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## **Westernized Weddings in Turkey**

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## Introduction

All over the world, a wedding is understood as a social event that carries much significance for both the newlywed couple and the entire society. Particularly, Western-style weddings are famously known as being very elegant, well-planned, extravagant events featuring the brides in signature white dresses. The main focus of this article is to analyze the differences between the wedding industry in the United States and Turkey. The data for the consumer market in the United States was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over the telephone with a recent bride and a soon to be married couple. The informants came from the upper-middle class and they provided us with information about planning a wedding, the industry language, and some particularities of the industry. Additionally, we carried out a survey for brides-to-be from the middle class, which mainly concerned the budget for a wedding; we also visited a bridal shop from Richmond and several websites related to wedding planning. We started an account on one of the most popular online wedding magazines, where mostly brides share their experiences and offer advice. The secondary data research for Turkey consisted of three taped interviews with a Turkish professor who got married there and two students who recently participated in Turkish wedding ceremonies. Online research consisted of wedding videos on YouTube and the website of the TV channel DüğünTV that shows weddings of eager couples and steps from the entire process of planning. Moreover, the study relies on previous research on the development of lavish Western weddings.

## Weddings in the US

*“The ‘traditional’ or lavish wedding denotes a religious setting, a bride dressed in a long, white gown, a multi-tiered white cake, abundant flowers, attendants in matching finery, a reception, and a honeymoon and is the dominant form in much of global culture today.”<sup>1</sup>*

Historically, Western weddings were not always as lavish. In some households, “Couples made reciprocal promises of marriage and then moved in together, declaring themselves married.”<sup>2</sup> Small and informal marriage ceremonies became much less popular in the late nineteenth century when elite Victorian weddings grew. Professionals started to become more involved in the wedding market replacing tasks typically completed by the female friends and relatives of the newly wedded couple. Nowadays, wedding planning is a recognized profession with more than 10,000 wedding planning businesses in the U.S., which is a result of weddings becoming similar to real shows and spectacles<sup>3</sup>. Wedding planners are relevant for our study because they alter the behavior of the consumers, imposing their own opinions and ideas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams – The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, page 3;

<sup>2</sup> Vicki Howard, *Brides, Inc: American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006, page 10;

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Blakely, *Busy Brides and the Business of Family Life : The Wedding-Planning Industry and the Commodity Frontier*, Journal of Family Issues 2008 29: 639, Sage Publications; Boden, S. (2003), *Consumerism, romance and the wedding experience*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Volume 2, Number 1, 2011

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The consumers are notably the couples that are engaged and about to get married. The bride and groom both contribute to the consumer aspect when paying for the various things needed for a wedding. Consumer segmentation in the wedding industry classifies these consumers in a group that share similar characteristics and language. Websites, such as *theknot.com*, have created online communities as a means for couples to come together to communicate with one another.

One interesting aspect is that women usually represent the primary target group. Apparently, “love and consumption share another common bond; both are considered primarily to be the domains of women.”<sup>5</sup> In psychographic terms, the professional workers portray their consumers as “busy brides” as most women work while they plan their weddings.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, women are most interested in having everything. As one of the brides we interviewed said, “you only do this once” when personalizing the ceremony. They also identify with the big white wedding dress; Table One shows that some brides are willing to spend over one average paycheck for their dresses.

In recent statistics in the US, the median age to get married in 2007 was about 28-years-old for men and about 26-years-old for women.<sup>7</sup> However, with no set age on when to get married, people can marry as early as legally permitted or as old as when they reach their seventies. In modern day culture, more people do tend to finish their education first and begin to establish a career before wanting to get married. It is also notable that most elder people prefer a small wedding with close relatives as opposed to the lavish weddings dreamt by younger people. One of the respondents, Adam Marquardt, 40 years, considered that bringing all the family together and having a small reunion is the best way to celebrate the moment. His fiancé, 38 years, told us that when she was in her twenties she had other ideas about her wedding, but now she just wants something simple and elegant.

According to *theweddingreport.com*, the weddings that take place in the US have increased over the years but eventually have become relatively stable with about two million weddings per year. Throughout the years, the average cost of weddings have also increased but

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Debord, G. (1995), *The society of the spectacle*, New York: Zone Books; Wallace, C. M. (2004), *All dressed in white: The irresistible rise of the American wedding*, New York: Penguin Books.

<sup>4</sup> Marisa Corrado, *Teaching Wedding Rules : How Bridal Workers Negotiate Control Over their Customers*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 2002 31: 33, Sage Publication

<sup>5</sup> Cele C. Otnes, and Elizabeth H Pleck. *Cinderella Dreams – The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, page 11;

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Blakely, *Busy Brides and the Business of Family Life : The Wedding-Planning Industry and the Commodity Frontier*, *Journal of Family Issues* 2008 29: 639, Sage Publications

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Jayson, *Sooner vs. Later: Is There an Ideal age for First Marriage?*, 11/9/2008, USA Today, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-11-09-delayed-marriage\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-11-09-delayed-marriage_N.htm), last accessed on October 28, 2010

then decreased after 2007 because of the economy. However, in the first half of 2010 the average cost of a wedding increased 21.9% from \$19,581 to \$23,867.<sup>8</sup>

Because weddings can cost many thousands, the parents of couples also become a part of the consumer segment as they help pay for their children’s special day. Financial status and the personalities of couples certainly are factors that determine how lavish weddings can be. In one end of the spectrum, couples can choose to have a casual, low-key wedding that they do not want to spend much on or even elope in one of the many small wedding chapels from Las Vegas. In the opposite end of the spectrum, wealthy couples can have extravagant weddings that can cost in the millions.

The term wedding industry actually refers to small enterprises, independent and local vendors, so the potential consumers do not normally have previous brand loyalty.<sup>9</sup> They make their decisions by word of mouth and take into much consideration the different categories of wedding expenses when budgeting their money: attire and accessories, beauty, health and spa, entertainment, flowers and decorations, gifts and favors, invitations, jewelry, photography and video, a wedding planner, transportation, and venue and catering. Over the years, there have been gradual wedding changes in consumer trends that businesses are taking note of. Weddings are certainly becoming more creative and personalized.

As couples are becoming more frugal with their spending, some businesses are noticing a decline in demand for their services. For example, although couples want their special day to be remembered through photography, they are turning more to affordable, amateur photographers. Also, the desire for smaller guest lists reduces additional costs such as invitations and food. Nevertheless, the wedding industry overall gains much profit from this particular consumer segment of engaged couples.

**Table 1: Consumer Survey Results**

		Amanda Lederman	Patricia Nolan	Christina Brooks	Emily Nash
Dress Style					
	Long	X	x		x
	Short			x	
	Strapless		x		x
	Beaded	X			
	Ball gown/full skirt	X			
	Sleath/mermaid silhouette		x		x
Dress price					
	Less than one paycheck				

<sup>8</sup> Average cost of a wedding increases 21.9% for Q1-Q2 2010, <http://theweddingreport.com/wmdb/index.cfm?action=facts.viewreport&id=33CE511D-3048-6387-A217D838919DFD70>, last accessed on October 28, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Marisa Corrado, *Teaching Wedding Rules: How Bridal Workers Negotiate Control Over their Customers*, Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 2002 31: 33, Sage Publication

	About one paycheck		x	x	
	More than one paycheck	X			x
Describe Bridesmaid dress					
	Description	Dark blue strapless	pink	black	green
Where were you married					
	Church/synagogue		x	x	
	Reception Hall	X			x
	Other				
Wedding Reception					
	home				
	Reception Hall	X	x		x
	restaurant			x	
How long did you plan					
	Less than six months			x	
	About than one year		x		
	More than one year	X			x
Did you use wedding planner					
	yes				x
	no	X	x	x	
How much did your wedding cost					
	Less than half year's salary				
	About half year's salary	X		x	
	More than half year's salary		x		x
Did you go on a honeymoon					
	yes	X		x	x
	no		x		
Where did you go					
		Hawaii	Had to work	Costa Rica	Hawaii
What was the most common gift you received					
	cash		x	x	x
	housewares	X			

	other				
Were there any special traditions at your wedding?					
	list	None	Wore mother's viel	Sister was maid of honor	Brother gave her away-dad has passed away
Any advice for future planners?					
	list	"Plan early"	"Don't get stressed"	"Remember it's your day"	"Don't do it --Just kidding"

### Weddings in Turkey

*“There are a variety of countries, but only one civilization. In order for a nation to advance, it is necessary that it join this civilization. All our efforts are directed toward the building of a modern, therefore Western, state in Turkey. What nation is there that desires to become a part of civilization, but does not tend toward the West?”*

This is how Mustafa Kemal, also known as “Atatürk”, understood the concept of modern in 1923 when he founded the Republic of Turkey. Civilization, modernity, and the West, were all seen as one<sup>10</sup> – the ideal to which Turkey should tend to and which remains to this day the direction which the country is following as Turkey’s longtime aspiration is joining the European Union. This particularity makes Turkey very interesting to analyze in respect to the Western weddings consumption model.

Turkey is a Muslim country since 99% of the population is Muslim.<sup>11</sup> However, as a consequence of the founding principles Turkey is a secular democracy. The government does not identify itself with Islam and is trying to reduce the influence of religion from all the facets of society. One example is the 1982 ban against headscarves worn for religious purposes in all universities, both public and private, as well as in government officials.<sup>12</sup> The veil is probably the most obvious thing that makes Islam different from the West.<sup>13</sup> This is a very important aspect of Turkish weddings and what women wear on the wedding day.

<sup>10</sup> Alev Çınar, *Modernity, Islam, and secularism in Turkey : bodies, places, and time*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c2005; page 5;

<sup>11</sup> Background Note: Turkey, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3432.htm>, last accessed on October 28, 2010

<sup>12</sup> Valorie K. Vojodik, *Politics of the headscarf in Turkey: Masculinities, Feminism, and the Construction of Collective Identities* (property of Harvard Law School Journals); Ayje Saktanber & Gül Çorbacıoğlu, *Veiling and Headscarf-Skepticism in Turkey*

<sup>13</sup> Nilüfer Göle, *Civilization and veiling*, The University of Michigan Press; page 1;

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A prior study on the relationship between Islamic and secular modernity in Turkey provides an anecdote about a wedding ceremony held at an officials' club. Since the military is a symbol of the modern secular republic, they will not permit anyone to enter with anything that reminds of Islam: "Although minutes pass and the musicians seem to be ready, the music does not start. A uniformed petty officer is arguing with a man whose wife is standing near him, her headscarf tied in the same way as the two elderly women. 'Why? It's not covering all of her hair, like those women over there...' The officer responds that his wife is too young to be allowed to wear a headscarf on her head, no matter how she ties it. With this explanation I learn the age limit included in the dress code set by the military: only women above 60 are permitted to wear a headscarf on their heads and in a certain style."<sup>14</sup>

This separation inside Turkey can be found all over the country, in rural, but also urban areas. More than 70% of Turkey's population lives in urban areas that combine Western lifestyles with more traditional ways of life.<sup>15</sup> However, more generally, the West part of Turkey is considered more urbanized, modernized, and Westernized, whereas the East is somehow less developed, poorer, and more conservative.

This amazing diversity influences significantly the way wedding ceremonies take place in Turkey. A wedding holds a very important value, since family remains the basis of Turkish society.<sup>16</sup> Even if arranged marriages are no longer a common affair, in more conservative places, the families of the couples have to give their consent. Nowadays, the whole wedding process begins with the offering of the engagement ring, which is a result of the Western influence, especially through magazines, and soap operas. Every future bride now expects an impressive diamond ring as one of the respondents confessed: "When my brother decided to give his girlfriend a diamond ring, I was shocked: a girlfriend, not even fiancée? I mean they are going to get married eventually... This is a huge difference from ten years ago when people did not expect a diamond ring when they got married, just a simple wedding band".

Because of the culture, one can plan a wedding in Turkey in a very short time. Nevertheless, a few months or even a year is often better for those who want an organized wedding. Somehow expected, summer is the most hectic time to have a wedding as Gokce Simsek advised: "If you are going to marry during the summer, you should book it [the place] in advance".

Although wedding festivities traditionally lasted for seven days, they now last one to three days. As the religious ceremony is not officially recognized, the couple can have only the official one when they sign the papers. In recent years, Turks have tried to personalize their official weddings by exchanging vows, imitating the Western pattern. Actually, the whole concept of a romantic and lavish wedding is becoming more and more appealing, with pigeons,

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<sup>14</sup> Mahiye Seçil Dağtaş, *Bodily Transgression: Conflicting Spaces and Gendered Boundaries of Modernity and Islam in Contemporary Turkey*, Anthropology of the Middle East; Sep2009, Vol. 4 Issue 2, p1-13, 13p

<sup>15</sup> Background Note: Turkey, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3432.htm>, last accessed on October 28, 2010

<sup>16</sup> Sean Sheehan, Turkey, Benchmark Books, Marshall Cavendish, New York; page 67;

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fireworks, orchestra music, vows, as one of the respondents explained: "...they want to have everything".

In most cases, the ceremony takes place in a hotel ballroom. In rural areas it can be at the family's house, in the garden. For people who cannot afford a reception, the town hall provides places where just the official ceremony can be conducted. Even though in the U.S. eloping has increased in popularity, this is not very common in Turkey. Weddings there are seen as that special moment to be shared with the families and even the entire community, as one respondent summed up: "In Turkey everyone knows each other". Therefore, the receptions can get very crowded. Dr. Grove had four hundred guests and that was not considered very big. One consequence is that meals will not be served during the ceremony, just "cookies and juice...cookies and Coke". However, since weddings are seen as occasions to show off the status of the newlyweds and their families, meals are offered more often by the middle income class too, not only by the high income class.

The dance is probably the most important part of the ceremony, especially if there is no food: "We have Western music and the traditional music. It is a lot of belly dancing! In the middle class they have their own version: it is very loud". The style has definitely been altered as seen on YouTube videos: from the first dance on Enrique Iglesias's "Mentiroso" or a wedding dance routine to impress the guests.

During the ceremony there is a particular moment when the guests stand in a line and give their gifts to the bride and groom. Dr. Nuray Grove remembered receiving vacuum cleaners or very ugly gifts, but said "gold and money are actually expected. It is almost like a social structure to help the couple to start their new life. And it is the most fun part of the wedding. Just to watch people and talk about who is giving what".

The wedding day in Turkey remains that one day when everything has to be perfect, so consumers spend a lot of money. A recent bridesmaid said: "People spend too much money on weddings. Even the middle class, because it happens only once...it should be the best". Traditionally, the groom's family has to pay for all the expenses, but couples are starting to pay for themselves, especially if the woman works too. During the whole preparation process, the couple makes the decisions together. According to all the respondents, there is no industry for wedding planners for the middle class, which is somehow due to the fact that families play an important part in the organization of the wedding.

Obviously, the wedding dress is essential for every future bride. The big white Western wedding dress is customary all over Turkey: "It is hard to find a bride not dressed in white". Even in rural areas, where the guests do not wear elegant clothes, the bride will have the white gown. Although there is not as much stress over the wedding preparation as there is in the U.S., women do have their dreams of a fairy tale wedding. The young respondents felt that: "Women can reflect their childhood dreams through the dress but they try to stay within the budget." The market is however divided, as there are bridal shops that only offer designs for more conservative people: the dresses are not strapless or sleeveless and they have head coverings. For men it is generally easier to choose as they now wear the traditional tux. In addition, having bridesmaids is not common in a Turkish wedding. However, one of our respondents had actually



been a bridesmaid during a recent wedding, which proves that weddings in Turkey are truly becoming more Westernized.

### Conclusions

Lavish Western-style weddings are growing in popularity. Marriage is still a very common practice and almost 90% of adults will marry at least once in their lifetime.<sup>17</sup> In Western cultures, marriage has many rewards socially, legally, and financially. With less arranged marriages taking place around the world, Westernized weddings are becoming increasingly more dominant. The Turkish consumer has definitely adopted the U.S. behavior and has tried to blend it with the existing traditions. They are continuously trying to keep up with the U.S. model, so that weddings in Turkey are becoming more modernized and Westernized.

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<sup>17</sup> Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams – The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.