



## Exploring Sociology of Consumption of Wedding Dress Rentals in Thailand

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**Introduction:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the sociology of consumption in Thai consumers' renting decisions within Engel-Kollat-Blackwell's five-step decision-making process (EKB model hereafter). Specifically, the study focused on how Thai societal characteristics (the sociology of consumption of Thai consumers) influenced their decision-making processes. Due to the success of apparel renting businesses in the U.S., such as Rent the Runway's sales of USD 120 million in 2016 (Privco, 2016), a study of wedding dress rental behavior is useful to our understanding of the structure of renting decisions and how wedding dress rental decisions among Thais align or deviate with the EKB model and their societal characteristics.

**Literature Review:** Renting allows for the use of the product for a specific time in exchange for a fee and the returning of the product (Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010) and Thai consumers utilize renting to fulfil wedding dress needs. To understand societal characteristics that influence Thais' renting decisions, Nicosia and Mayer's (1967) sociology of consumption was reviewed because the framework provides a better understanding on social and cultural contexts of how consumers behave in the decision-making process. They proposed that cultural values, social institutions and their norms, and consumption activities are underlying motives that shape one's consumption. They defined cultural value as widely held beliefs that impact activities while social institutions as "a set of specific activities performed by specific people in specific places through time" (Nicosia & Mayer, 1967, p. 67). Consumption activities are also defined as acquiring, using, and disposing behavior in relation to decision-making process (Nicosia & Mayer, 1967). It is valuable to investigate sociology of consumption along with the EKB model (problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation) in the context of wedding dress renting because consumers often possess limited knowledge and skills about the product; therefore, societal characteristics, often used as decision rules, might dominate their decisions (Erasmus et al., 2001).

**Method:** In-depth interview and on-site observation methods were employed to gain Thai consumer experiences in wedding dress renting and consumption. After IRB approval, the participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that enough data from the right participants was obtained (Mason, 1996). Interviews in neutral settings were conducted and analyzed simultaneously until saturation was achieved with the six participants. The researchers attended seven wedding ceremonies in Thailand, participating as audience members in order to gain a close familiarity with processes and culture surrounding of the wedding ceremonies. Data were transcribed and translated from Thai to English. Patterns in the meaning of data that emerged were interpreted relative to the tenets of the proposed concepts.

**Results and Discussion:** Four themes emerged, reflecting the components of the EKB model and underlying values and norms embedded in consumption activities. The first theme signified the need recognition stage. Data showed that Thai couples' decision to rent a wedding dress was

influenced by subjective norms relative to the benefits of pre-wedding packages imposed by wedding institutions (e.g., wedding organizers, bridal stores), suggesting that participants conformed and recognized advantages of the inclusive package. The second theme captured information search and alternative evaluation stages. Data revealed that approval of others can serve as decision rules to search and evaluate options (Erasmus et al., 2001). In turn, the participants complied with subjective norms and sought social acceptance when making decision to rent. The finding corresponds with the Thai cultural value that socially accepted decisions tend to be inoffensive and pleasant (Komin, 1990). The stage of renting decision emerged as the third theme in terms of the value of 'propriety and consideration of place and time' known in Thailand as 'Ka-La-Thea-Sa' and was followed by the participants when deciding on a dress rental. In one example, participant B explains: "*I wore a long-sleeves dress because I want to look modest and refine for the church ceremony. The ceremony dress represents my respect for the venue and the church ceremony*", suggesting that the norms relative to respect, appropriateness, and decency were translated from such Thai value. The final theme reflects post-renting evaluation. Data showed that having a functioning and appropriate wedding dress to present at the wedding is a means to increase social 'front' status and to signify quality of life (Komin, 1990), rather than for a sentimental purpose. For example, participant F explains "*I didn't feel emotional with the dress while I was wearing it. I only need the gown for the event and to be photographed. Keeping the photographs of me in the dress was more meaningful...than keeping the dress*", showing that it is more important to have a wedding dress to use than to keep because Thai people value material possessions as decorative external labels and prestigious symbols that can validate their success and gain respect (Komin, 1990).

**Conclusion:** This study offers advocacy for the use of sociology of consumption along with the EKB model in non-western culture research. While results support the five-step decision process within renting decisions, the current study offers the vital use of sociology of consumption to reflect the underlying factors involved in wedding dress renting context. Results offer insights that help marketers to promote renting of good quality wedding gowns which, in turn, could protect U.S. wedding dress designers and retailers from the growing threat of lower cost and counterfeit bridal gowns from overseas.

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