turkish wedding industry has now grown to an immense scale. Couples who cannot afford the upmarket creative services can hire professionals to plan weddings or henna nights

[10] Burcu Kalpaklıoğlu, "Mehir (Dower), Gifts of Gold, and Intimate Economies of Marriage in Istanbul," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 19, no. 1 (2024): 67–85.

[11] Lila Abu Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55; Kimberly Hart, "Love by Arrangement: The Ambiguity of 'Spousal Choice' in a Turkish Village," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007): 345–62.

[12] Tuba Ustuner and Douglas B. Holt, "Toward a Theory of Status Consumption in Less Industrialized Countries," *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 1 (2010): 37–56; Annessa Ann Babic and Tanfer Emin Tunc, "'Here Comes the (Turkish) Bride': American Consumer Culture and the Turkish Bridal Industry," *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture* 11, no. 3/4 (2021): 1–20.

[13] Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan, and Ahmet Öncü, eds., *The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey* (Oxford, UK: Berghahn, 2015); Irmak Karademir Hazır, "Boundaries of Middle-Class Identities in Turkey," *Sociological Review* 62, no. 4 (2015): 675–97; Aksu Akçaoğlu, *Zarif ve Dinen Makbul: Muhafazakar Üst-Orta Sınıf Habitusu* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2018); Merve Kütük-Kuriş, "Piety, Fashion and Festivity in a Modest Fashion Shopping Mall," *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 167–91; Claudia Liebelt, *Istanbul Appearances: Beauty and the Making of Middle-Class Femininities in Urban Turkey* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023).

[14] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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Figure 2. A photo shoot area in a public park operated by the Istanbul Municipality, March 2018, Istanbul. Photograph by the author.

that, although not exactly rivaling luxurious events, certainly mimic them. Budget-friendly wedding venues have mushroomed across Istanbul's middle- and lower-class residential districts. These venues mirror the mise-en-scène of high-end events, but with more limited offerings—for example, there may be soft drinks and dried fruit instead of lavish à la carte menus. For couples on a tight budget, municipalities offer alternative celebration options, such as cocktail receptions in affordable venues after the official marriage ceremony (*nikah*). Municipalities even seek to distinguish their venues by adding features such as decorative pools and specially decorated areas for photo shoots (Fig. 2). At the higher end of the market, upper-class weddings tend to be similarly spectacular, regardless of religious affiliation. The

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principal difference between wedding services tailored for secular customers and those aimed at the Islamic bourgeoisie lies in the performance of a Qurʾan recitation after the *nikah* to bless the marriage. Apart from this, differences include small details such as the provision of alcohol-free menus, the absence of dance floors at mixed-gender events, and the employment of professional folkloric or Turkish musicians for Muslim guests to watch rather than dancing themselves. These details are minimal, and indeed, as I was informed by Nuran, the manager of a luxury venue on the Bosporus, some young couples from conservative families even have an after-party once their older relatives have gone home, with entertainment that includes alcohol and mixed-gender dancing.[15] There is a wide choice available to young couples, ranging from affordable municipal halls to specialist wedding venues in lower- and middle-class residential areas, to luxury five-star hotels in upper-class districts of Istanbul (Fig. 3).

The Turkish wedding industry has global significance thanks to the diversity and flexibility of its services. In 2024 the industry was valued at US $15.3 billion, and industry professionals were seeking state support to market Turkey as a premier destination for wedding tourism.[16] The market now caters to a wide range of tastes among not only Turkish citizens but also consumers from countries including Iran, Lebanon, India, Pakistan, Russia, the Gulf countries, and various parts of Europe.[17] Moreover, the industry encompasses more than just venues and wedding planners: since the 2010s, there has been a steady increase in economic and media professionals offering a variety of services. For instance, young women strongly value romantic marriage proposals, engagement events, and weddings, with photo shoots in specially chosen locations, and photographers, bridal boutiques, hairdressers, makeup artists, dance instructors, florists, and pastry chefs all play significant roles.

Marriage-related services also make important contributions to Turkey's home wares sector. Home decoration has long been central to Turkish women's aspirations concerning marriage, reflecting the nation–state's positioning of modern women as homemakers.[18] However, after the 1980s, the marketization of interior design, and women's changing role as both experts and consumer-citizens in the domestic realm, gave this trend a new dimension. In the early Republic, women's role had been to create the modern ideal home according to

[15] Women's consumerist practices around marriage preparations challenge the reductionist secular-Islamist binary often employed to interpret contemporary Turkey, particularly amid claims of Islamization under AKP rule. This is not to deny the significance of piety in the lives of young Muslims. However, as both studies on lived Islam and my own fieldwork demonstrate, young Muslims negotiate overlapping influences of the market, religion, and tradition. For further discussion, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Samuli J. Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," ZMO Working Papers, 2010; Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Lara Deeb and Mona Harb, *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shiʿite South Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Sertaç Sehlikoglu, *Working Out Desire: Women, Sport, and Self-making in Istanbul* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021); and Merve Kütük-Kuriş, *Refashioning Muslims: Women between the New Conservatism and Neoliberalism in Istanbul* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

[16] Betül Alakent, "Turkey Projected to Generate 500M from Wedding Tourism Income," *Daily Sabah*, 24 July 2022, https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkey-projected-to-generate-500m-from-wedding-tourism-income.

[17] Mitra Etemaddar, Maree Thyne, and Andrea Insch, "A Taste of Home: Choosing a Destination Wedding," *Anatolia: International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research* 29, no. 3 (2018): 422–32; Çetin Furkan Usun and Gözde Emekli, "New Expansions in Turkey Tourism: Indian Weddings," *Tourism, Leisure and Global Change* 5 (2019): 477–89; "Türkiye Uluslararası Düğün Sektörü İçin Bir Cazibe Merkezi!" (editorial), *Dünya*, 2 May 2024, https://www.dunya.com/gundem/turkiye-uluslararasi-dugun-sektoru-icin-bir-cazibe-merkezi-haberi-725144.

[18] Sibel Bozdoğan, *Modernism and Nation-Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), 193–239; Elif Ekin Akşit, *Kızların Sessizliği: Kız Enstitülerinin Uzun Tarihi* (Istanbul: Iletişim, 2005); Serpil Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti: Erkekler Devlet, Kadınlar Aile Kurar* (Istanbul: Iletişim, 2012).

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Figure 3. Lower middle-class wedding venue mimicking the extravagant weddings on offer at five-star hotels, October 2019, Istanbul. Photograph by the author.

the principles of frugality and functionality; now the relevant domestic principles became neoliberal and consumerist, focused on spending for pleasure, taste, and social distinction.[19] This shift intensified at the turn of the millennium with the emergence of new media platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram, and today new home décor brands (e.g., Madame Coco, English Home, Mudo Concept) promote consumerist lifestyles that offer a mix of global

[19] Ayşe Öncü, "The Myth of 'Ideal Home' Travels across Borders to Turkey," in *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*, ed. Petra Weyland and Ayşe Öncü (London: Zed, 1997), 56–72.

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trends for newlywed couples' homes. Trousseau boutiques too are significant players in the industry: although the tradition of trousseau-making has lost some of its importance, it continues to be negotiated among mothers and mothers-in-law.[20]

Paradoxically, however, the growth of the Turkish wedding industry also has given cause for concern among conservative sections of society, with the government even seeing it as part of a "crisis of the family." According to Turkish Statistical Institute data for 2002 through 2021, marriage rates in Turkey dropped by twenty percent and divorce rates rose by forty-seven percent.[21] The fertility rate, which in 2001 was above the population renewal level of 2.10, has consistently been below that level since 2016.[22] In Turkey as elsewhere in MENA, financial pressures associated with extravagant marriage-related rituals have led many young people to delay marriage.[23] In response, the AKP government in Turkey has implemented interest-free marriage loans for couples between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine who earn less than the minimum wage.[24] Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs and the leaders of Islamic religious orders (*tarikats*) emphasize the importance of marriage in their sermons and criticize the phenomenon of singlehood as the result of the trend for lavish expenditure on wedding preparations. Islamic scholars advise young couples to scale back their materialistic expectations, urging parents to do likewise to encourage their children to marry while young.[25]

Despite the massive growth of the Turkish wedding industry since the 1980s, there is no comprehensive research on the diversity of marriage-related rituals in Turkey or the changes in their functions and social meanings. This gap stands in contrast to a strong body of literature discussing the recent transformation of marriage-related performances across MENA and how they affect young brides' subjectivities.[26] Although some marketing and consumer studies have sought to understand the emergence of the Turkish wedding industry, they do not cover the industry's expansion in the last decade.[27] There is only one study of the cultural and socioeconomic meanings of the tradition of giving gold gifts during marriage preparations, therefore this scholarship does not provide an overarching perspective on the rising popularity of marriage-related rituals.[28] The one exception in scholarship on Turkey is a recent body of research on harem-themed henna night events

[20] Kütük-Kuriş, "Ritual Economy of Marriage."

[21] Scholars underline women's increasing levels of education and the legal advancement of gender equality as important reasons behind this trend. "Türkiye'de Evlilik İstatistikleri: Boşanmalar ve Ortalama Evlilik Yaşı Yükseliyor" (editorial), *Euronews*, 11 April 2022, https://tr.euronews.com/2022/04/11/turkiye-de-2021-de-evlenen-cift-say-s-562-bin-bosanan-174-bin-ciftler-neden-bosan-yor.

[22] "Birth Statistics, 2023," Turkish Statistical Institute, 15 May 2024, https://tinyurl.com/yxxwxw7v.

[23] Diane Singerman, "The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth in the Middle East," Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper No. 6, September 2007; Jane Bristol-Rhys, "Weddings, Marriage and Money in the United Arab Emirates," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 2, no. 1 (2007): 20–36; Frances S. Hasso, *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[24] "Evlenecek Gençlerin Desteklenmesi Projesi," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 15 February 2024, https://www.aile.gov.tr/duyurular/evlenecek-genclerin-desteklenmesi-projesi. On the AKP's neoconservative familial policies, see for instance Zafer Yılmaz, "Strengthening the Family Policies in Turkey: Managing the Social Question and Armoring Conservative-Neoliberal Populism," *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 371–90.

[25] Anka, "Diyanet İşleri Başkanı Ali Erbaş: 'Evlilik Yaşı 25'lere 30'lara Çıkıyor. Bu Konuda Gençlerimizi Uyaralım,'" *Cumhuriyet*, 19 July 2024, https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/diyanet-isleri-baskani-ali-erbas-evlilik-yasi-25lere-30lara-2229135.

[26] Eum, "Revival of Henna Night"; Kochuyt, "Making Money, Marking Identities."

[27] Tuba Ustuner, Güliz Ger, and Douglas B. Holt, "Consuming Ritual: Reframing the Turkish Henna Ceremony," *Advances in Consumer Research* 27 (2000): 209–14; Ustuner and Holt, "Toward a Theory."

[28] Burçak Ertimur and Özlem Sandıkçı, "Alienable Gifts: Uses and Meanings of Gold in Turkey," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 13, no. 3 (2014): 204–11.

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that reimagine the Ottoman royal court. These studies argue that the recent popularity of these events aligns with the AKP's efforts to construct a new national identity based on nostalgia for the Ottoman-Islamic heritage.[29] However, a detailed ethnographic focus on both industry professionals and young brides reveals that neither Western cultural assimilation nor neo-Ottomanism are the whole story.[30] Rather, young Turkish women are creatively appropriating elements from various cultures to produce their own cultural fusion.

Another notable gap in scholarship on Turkey's changing marriage culture relates to the country's shift toward economic neoliberalism. There is a robust body of literature on Turkey's consumer culture in general: some studies focus on the emergence of the middle classes, others on the rise of the Islamic bourgeoisie and market Islam.[31] Given Turkish neoliberalism's specific targeting of women as consumer-citizens, there is also a strong emphasis on gendered aspects of the shift.[32] However, this scholarship overlooks marriage-related rituals, despite their significance for consumer culture and their growing market share. During the marriage preparation process, women place great importance on material possessions such as bridal gowns, jewelry, and home décor, as well as on nonmaterial items such as marriage proposals, henna nights, and wedding festivities. Such gendered desires around marriage-related consumerism actively shape young women's individual neoliberal subjectivities. It is crucial to grasp this recent transformation in marriage-related rituals for an understanding of those rituals' complex meanings for young brides.

This article draws on scholarship from the MENA region and its diasporas to fill the gaps in the literature on the marriage preparation process in Turkey. However, it does so without reproducing a binary division between East and West. Because young brides develop forms of hybridity by combining different cultural influences, the article also references themes from Western marriage culture, specifically concerning the proposal, the wedding photographs, and the first dance at the reception. These themes are significant in Turkey, where the initial surge in extravagant marriage rituals after years of Republican restraint was specifically inspired by Western consumerism.[33]

Since the 1980s, TV programs and magazines devoted to marriage and home décor have presented celebrities' luxurious wedding and interior design choices, thereby shaping neoliberal and consumer-oriented ideals of female subjectivity.[34] More recently, this imaginary world has been consolidated and made more accessible through above-mentioned

[29] Petek Onur, "The Politics of Nostalgia: The New Urban Culture in Ankara's Historic Neighbourhoods," in *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey*, ed. Pierre Hecker, Kaya Akyıldız, and Ivo Furman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 253–74; Petek Onur, "The New Ottoman Henna Nights and Women in the Palace Nostalgia," in *Neo-Ottoman Imaginaries in Contemporary Turkey*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Petek Onur (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 209–36.

[30] Babic and Tunc, "Here Comes (Turkish) Bride"; Kütük-Kuriş, "Ritual Economy of Marriage."

[31] Ayşe Buğra, "Class, Culture and State: An Analysis of Interest Representation by Two Turkish Business Associations," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 4 (1998): 521–39; Mücahit Bilici, "Islam'ın Bronzlaşan Yüzü: Caprice Hotel Örnek Olayı," in Islamın Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri, ed. *Nilüfer Göle* (Istanbul: Metis, 1999), 216–37; Özlem Sandıkçı and Güliz Ger, "In-Between Modernities and Postmodernities: Theorizing Turkish Consumptionscape," *Advances in Consumer Research* 29, no. 1 (2002): 465–70.

[32] Barış Kılıçbay and Mutlu Binark, "Consumer Culture, Islam and the Politics of Lifestyle: Fashion for Veiling in Contemporary Turkey," *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (2002): 495–51; Irmak Karademir Hazır, "Wearing Class: A Study on Clothes, Bodies and Emotions in Turkey," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, no. 2 (2017): 413–32; Nazlı Alimen, *Faith and Fashion in Turkey: Consumption, Politics, and Islamic Identities* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018); Merve Kütük-Kuriş, "Muslim Fashionistas in Contemporary Turkey: Devoted Mothers, Benevolent Philanthropists, and Leisure Enthusiasts," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 17, no. 3 (2021): 395–422.

[33] Öncü, "Myth of 'Ideal Home'"; Ustuner, Ger, and Holt, "Consuming Ritual."

[34] Nurdan Gürbilek, *Vitrinde Yaşamak: 1980'lerin Kültürel İklimi* (Istanbul: Metis, 1992).

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bridal TV shows. These programs construct a new category of bride, a consumer-citizen who embraces global consumer culture while remaining tied to the traditional gendered expectation that "women make homes."[35] This media landscape has been further intensified by the international popularity of Turkish soap operas since the early 2000s. Although these series offer a range of gendered representations—including women as autonomous and empowered—studies show that their global appeal stems largely from the aspirational images they promote: lavish lifestyles and emotionally expressive male protagonists, even when such portrayals reinforce hegemonic masculinity.[36] Significantly, these narratives suggest that modern womanhood does not require a break from tradition. Instead, traditional social values and norms can coexist with the requirements of modern life.[37] Today, social media influencers who present themselves as "one of us" continue this trend by sharing intimate aspects of their lives—from marriage proposals to wedding preparations—thereby inspiring ordinary women to imagine themselves as deserving of similar romantic and material fulfillment. In short, they send the message that women should refuse to settle for "less."

Consuming Romance

Although he wrote more than a century ago, Veblen can help us understand how today's media—including TV, print magazines, and social media—fuel our desire to emulate others.[38] The online portrayal of "people like us" significantly shapes our imaginations and aspirations for a more prosperous future, and individuals' desires for an affluent and unique life are arguably more pronounced today than ever before.[39] Of course, not all online content is the same. Some actors, such as "momfluencers" and female food influencers, reinforce women's traditional roles; others, such as influencers focusing on education or careers, offer alternative aspirations, encouraging women to break with conservative gender norms. The media and the market provide an array of opportunities, creating a large marketplace in which female consumers have room for agency rather than mere role conformity. The ritual economy of marriage perspective emphasizes that women are not simply victims of social media or consumer culture; instead, women utilize these complex resources to develop a sense of self. My interlocutors' narratives about marriage preparations offer clear examples.

[35] Feyda Sayan-Cengiz, "Bridal Anxieties: Politics of Gender, Neoconservatism and Daytime TV in Turkey," in *Female Agencies and Subjectivities in Film and Television*, ed. Didem Sezen, Feride Çiçekoğlu, and Aslı Tunç (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 229–48.

[36] Hegemonic masculinity is a notion developed to critically examine culturally idealized forms of masculinity within specific sociohistoric contexts. Traits such as toughness, aggression, material success, and heterosexuality have long been upheld as the standard of manhood, reinforcing unequal gender relations not only between men and women, but also among men who fall outside this ideal. Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59. The following studies examine how this phenomenon is promoted in Turkish TV series, and how it resonates with diverse international audiences: Sevgi Uçan Çubukçu, "Gender Discourse in Popular Culture: The Case of Television Series in Turkey," in *Groups, Ideologies and Discourses: Glimpses of the Turkic Speaking World*, ed. Christoph Herzog and Barbara Pusch (Würzburg, Germany: Ergon Verlag, 2008), 113–30; Marwan M. Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere," *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): 17–29; Eleni Pothou, "Why So Successful? An Audience Research on the Turkish TV Series in Greece," *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture* 9, no. 17 (2020): 62–78; and Miriam Berg, "Turkish Television Serials' Reception among Women Viewers in Rural Türkiye: Gendered and Generational Readings between Younger and Older Women," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 19, no. 1 (2023): 79–99.

[37] Christa Salamandra, "The Muhannad Effect: Media Panic, Melodrama, and the Arab Female Gaze," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2012): 45–78; Miriam Berg and Antonella Sansalone, "Cultural Proximity and Gender Representation: Why Italian Women Are Drawn to Turkish TV Serials," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 6 (2024): 869–88.

[38] Veblen, *Theory of Leisure Class.*

[39] Daniel Miller, *How the World Changed Social Media* (London: UCL Press, 2016).

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Figure 4. Marriage proposal in a romantic restaurant setting, September 2018, Istanbul. Photograph by the author.

Since the formation of the nation–state, Turkish women have been closely associated with familial rather than individualistic roles.[40] Neoliberal Turkish consumerism includes a strong streak of familialism, and women are regarded first and foremost as domestic caregivers, regardless of their careers or achievements. Consequently, many young women remain deeply motivated by the ideal of romantic marriage. From a very young age, they are socialized to feel special and unique, and these narratives are heightened during marriage preparations, with numerous rituals fostering young women's romantic aspirations.

The feeling of uniqueness, of "being the princess in one's own fairy tale," is commercialized and commodified through romantic images, objects, and symbols, many of which do not constitute an "authentic expression of intimate sentiments" on the groom's part.[41] According to Phillip Vannini, who studies the commodification of romance in Western wedding rituals, the media and the market create certain images and products to fix the idea of romance in women's imaginaries. For example, a candlelit dinner, a red rose, a diamond ring, and the element of surprise have become commodities that shape women's expectations of marriage proposals.[42] These romantic female expectations are also evident in Turkey, where events companies cater to various budgets, offering packages for romantic proposals aboard boats or in restaurants' VIP lounges (Fig. 4). Indeed, if you were to spend an evening in Istanbul on any summer weekend, you might see as many as five or even ten laser projections of the words "*Benimle evlenir misin?*" (Will you marry me?) on the Bosporus Bridge, beamed from boats on the river below (Fig. 5). Despite the risk of uniformity—a paradox of fashion described by Simmel, where the pursuit of uniqueness and distinction from others often leads to sameness—many young women strongly desire their marriage to begin with such a romantic gesture.[43]

[40] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (1987): 317–38; Nükhet Sirman, "The Making of Familial Citizenship in Turkey," in *Citizenship in a Globalizing World: European Questions and Turkish Experiences*, ed. Fuat Keyman and Ahmet İçduygu (London: Routledge, 2005), 147–72.

[41] Phillip Vannini, "Will You Marry Me? Spectacle and Consumption in the Ritual of Marriage Proposals," *Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 1 (2004): 170.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

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Figure 5. Marriage proposal on a boat cruising the Bosporus, November 2019, Istanbul. Photograph courtesy of Esra, interlocutor.

For my informants, the sense of being the princess in one's own fairy tale referred to the groom's physical and emotional investment in rituals such as carefully orchestrated marriage proposals, wedding photograph sessions in unique locations, and the first dance at the wedding reception. Nur, a twenty-seven-year-old middle-class woman, described her marriage proposal as follows:

> Every young woman dreams of a marriage proposal. It is a special moment. I always wanted mine to be grand. I had high expectations. Thank God [*Allah gönlüme göre verdi*], my husband fulfilled that dream. He had planned a surprise at Galata Tower. According to urban legend, you marry whoever you visit Galata Tower with for the first time. We had not been there before, but on that day there was a long queue. I did not want to waste time, but he insisted. When we reached the top, my husband knelt down and proposed with a ring while also pointing down at the street. [Laughing.] Having already seen the ring, how could I look down? It turned out that our male friend had helped my husband to unfurl a huge banner below at the foot of the tower.

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> It read: "I counted thirty [the groom's age] without you, will you count a lifetime with me? WILL YOU MARRY ME?" The passersby around the banner applauded. I was so happy.[44]

Nur's marriage proposal—which she described with her eyes shining with joy and pride—confirms Vannini's analysis. Proposals that include drama and unexpectedness, especially those in which the groom proclaims his love publicly, make young women feel unique. From a Goffmanian perspective, being seen as the ideal groom requires proper impression management during the marriage preparations.[45] For my interlocutors, the public announcement of the man's desire to marry the woman was essential for a successful performance. If the groom performed this act inadequately, or failed to perform it at all, it could make the bride sad and even angry. Hale, a twenty-nine-year-old informant, described her anger on the day of her marriage proposal:

> I kept teasing him, asking if he was ever going to propose to me. I have a passionate desire for romantic things. I was expecting the proposal on my birthday. We had dinner together, but it was a dull, average place. He did not even get me a birthday gift. I thought: "At least he could have bought me a flower." Then, he suggested we go to another café with a beautiful view. I agreed, but I was already angry and barely holding it in. I kept telling myself: "Don't sulk, Hale. Don't ruin the day. Be calm. You can make him pay for it later." We went into a building and started going up to the roof. It turned out to be his friends' terrace, decorated with roses. Our friends were there. It was a big surprise. He got down on one knee, and we put on the ring. We hugged. [Laughing.] I'm glad I controlled my anger, or else I might have gotten mad and gone home.[46]

Although young Turkish brides' expectations of a romantic proposal have many similarities with Western examples, Turkish marriage culture also gives rise to differences. One key difference is the *kız isteme* ritual, which requires the groom's family—usually a senior male relative—to formally request the bride's father's consent to the marriage. For economically independent couples, especially in big cities, this custom has become sweetly symbolic, with the father's approval already given beforehand. However, for some brides and their families, *kız isteme* remains significant. In these instances, grooms might prefer to stage a romantic proposal after the *kız isteme* ritual, and young women may appreciate the groom's sensitivity to tradition. Some grooms might stage low-key proposals due to other constraints. For example, a candlelit dinner may not be feasible if the bride is unable to stay out late. In either case, however, the proposal can feel more like a task on a marriage preparation to-do list, robbed of romance and surprise. Twenty-seven-year-old interlocutor Gülden told me that her husband had proposed in a luxury restaurant overlooking the Bosporus, in a VIP lounge decorated with roses and candles. However, the proposal took place the night before their engagement ceremony, meaning that the marriage had already been announced. Although Gülden's narrative differed from Nur's and Hale's joyful accounts, there was still some element of surprise and unexpectedness, because she had not anticipated such an event right before their engagement. But another interlocutor, twenty-five-year-old Seha, told a different story:

[44] Interview with Nur, 15 October 2019, Istanbul.
[45] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1971).
[46] Interview with Hale, 17 October 2019, Istanbul.

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> We were in the dating phase, and our families had not yet met. This is why I could not go out at nights. My husband planned a surprise breakfast at our favorite spot. The table was decorated with rose petals, and that is when he gave me the ring. To be honest, I had imagined something different, perhaps fluttering curtains, or balloons on a beach. But given the circumstances, this was the best he could do. He was always thoughtful and made sure all my wishes were fulfilled.[47]

Both Gülden and Seha understood that their romantic considerations were shaped not only by the media and the market, but also by cultural factors. For Seha, the care and effort her husband put into his proposal were enough to make her feel happy, if not particularly excited. Another important finding is that brides are more troubled by deficiencies in the marriage proposal than by the proposal's alignment with Turkish customs. For example, twenty-four-year-old Ayten expressed sincere disappointment with her marriage proposal:

> We have been married for a year and a half and have a daughter. But I am still waiting for a proper proposal. [Laughing.]. . . I wanted something to please both my heart and my eyes. But what happened was, we were just sitting in a random café, and he said: "Everything between us is going well. You are the person I want to marry. You can be a mother to my children." And so on. I was expecting a ring, flowers, balloons, music—none of that was there. To me, the marriage proposal still has not happened. Do I not deserve a grand proposal?[48]

A marriage proposal is meant to be a surprise to the bride, and the groom must thoroughly understand the bride's expectations if he is to deliver a successful performance. Many disappointed brides attempt to compensate for a proposal's shortcomings—whether because of the groom's "inability" to read the bride's dreams, or because of the limits of tradition—by taking control of the other marriage rituals. This is most evident with regard to engagement and wedding photographs.

Previously, the main sociocultural function of taking photographs was to build memories. Many life-cycle events (e.g., birth, wedding, circumcision) were marked by special photo shoots, often in professional studios, and the photographs became important parts of the family's collective memory. However, with the rise of consumer culture and the current craze for sharing images on social media, photo shoots have evolved beyond family nostalgia. In a study of the trend for luxury wedding photography across different social classes in Asia, Adrian argues that consumer culture has a global reach, and Asian brides draw inspiration from various popular cultures—whether Hollywood or Bollywood—to showcase their prowess as consumers, presenting themselves as cosmopolitan subjects.[49] The circulation of images has provided female consumer-citizens worldwide with opportunities for self-presentation, self-branding, and self-marketing. Brides now prefer to pose for romantic wedding photographs in special settings, with unique décor in unique locations. My interlocutors often curated this ritual themselves, subsequently sharing their happy, romantic images with the public. What the audience saw was not a timid bride, but a confident woman proudly displaying her romantic relationship and demanding the continuation of her love story.

[47] Interview with Seha, 25 October 2019, Bursa.
[48] Interview with Ayten, 24 October 2019, Bursa.
[49] Adrian, "Geographies of Style," 74.

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Consider twenty-four-year-old Simge's efforts to organize her own engagement and wedding photographs. Despite her financial constraints, Simge deployed the ritual economy of marriage and went to great lengths to achieve her dreams:

> During the preparations, I was constantly browsing wedding-related content on social media and discovered a photographer. I checked out his Instagram and was impressed by the photos and I worked with him. . . . My engagement happened on a very rainy winter's day. I had always wanted to have my photos taken at the Maiden's Tower. Despite the bad weather, I stuck with my plan. We could not get there by boat, but we managed to take some photos from the shore when the rain eased up. I had borrowed a white faux-fur coat from a recently married friend, to keep me warm. . . . For the wedding, I wanted to be out in nature, and we went to the forest in Şile [a leisure district in Istanbul]. It was quite an adventure because traveling that far on the wedding day was risky due to Istanbul's heavy traffic. However, I was super-organized. At 7 a.m. I was at the hairdresser, and they opened early just for me, allowing me to arrive at the wedding venue on time.[50]

Simge's use of "I" in her narrative is significant: although marriage rituals are intended to celebrate the couple's union, they highlight the bride's taste as an individual. It is the bride who determines the quality of the marriage celebrations, thereby certifying her new subjectivity as a newlywed woman. Another key element of the gendered expectations surrounding marriage rituals is illustrated in Simge's emphasis on the meticulous timing of the preparations. Because a photo shoot requires extra care, it is challenging to complete it on the wedding day itself. For this reason, many brides prefer to have their photographs taken a week before or a month after the wedding. Brides who are dissatisfied with their original wedding photographs may also choose to reshoot them later. Nur had decided to delay her wedding photo shoot, feeling that she might not capture the best images amid all the rush of the wedding day:

> I value memories a lot. That is why my wedding photos were very special to me. But I managed my marriage preparations with back-and-forth trips between two cities. My family lives in Manisa [city in the Aegean], so my henna night was there. The next day, we traveled to Istanbul for the wedding. It was hectic. How good could the photo shoot be? We had a week-long honeymoon in Cappadocia. We planned the photo shoots there. We had two days of photo shoots, including a separate balloon shoot. I had photos taken both in my wedding gown and in a short white dress. I was very pleased with the results. Hopefully, if everything goes well, I would love to do something similar abroad for our tenth anniversary.[51]

Nur's account reveals a transformation of the relationship between memories and photographs. Classically, there was a strong connection between experience and representation, and the photograph's function was to capture the moment and its attendant emotions. However, wedding memories have now taken on a manufactured nature. If it applied only to social media influencers or artists, this trend would be easily interpreted as a predictable result of commodification and advertising; but the desire for meticulously curated photographs, unique locations, and special clothing extends beyond those who monetize their own online presence. Like many other young brides, Nur was not an influencer, but she still

[50] Interview with Simge, 19 October 2019, Istanbul.
[51] Interview with Nur, 15 October 2019, Istanbul.

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wished to present a carefully crafted image to the public. The rise of social media has turned ordinary individuals into active agents in the world of appearances. In Goffman's terms, this marks stage four: young brides are increasingly drawn to the influence of social media and the commodified space of wedding rituals.[52] For brides, impression management involves showcasing romantic proposals and stylish wedding photographs. They desire to be a celebrity in their own story, mediating reality to present their life as happy and exciting, as if they were the leading actress in a TV series or the protagonist in a fairy tale.

The final aspect of romanticism I will discuss here is the first dance at the wedding reception. Regardless of class, religion, or ideological alignment, all my interlocutors closely associated romance with Western dance forms, particularly the waltz. As observed above, grooms will generally do anything in their power to make their brides happy. However, many grooms feel uncomfortable with the waltz, which is somewhat alien to their cultural repertoire, despite the early Republican elite's efforts to promote it.[53] For instance, my middle-class interlocutor Seha said her husband had agreed to practice the waltz solely to avoid disappointing her. Şemsa, a bride featured on a YouTube wedding channel, described the first dance at her wedding reception, held in a luxury hotel with nearly eight hundred guests:

> I wanted to do a waltz. We took dancing lessons [from a well-known dance instructor for upper-class brides]. My husband was skeptical, saying: "I am from Gümüşhane [a city in the Black Sea region]. What is a waltz?" [Laughing.] I replied, I am from Adana [a southern Turkish city famous for its traditional dances], so what?" We danced the waltz to André Rieu's famous waltz music.[54]

Turkish brides' imaginaries of romance are arguably based on an imitation of Western consumer culture. This is evident in the details not just of marriage proposals and wedding photographs, but also in the preference for the waltz, a dance associated with the swan-like elegance of the traditional Western fairy tale of Cinderella. However, my informants appropriated images and tastes from the global consumer market selectively, in ways that aligned with their local cultural context. For example, Şemsa further noted that her husband had arranged for a special dance group to perform the *halay*, a traditional Turkish dance, with his male friends. Another informant from an Islamic bourgeois background stated that she had had to convince her husband, who was born in the northern coastal city of Giresun, to dance the waltz. There was a negotiation between the couple, and the groom hired a dance team to perform the *horon* afterward, a folk dance popular in the Black Sea region.

Marriage-related rituals that bear influences from various cultures have become a defining feature of Turkey's growing marriage industry. For example, a feature of henna nights is that brides go through numerous costume changes throughout the event (Figs. 6, 7, 8).[55] They first wear Ottoman-inspired kaftans, then change into an Indian sari, and later wear a minidress for the after-party. This fusion of cultures seeks to make the marriage festivities unforgettable, almost theatrical—a trend that has become particularly extravagant among the bourgeoisie. Nuran made a notable observation:

[52] Goffman, *Presentation of Self.*

[53] Ayşe Saktanber, *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Zafer Toprak, *Darwin'den Dersim'e: Cumhuriyet ve Antropoloji* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2012).

[54] Aysun Germi, host, "Yeni Gelin Ev Gezmesi 2," YouTube video, 4 November 2018, 10:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzQdp6h5lHM&t=1351s.

[55] Kütük-Kuriş, "Ritual Economy of Marriage."

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Figure 6. A Turkish celebrity, similar to many brides in Turkey, changes multiple outfits during her henna night—starting with a modern nightgown, then wearing an Ottoman-inspired kaftan, and concluding the night in a sari. November 2018, Istanbul. Photograph courtesy of Ertan, interlocutor.



Figure 7. The same bride in an Ottoman-inspired kaftan during the traditional henna ceremony. November 2018, Istanbul. Photograph courtesy of Ertan, interlocutor.

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Figure 8. The same bride in a sari. November 2018, Istanbul. Photograph courtesy of Ertan, interlocutor.

> Recently, weddings have turned into opulent shows. The focus has shifted to impressing guests with one spectacle after another—whether it's a fire dance, acrobats, folk dance groups, or live music. We often find ourselves struggling to fit all these performances into the schedule. I question whether the goal here is to celebrate the couple's union and share their happiness or to watch a show similar to *Anadolu Ateşi* (Sultans of the Dance, a famous production blending traditional and contemporary Turkish dance) at Zorlu Performing Arts Center [Istanbul].[56]

Nuran's statement is significant in several ways. First, it highlights the formation of young brides' consumerist subjectivities as they navigate the market while balancing economic and cultural considerations. Here, the quest for uniqueness cannot be reduced to personal happiness. By actively mediating reality in marriage rituals, brides seek public recognition as deserving of something special, exhibiting their cosmopolitan and consumerist expertise and taste in the process. Bridal desire also indicates a close relationship between marriage rituals and the construction of social prestige. As we will now see, marriage rituals provide brides and their families with opportunities to establish social status and attain social distinction.[57]

Marriage Spectacle As a Path to Social Prestige

Marriage rituals that evoke fairy tales or TV soaps also are marked by their ability to portray the socioeconomic status of the young couple and their families to the public. For brides who have achieved economic independence through education and career opportunities, these

[56] Interview with Nuran, 16 October 2019, Istanbul.
[57] Bourdieu, *Distinction.*

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glamorous rituals may symbolize personal success and upward social mobility. For upper-class brides, on the other hand, the rituals reinforce their already distinct social status. Drawing from Bourdieu's concept of social distinction, I argue that lavish expenditure on marriage preparations is about not only fulfilling women's romantic desire to feel special, but also signaling social status.[58] Twenty-eight-year-old industrial engineer Ayşe's strong desire to hold her engagement ceremony in an elegant restaurant is a good example of how marriage-related spending can be intended to showcase the bride's newly acquired social position:

> In our culture, the girl's family covers the engagement ceremony expenses. I took charge of organizing it. I wanted my relatives to be there to witness the event. I also wanted to offer better hospitality to them, such as a nice meal and drinks. The groom's side were coming from Ankara. I wanted them to enjoy a nice venue too. That's why I booked a restaurant by the Bosporus for a hundred guests. . . . This was kind of a personal mission I had set myself. Being the eldest in a humble family of civil servants, I did not grow up comfortably. I worked hard to finally achieve public status [as a manager in a prestigious retail chain]. My engagement ceremony was indeed a status symbol for me. I earn a good living, and with that, I wanted to create a pleasant memory for both families.[59]

My lower- and middle-class informants exhibited their newly acquired social status through material and stylistic choices regarding attire, venue, décor, music, food, or gifts during marriage celebrations. Nur similarly expressed pride at having organized her henna night with all the grandeur of a wedding. For Nur, the henna night was not only a celebration of her success in starting a new life in Istanbul, but also a symbol of her mother's achievement in raising her alone:

> I had always dreamed of a countryside wedding. But given our budget, it would have been challenging to have it in Istanbul. So, I turned my henna night in Manisa into a wedding-like event. I made my first entrance in a wedding gown. Later, I changed into a kaftan during the henna application ritual. That way, my elderly relatives who could not come to the wedding in Istanbul also got to see me in a white wedding dress, graceful as a swan. It was a deeply emotional moment in my life.[60]

Simge's account of her henna night mirrors middle-class Nur's experience. The daughter of a janitor and a cleaning lady, Simge was on a limited budget, but nonetheless she proudly described her ability to incorporate various items and motifs into her marriage preparations. As well as the photo shoots discussed above, she listed the "right" engagement and wedding gowns—which she found in Sultanbeyli, a lower-class district of Istanbul—and her efforts to hold marriage-related ceremonies in small wedding venues in Istanbul's lower-class neighborhoods. But the highlight of her story was her henna night, which she had organized with a special events company in her village near Çorum, a city on Turkey's north coast:

> I was the first bride in my village to have a henna night run by an event company. . . . Imagine a traditional village wedding, held in the village square. The difference was

[58] Ibid.
[59] Interview with Ayşe, 14 October 2019, Istanbul.
[60] Interview with Nur, 15 October 2019, Istanbul.

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> that the event company provided the throne for me and my husband to sit on. On arrival at the square, a red carpet was rolled out as I stepped out of the car. I first wore my wedding gown, then changed into a *bindallı* [traditional Turkish wedding attire]. The women in my family spent three nights preparing the gifts and food offerings. My mother also made small gift bundles for all the groom's relatives, both close and distant. It was a gratifying experience. Guests were both impressed and surprised by the details.[61]

Simge's integration of urban and market-friendly elements into a village ceremony was not only about her wish to feel unique. The specificities of her henna night—throne, red carpet, gifts—were also important symbols of her newly attained social status in the eyes of the village community. This status had been made possible by her family's move to Istanbul when she was a small girl and her opportunity to pursue a university education. In short, Simge's pride was deeply tied to her social mobility.

Brides' accounts also indicate that soap opera–style marriage rituals involve negotiations that include not only the couple but also their parents. This is largely due to the societal nature of marriage celebrations, particularly engagements, henna nights, and weddings. As well as being symbols of love and romance between the couple, these rituals are designed to meet the sociocultural expectations of their parents, who are heavily influenced by their relatives and social circles. In Bourdieu's terms, marriage rituals are fashioned to address norms, performances, and ideas of the family's habitus, reflecting both the bride's and the parents' reputation and social status.[62] Because the desires and expectations of brides and parents do not always align, my informants often found themselves negotiating with both their own parents and the groom's family during the marriage preparation process. For parents, lavish spending is a way to build prestige (for upwardly mobile classes) or display it (for upper classes). Therefore, extravagance is not considered wasteful. Indeed, the literature on changing marriage rituals in MENA and its diasporas confirms the existence of this reputational dynamic beyond Turkey.[63]

From the perspective of the ritual economy of marriage, extravagant rituals are important socialization opportunities for (re)affirming and consolidating the family's socioeconomic status. Shaped by the social expectations of habitus, and part of symbolic capital, these performances can spark tensions between brides and families. Yasemin, a thirty-two year-old informant, described her disagreements with her in-laws concerning the wedding:

> My mother-in-law wanted a big wedding, but I thought it was pointless to use our budget for that. It is more important to spend our money on essentials and invest in our future. So, we opted for a *nikah* at the municipal office. She was disappointed, of course, saying that since she had attended other people's weddings, she would feel embarrassed if she did not host a similar event. I understand her, but she was not able to provide us with any financial support. So, why should we, as young people, incur such expense?[64]

Yasemin offered a distinctive perspective on social expectations: because the families were unable to offer financial help, she chose to follow the rational-choice model, prioritizing functionality over extravagance and materialism. However, other interlocutors placed great

[61] Interview with Simge, 19 October 2019, Istanbul.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ikran Eum, "Consumerism and Negotiations for Marriage among the Middle- and Upper-Class Muslims in Cairo," *International Area Review* 7, no. 2 (2004): 171–86; Singerman, "Economic Imperatives"; Kochuyt, "Making Money, Marking Identities"; Kaplan, "Food and Class Distinction"; Woźniak-Bobińska, "Big Fat Assyrian/Syriac Weddings"; Allouche, "Love, Lebanese Style."

[64] Interview with Yasemin, 28 October 2019, Istanbul.

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importance on grand celebrations, often relying on their family's financial support to do so. In these instances, a bride's desires and expectations might conflict with those of her parents, with the bride needing to manage her parents' desire for respectability. For instance, twenty-four-year-old upper-class Serap excitedly described how active she had been during her marriage preparations. Unlike many of my other interlocutors, she had curated her own henna night instead of handing it over to an events company. She aimed to stand out, to create social distinction consistent with her bourgeois status. For example, she arranged a unique dance session with her friends for the henna night rather than hiring professional dancers as many brides do. However, she was unable to exercise the same level of control over her wedding:

> Some aspects of the wedding didn't fully make me happy, but I didn't want to upset my father-in-law, so I didn't get too involved in the preparations. The wedding was held at a beautiful hotel overlooking the Princes' Islands. But the event was held in the garden. It is challenging to light a garden well in the dark, and outdoor factors like the wind also affected the setting. In a ballroom, we could have decorated it better. I could have shone as the bride. However, my father-in-law specifically requested the garden setting, and I didn't want to contradict him. The wedding is somewhat a family affair. What I did, I chose to devote all my energy to my henna night.[65]

Serap's experience is revealing of situations in which brides find it difficult to negotiate with the patriarch of a bourgeois family. However, such backstage (in Goffman's sense) compromises are not limited to interactions between the bride and the groom's family.[66] Brides face similar challenges within their own families. For example, Hale's father perceived her wedding as a reflection of the family's reputation, and this caused her stress:

> Compared with my husband, I come from a wealthier background. However, my parents were always very cautious about this, and they didn't place any significant demands on my husband. . . . For example, I hoped my father would support us in moving to a larger house rather than the small apartment my husband had. But my father told me: "Marriage was your decision, so you need to learn to live according to your new standards as a couple." But the situation changed when it came to the wedding. . . . Traditionally the groom's side is responsible for covering the wedding expenses, which can be stressful for the bride's family, especially when, as with my father, the guest list is very large. My father had a list of about six hundred colleagues—can you imagine? I insisted that he reduce the list, since I didn't know these people. But my father replied: "It doesn't work that way." Being well regarded in his professional circle, he felt it would be rude to invite some and not others. I was stressed. . . . Behind my back, my father called my father-in-law and convinced him to cover part of the wedding expenses. In the end, we had a wedding with around twelve hundred guests, and my father covered the costs for his network.[67]

Brides' narratives about henna nights and weddings reveal that the consumption involved in these rituals extends beyond romantic aspirations and includes personal imaginaries of material success (for my lower and middle-class informants) and familial negotiations (for upper-class informants). Consequently, marriage-related rituals should not be seen merely as emblematic of romance and the couple's happiness, or as moments when brides feel like princesses. Brides' efforts to present their lives as soap operas also provide opportunities for them and their families to display and cement the family's social status.

[65] Interview with Serap, 29 October 2019, Istanbul.
[66] Goffman, *Presentation of Self*.
[67] Interview with Hale, 17 October 2019, Istanbul.

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Bridal Performances: Staging Romance and Distinction, Negotiating Social Stakes

In this article I have examined the recent transformation of marriage rituals in Turkey and their complex functions for young women's subject formation. Although a strong gender-specific lens has been turned on Turkey's consumer culture since the 1980s, there is a lack of nuanced research on how young Turkish women engage with consumerism during marriage preparations, and how their consumerist performances shape their individual self-making. This article has addressed that gap, arguing that brides aspire to be princesses in their own fairy tale, while simultaneously striving to maintain class boundaries. Put differently, bridal performances are manifestations of neoliberal consumerist subjectivity, simultaneously preserving and reinforcing existing class divisions.

I have introduced the ritual economy of marriage approach as an alternative to the classical rational-choice model. This approach has revealed that brides' expectations concerning marriage celebrations are not passively inherited from tradition or dictated by the market, but are shaped by complex negotiations with cultural norms, media imagery, and global consumer trends. Rather than viewing young women as either victims of consumerism or fully autonomous individuals, I demonstrate that they dynamically engage with, adapt, and reinterpret the very structures that influence their aspirations, without necessarily subverting them.

This negotiation is particularly evident among upper-class brides (like Serap), who develop creative strategies and new consumerist practices to maintain class boundaries through their marriage expenditure. For upper-class brides, the ability to go beyond standard market offerings and make more creative expressions is a mark of distinction. However, the desire to feel unique and special is not exclusive to bourgeois female subjectivities. For brides with fewer financial resources (such as Simge), the marriage rituals themselves constitute a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to feel unique, like a character in a fairy tale. Regardless of socioeconomic status, all brides seek to showcase their individual taste and upward social mobility. In other words, brides share a common motivation to invest emotionally and financially in their marriage preparations. Through photographs and other material symbols, they manufacture images and prosperous realities that reflect the romantic ideals seen in popular culture. These similarities, I have argued, reveal that the imaginary world of young Turkish women—a world built around images of romantic love and mechanisms of social distinction—constitutes a new female subjectivity based on neoliberal individualism and cosmopolitan consumerism.

In conclusion, this article contributes to the gender scholarship on the MENA region by examining how young women consume romantic imaginaries that are intimately tied to the institution of marriage. I have demonstrated that bridal practices entail active negotiation and creative performance within broader socioeconomic and cultural structures. However, some questions about bridal performativity remain. Bridal fantasies often gain social legitimacy, in part because marriage continues to be seen as a normative life path for women. Future research might explore how these performances are received after marriage. Are they sustained, or do they generate conflict with spouses or extended families? How does women's agency and strategic capacity evolve after marriage? Does the emotional and symbolic investment in being a "bride" transform into new modes of selfhood as a "wife"? And what might this shift reveal about the limits of postmarital agency?

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