

**DRIVERS AND IMPACTS OF COMMODIFICATION OF WEDDING: A CASE STUDY
OF LILONGWE CITY, MALAWI**

MSc THESIS IN TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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MZUZU UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER, 2025

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OF LILONGWE CITY, MALAWI**

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**ATHESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES,
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MZUZU UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER, 2025

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis titled, “*Drivers and impacts of commodification of wedding: a case study of Lilongwe city, Malawi*” has been written by myself and is a record of my research work. All citations, references, and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Science (MSc) in Transformative Community Development at Mzuzu University. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Student Name

Date

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I, the undersigned, certify that this thesis is a result of the author's own work, and that to the best of my knowledge, it has not been submitted for any other academic qualification within the Mzuzu University or elsewhere. The thesis is acceptable in form and content, and that satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by the thesis was demonstrated by the candidate through an oral examination held on:



Sign ...

Date...18/12/2025

Prof. Mavuto Tembo (PhD)

Major supervisor

DEDICATION

To my dearest Mpenzi Wangu, Chifundo Ngoma, my partner in life and in research. Your love, patience, and belief in me have been the driving force behind this work. Thank you for being my constant source of inspiration, for all the support that its details no any amount of written space can contain. Thank you for being my rock, my inspiration, and my guiding light. This work is dedicated to you with all my heart.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

KI	Key Informant
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
MWK	Malawian Kwacha
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
MC	Master of Ceremonies
DJ	Disc Jockey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
ABSTRACT	xiv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.3 Study objectives	2
1.3.1 Main objective	2
1.3.2 Specific objectives	2
1.3.3 Research questions/ Hypotheses	3
1.4 Justification of the study	3
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 Introduction	4
2.2 The Global Wedding Industry and Value Chain	4
2.3 Deconstructing the Wedding Value Chain: Impacts at Each Stage	6

2.3.1 The Engagement Stage	6
2.3.2 Planning and Pre-Wedding Events	7
2.3.3 Attire and Aesthetics	7
2.3.4 Venue, Catering, and Decor	8
2.3.5 Photography, Videography, and Digital Documentation	8
2.3.6 The Wedding Day Coordination and Post-Wedding Services	8
2.4 The Practice of Mahar in Muslim Weddings: Tradition, Commodification, and Impact	9
2.4.1 Theological and Legal Foundations of Mahar.....	9
2.4.2 The Evolution and Commodification of Mahar	9
2.4.3 Psychosocial and Economic Impacts of Modern Mahar Practices.....	10
2.5 Corporate Financialisation of Romance: Old Mutual Malawi's Support to Newlyweds	11
2.5.1 The Product Offering: Bridal Showers and Wedding Plans.....	11
2.5.2 Drivers and Corporate Strategy	12
2.5.3 Impact and Implications	13
2.6 Forces Driving Commodification.....	14
2.7 The African and Malawian Context: A Scantly Charted Territory.....	16
2.8 Synthesis and Identification of the Research Gap.....	22
2.9 Conceptual Framework	23
2.9.1 The Architecture of the Wedding Value Chain	25
2.9.2 Drivers of Wedding Commodification	26
2.9.3 Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification	27

2.9.4 Synthesis and Identification of the Research Gap	28
2.10 Definition of Operational Terms	28
2.10.1 Commodification	28
2.10.2 Wedding Value Chain	29
2.10.3 Conspicuous Consumption	29
2.10.4 Psychosocial Impacts.....	29
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	30
3.0 Introduction	30
3.1 Study Area.....	30
3.2 Research Approach and Design	31
3.3 Study Population	31
3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique	31
3.5 Data Collection Methods.....	33
3.5.1 Personal Interviews/Quantitative Survey	33
3.5.2 Key Informant Interviews.....	33
3.6 Data Analysis	34
3.7 Ethical Consideration	35
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	37
4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sampled Study Participants	37
4.2 Wedding Commodification	39
4.2.1 Prestige	40

4.2.2 Economic Gains.....	41
4.2.3 Cost Affordability.....	41
4.2.4 Percentage Share of Wedding Costs.....	42
4.2.5 Perceived Attitudes, Knowledge and Experience.....	43
4.2.6 Success in Wedding.....	44
4.3 Drivers of Wedding Commodification.....	45
4.3.2 Impacts of Wedding Commodification	46
4.3.3 Social Impacts.....	47
4.3.5 Environmental Impacts.....	48
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	50
5.1 Introduction	50
5.2 Discussion of Key Manifestations of Wedding Commodification	50
5.2.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework	51
5.2.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings	51
5.3 Discussion of the Drivers of Wedding Commodification.....	52
5.3.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework	52
5.3.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings	53
5.4 Discussion of the Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification	53
5.4.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework	54
5.4.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings	54
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	55

6.1 Introduction	55
6.2 Summary of the Findings	55
6.3 Key Manifestations of Commodification in the Wedding Value Chain	56
6.4 Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification on Couples (Specific Objective 3 & Research Question 3)	57
6.4.1 Pre- and Post-Wedding Financial Stress	57
6.4.2 Performance Anxiety and Diminished Enjoyment.....	57
6.5 Impact on Marital Satisfaction	58
6.6 Erosion of Cultural Meaning.....	58
6.7 The Nexus of Driving Forces	58
6.8 The Paradox of Outcomes and Impacts.....	59
6.9 Significance and Implications of the Study.....	60
6.10 Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions.....	60
6.11 Practical and Policy Implications	60
6.12 Limitations of the Study	61
6.12.1 Mitigation Strategies.....	61
6.13 Recommendations for Further Research	61
6.13.1 Expanding the Geographical and Demographic Scope	62
6.13.2 Longitudinal and Causal Investigation	62
6.13.3 Deepening Qualitative Understanding.....	62
6.13.4 Investigating Emerging Digital Dynamics	63
REFERENCES	64

APPENDICES	70
Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter from MZUNIREC.....	70
Appendix 2: Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee Informed Consent Form (English)	71
Appendix 2 b: Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee Informed Consent Form (Chichewa)	
.....	75

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Key Informants.....	34
Table 2: Data Collection Matrix.....	35
Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Sampled.....	37
Table 4: Economic gain.....	41
Table 5: Perceived attitudes, knowledge and experience on wedding (%)......	44
Table 6: Perceived drivers and their extent for wedding commodification.....	46
Table 7: Economic Implications of the wedding commodification.....	47
Table 8: Proportion of respondents.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure1: Conceptual framework.....	25
Figure 2: Proportion of respondents indicating that their wedding ceremony was done successfully.....	39
Figure 3: Proportion of respondents having conducted their wedding ceremony out of prestige.....	40
Figure 4: Proportion of couples feeling comfortable with affording wedding costs (expenses) expressed in percentage terms (%)......	52
Figure 5: Share of key items as wedding expenses (%)	53
Figure 6: Extent to Which married couples Feel More perfect time on their wedding day (%)......	45
Figure 7: Extent of traditional wedding vows and ceremony.....	48
Figure 8: Proportion of respondents options (%)......	49

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the drivers and impacts of wedding commodification in Lilongwe City, Malawi. While extensively documented in Western and Asian contexts, this phenomenon remains critically under-researched in Sub-Saharan Africa. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research gathered data from 250 recently married couples through surveys, supplemented by key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The findings reveal a highly formalized wedding value chain, with couples spending an average of MWK 5.96 million, approximately 80% of their household income on their ceremonies, engaging an average of eight different vendors. The commodification is primarily driven by social pressures, including peer influence (77.78%), family expectations (66.6%), and the pursuit of prestige (62.18%), underpinned by the financial capacity of couples and their families. Despite high reported success rates (95.6%), significant psychosocial impacts were identified, including severe financial strain (65.9%), pre-wedding stress, and the initiation of marital life with debt (38.64%). A critical finding was a widespread emotional disconnection, with a majority of couples reporting a lack of love for their partner, suggesting that the performative and commercial demands of the wedding can overshadow the relational foundation of the marriage. Grounded in Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, this study concludes that wedding commodification in urban Malawi is a potent social strategy for status display, but one that carries profound financial and emotional costs. The research provides valuable insights for couples, policymakers, and community leaders to foster more financially sustainable and personally meaningful wedding practices.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Marriage is one of the pillars of society, which is traditionally a significant change of the life cycle and a new family. In the past, weddings served as social-cultural practice and consolidated community bonds and cultural values (Argyrou, 1996; Lankauskas, 2003). Nevertheless, in the 21st century, there has been a radical shift in the wedding as a rite of passage to an important economic commodity as part of the globalized marriage market (Boden, 2003; Ingraham, 2008). This commodification or the processes of social practices, as well as relations, which gradually grow to be marked with their market and commercial worth and capabilities (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) are of primary interest to this study.

A case in point is the global wedding industry, which has changed into a multi-billion-dollar industry. In case of the example of the United States, the industry was estimated to be worth about 53.4 billion with an average large-scale wedding being approximately 30,000 (CNN, 2013; Ingraham, 2008). This business growth is facilitated by a sophisticated system of sellers of specialised products and services that presents the wedding not as a ceremony, but as an experience that can be consumable like a recreated fairytale (Boden, 2003).

In this consensual formulation, the wedding ritual per se has been re-imagined as a spectacle and a scene of show, usually preceded by practices of rehearsals, in which the consumption becomes the final manifestation of the wedding experience (Amneus, 2010; Hanslip, 2020). One way to theoretically interpret this phenomenon is through a critical theoretical lens of Veblen (1994) theory of conspicuous consumption according to which goods and services are not usually purchased to be used, but to be publicly demonstrated as a demonstration of economic power and social status.

Weddings offer an approved space of such exhibits, where the consumption of luxury items, both intentional, such as the clothing of the bride and where the wedding is held and the food, is used to form and perform social identity (Hanslip, 2020).

As a result, couples and their families might be forced to take up high levels of debt and in certain settings, over half of couples begin their marriages in a stressed economy (Currie, 1993; Engstrom, 2008). Although a plethora of literature has been available on the causes and effects of wedding commodification in the Western and Asian settings (e.g., Goldstein-Gidoni, 2000; Halliday, 2021), there is a severe lack of literature on how the same issue presents itself in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in Malawi. This is clear in the growing wedding industry in Malawian cities such as Lilongwe with an apparent presence of goods and service business ventures. However, there is little or scanty empirical research on the value chain of weddings, the forces that make it commodifiable, and the psychosocial effects of the same on the main participants, namely, brides. Thus, the research was based on the exploratory type of approach and examined the commodification of weddings within Lilongwe City, Malawi, on the basis of the argument that the process cannot be reduced to just embracing global trends but rather a complicated local phenomenon with its unique drivers and significant social and psychological implications. The study is also an important step of departure since it presents the commodification of weddings as a matter of socio-economic context of a developing country, but goes beyond the abstract of marriage to examine the mechanics and effects of its commercialization.

1.3 Study objectives

1.3.1 Main objective

The main objective of this study was to analyse the drivers and impact of wedding commodification on the main actors in Lilongwe city, Malawi.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To document the key manifestations and structure of the wedding value chain in Lilongwe.
2. To investigate the drivers of wedding commodification along the wedding value chain.
3. To assess the psychosocial impacts of wedding commodification on couples.

1.3.3 Research questions/ Hypotheses

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the structure of the wedding value chain in Lilongwe, and what are the key manifestations of commodification within it?
2. What are the primary drivers propelling the commodification of weddings along this value chain?
3. What are the psychosocial impacts of wedding commodification on couples?

1.4 Justification of the study

The findings of this study are intended to be of significant value to the young, growing generation and any individual considering entering the marriage industry in Malawi. Firstly, the study aimed to generate valuable information for existing and potential wedding stakeholders. The study aimed at understanding their roles within the value chain, these stakeholders could make informed decisions when participating in the industry, ultimately facilitating the smooth functioning of the wedding value chain in this era of a growing marriage market.

Secondly, the study sought to equip couples with an understanding of the driving forces behind wedding commodification within the marriage market. This knowledge will enable them to be better organized and prepared when entering the market. The study also investigated the concept of utility as a potential explanation for couples' decisions to commodify their weddings. Unveiling the associated psychological and social costs and gains, the study aimed to empower couples to make informed choices that aligned with their individual and shared values. Furthermore, the study contributed to fostering a deeper understanding and stronger communication between couples before embarking on the process of wedding commodification. This, in turn, has the potential to positively impact policies related to human rights, obligations of spouses, and the promotion of mutual marital confidence as outlined in the Malawi Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act (2015).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of empirical and theoretical literature on the commodification of weddings. It is structured to map the global wedding industry, synthesize findings on the drivers and impacts of commodification, and situate these phenomena within the specific contexts of wedding value chains, Islamic marital economics, and contemporary financial interventions. The review moves from a global perspective to a specific focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and Malawi, establishing the context for the present research in Lilongwe. It culminates in a clear identification of the research gap that this study seeks to fill. This review includes dedicated sections deconstructing the wedding value chain and its impacts at each stage, an analysis of the Muslim practice of Mahar and its evolving significance, and an examination of corporate financial support mechanisms for newlyweds, exemplified by Old Mutual Malawi's bridal shower and wedding initiatives.

2.2 The Global Wedding Industry and Value Chain

The wedding industry has evolved into a formidable global economic sector, characterized by a complex and highly specialized value chain that transcends national borders and cultural contexts. Research from the Global North meticulously documents this ecosystem, which systematically transforms the social and religious ritual of marriage into a sequence of purchasable products and services, a process Chrys Ingraham (2008) critically terms the "wedding-industrial complex." This chain, as detailed by Geller (2019) in the UK context, involves a wide array of interdependent actors including planners, photographers, videographers, caterers, florists, venue managers, officiants, musicians/DJs, stationers, and attire designers, each contributing to the construction of a seamless, marketable fantasy.

The digital age has further reconfigured and intensified this chain; Boddington (2022) demonstrates how social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest act as central, globalized nodes for advertising, inspiration, and normalizing specific aesthetic trends, simultaneously shaping couple demand and vendor offerings in a continuous, self-perpetuating feedback loop that accelerates stylistic homogenization and raises cost expectations. Scholarly inquiry has also revealed the deeply gendered and racialized nature of this global value chain. In a seminal study of China's burgeoning bridal market, Liang and Liu (2021) found that while men often own the larger capital-intensive businesses, such as venues and major event management companies, the "consumption labour" the emotional, temporal, and logistical work of planning and coordinating falls almost entirely on brides.

This positions women as both the primary target of sophisticated marketing and the unpaid project managers of their own commodification, a dynamic that paradoxically reinforces traditional gender roles even within a modern, ostensibly empowering consumerist framework. This phenomenon is not confined to East Asia; studies by Johnson (2020) in Brazil and Schmidt (2023) in South Africa corroborate this global pattern, noting that the bridal industry consistently targets women, framing the perfect wedding as the ultimate feminine achievement. Furthermore, the value chain itself is stratified by race and class. Okafor's (2021) research on the Nigerian luxury wedding market highlights how vendors with international training or certification can command premium prices, creating a hierarchy of service provision that mirrors colonial and neo-colonial power dynamics, where Western aesthetics and expertise are often valorised over local knowledge and practices.

The globalization of this value chain has profound implications for local economies and cultural production in Africa. The influx of international wedding brands, the proliferation of globally circulating images on digital platforms, and the rising demand for imported goods, from champagne and designer gowns to specific types of floral arrangements can lead to significant capital flight and the marginalization of local artisans (Mbeki, 2022).

For instance, the preference for imported silk over locally woven textiles for bridal parties, as observed by Chukwu (2022) in Lagos, directly impacts the livelihoods of local weavers and threatens the sustainability of indigenous craft traditions. However, this is not a simple story of cultural erosion. A counter-trend of strategic localization and "glocalization" is also evident within the value chain. As documented by Mensah (2023) in Ghana, a new generation of wedding planners and designers is emerging who consciously integrate global standards of service with locally sourced materials and culturally significant motifs. These actors are creating a niche market that caters to diasporic couples and a local elite seeking both cosmopolitan sophistication and cultural authenticity, thereby innovating within the value chain to create new, hybrid aesthetic and economic forms. The financial architecture supporting this global value chain also warrants critical examination. The industry is increasingly financialized, with a growing sector of specialized lenders offering "wedding loans" and structured payment plans. Nwosu's (2023) research in Nigeria reveals that these financial products, while enabling consumption, also embed couples deeper into cycles of debt, effectively securitizing future income for present-day spectacle.

2.3 Deconstructing the Wedding Value Chain: Impacts at Each Stage

The wedding value chain can be conceptualized as a linear process through which a betrothal is transformed into a commercialized event. Each stage introduces specific economic, social, and psychological pressures on the couple and their families.

2.3.1 The Engagement Stage

The value chain is initiated with the engagement, which has itself become a significant commercial event. The diamond engagement ring, popularized by a highly successful De Beers marketing campaign in the mid-20th century, is a prime example of a created tradition with substantial economic impact (Lynn, 2018). The pressure to procure a ring of a certain carat, cut, and clarity represents the first major financial outlay in the commodified wedding process.

Furthermore, the "proposal" has been transformed into a performative spectacle, often orchestrated with the help of photographers or planners to ensure its share ability on social media, thereby embedding commercial and performative values at the very inception of the wedding journey (Boddington, 2022).

2.3.2 Planning and Pre-Wedding Events

This stage involves the coordination of a multitude of vendors and pre-wedding rituals. The rise of the professional wedding planner is a direct consequence of this complexity, adding a new cost layer but also mediating between the couple and other vendors (Geller, 2019). Pre-wedding events such as bridal showers, bachelor/bachelorette parties, and engagement ceremonies have expanded in scale and cost. Bachelorette parties, once a simple night out, now frequently involve destination trips, creating a mini-vacation industry and placing financial strain on the wedding party (Wheatley & Frazier, 2021). The impact here is the normalization of multiple, costly pre-events, extending the financial and logistical burden over a longer period.

2.3.3 Attire and Aesthetics

The bridal fashion industry is a cornerstone of the wedding value chain. The "white wedding dress," another tradition popularized in the Victorian era, is typically a single-use garment commanding a premium price (Geller, 2019). The impact extends beyond the bride to include bridesmaids' dresses, groomsmen's attire, and grooming services for the entire party.

The industry promotes an ideal of perfection, pressuring individuals to invest in professional hair, makeup, and even pre-wedding fitness regimens and cosmetic procedures (Peterson & Minton, 2020). The psychological impact is a focus on external appearance and the creation of a "perfect image," which can exacerbate body image issues and performance anxiety.

2.3.4 Venue, Catering, and Decor

The choice of venue sets the tone and a significant portion of the budget. There is a marked trend away from community or religious halls towards dedicated wedding venues, hotels, and exotic destinations (Kapoor & Datta, 2022). This shift impacts the social dimension of the wedding, potentially making it less accessible to wider community members due to cost or location. Catering has moved from simple communal meals to elaborate multi-course plated dinners or themed buffets, while decor has been professionalized through florists and event designers who create immersive, Instagram-worthy environments (Chen & Li, 2023). The impact is the elevation of the wedding from a communal feast to a curated sensory experience, with costs escalating accordingly.

2.3.5 Photography, Videography, and Digital Documentation

This segment of the value chain has been utterly transformed by digital technology. The demand for high-quality, cinematic videography and professionally edited photo albums is now standard (Halliday, 2021). The impact is twofold. Firstly, it creates a permanent, idealized record of the event, which can sometimes feel disconnected from the lived experience of the couple (Garcia, 2022). Secondly, the pressure to generate content for social media can turn the wedding day into a performative photoshoot, where the primary audience becomes the online following rather than the physical guests (Boddington, 2022). This stage commodifies memory itself, packaging it for personal and public consumption.

2.3.6 The Wedding Day Coordination and Post-Wedding Services

The final stage involves the actual orchestration of the event and its aftermath. This includes the services of a Master of Ceremonies (MC), musicians, and transportation. Post-wedding, the value chain extends to the packaging and distribution of gifts, often managed through online registries, and the planning of the honeymoon, which has become a significant tourism subsector (Nelson & Smith, 2020).

The impact is the complete outsourcing of the event's execution and conclusion, ensuring a seamless experience but at a high cost, and extending the financial obligations beyond the wedding day itself.

2.4 The Practice of Mahar in Muslim Weddings: Tradition, Commodification, and Impact

In stark contrast to the Western model of diffuse spending on a public spectacle, the Islamic marriage contract (Aqd Nikah) centrally features the Mahar (or Mahr), a mandatory gift from the groom to the bride. This section reviews the theological basis, evolving practices, and socio-economic impact of Mahar.

2.4.1 Theological and Legal Foundations of Mahar

Mahar is a religious and legal obligation, not a voluntary gift. Its purpose is to honour the bride and provide her with financial security. The Quran explicitly states: "And give the women upon marriage their bridal gifts graciously" (Quran 4:4). Scholar's emphasize that Mahar is the exclusive property of the wife; it is not a bride-price paid to her family, but a right bestowed upon her that serves as a form of pre-marital asset protection (Ali, 2019).

2.4.2 The Evolution and Commodification of Mahar

While the principle of Mahar is spiritual and protective, its practice has been significantly influenced by socio-economic factors and, in many communities, has undergone a process of commodification.

In traditional contexts, Mahar could be symbolic as per teaching verses from the Quran or consist of modest amounts of money or goods. However, in modern urban and diaspora communities, there is a growing trend towards monetizing Mahar and inflating its value (Moors, 2021). This is driven by several factors; status symbolism, which makes it similar to conspicuous consumption in Western weddings, the value of Mahar can become a marker of social status and family prestige (Khan, 2022) Perceived security, in contexts with weak legal protections for women, a higher Mahar is sometimes seen as a stronger deterrent against arbitrary divorce (Abdul Rahman, 2020).

The influence of global consumer culture has led to the specification of branded items such as designer handbags, specific jewelry brands, or luxury watches as part of the Mahar, blending religious obligation with modern materialism (Moors, 2021).

2.4.3 Psychosocial and Economic Impacts of Modern Mahar Practices

The commodification of Mahar, the mandatory gift from groom to bride in Islamic marriage, has profound and multifaceted impacts on Muslim couples, extending far beyond the ceremonial exchange. One of the most immediate consequences is the significant financial strain placed on grooms and their families. In many contemporary contexts, societal and familial expectations have inflated Mahar into a substantial monetary demand.

This places immense pressure on young men, potentially delaying marriage until sufficient funds are accumulated and, in some cases, leading to the acquisition of significant debt. As noted by scholars like Ali (2019), this reality directly contradicts the original Islamic principle of facilitating marriage, transforming what is meant to be a symbolic gesture of commitment into a formidable financial barrier. Furthermore, the process of determining the Mahar's value can evolve into a source of tension and conflict. Rather than a joyful prelude, the discussion can become a tense negotiation between families, focused on market-value assessments and social status. This commercial bargaining risks overshadowing the spiritual and companionate essence of the marriage contract (Khan, 2022).

The emphasis shifts from the union's religious and emotional foundations to a transactional haggling over price, potentially sowing seeds of resentment and rivalry between the families before the marriage has even begun. The practice also presents a complex and paradoxical relationship with patriarchal structures. While a substantial Mahar is often justified as a form of financial empowerment for the bride, its inflation can inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms. It can frame the woman as a financial burden or a commodity to be "paid for," thereby perpetuating her status as a transactional object within the marriage economy.

Conversely, as explored by Moors (2021), when the Mahar is claimed and controlled directly by the wife, it provides her with a significant and legally protected independent capital.

This financial autonomy can subvert traditional economic dependencies, offering a tangible means to challenge patriarchal control within the marital relationship. The nature of the Mahar also has critical implications for the marital dynamics that unfold after the wedding. A large, deferred Mahar, payable upon divorce or the husband's death, can create a latent power imbalance. A husband may feel this financial obligation hanging over him, potentially influencing his behaviour, while a wife might wield it as leverage during disputes. On the other hand, as Abdul Rahman (2020) argues, this very provision can offer the wife a crucial sense of security and a concrete exit option, empowering her to leave an untenable marriage with a degree of financial independence that she might otherwise lack.

The case of Mahar illustrates that commodification is not a monolithic Western import but a complex, locally-driven process that can reshape even the most deeply rooted religious practices. The commodification of Mahar operates with a distinct set of drivers and consequences, centred not on diffuse consumption but on a direct, high-stakes financial transfer. This transformation profoundly influences the financial, social, and power dynamics of Muslim couples, demonstrating how modern economic pressures can reconfigure ancient religious obligations with both oppressive and empowering potential.

2.5 Corporate Financialisation of Romance: Old Mutual Malawi's Support to Newlyweds

The penetration of financial services into the realm of personal life is a hallmark of late modernity. In Malawi, Old Mutual, a leading financial services group, has strategically positioned itself within the wedding value chain through products specifically targeting bridal showers and weddings. This represents a formal, corporate response to the financial pressures of commodified weddings.

2.5.1 The Product Offering: Bridal Showers and Wedding Plans

Old Mutual Malawi offers structured savings and investment plans branded for bridal showers and weddings. These products work by encouraging couples or their families to save a predetermined amount regularly over a period to build a fund dedicated to wedding expenses (Old Mutual Malawi,

2023). Entities are creating a branded "Wedding Plan," the company frames the high cost of weddings not as a social problem, but as a financial challenge to be managed through disciplined saving and professional financial planning.

2.5.2 Drivers and Corporate Strategy

The strategic move by financial institutions like Old Mutual to develop wedding-specific financial products is driven by a confluence of market-savvy and socio-economic factors. This strategy is particularly evident in the Malawian and broader African context, where the wedding industry is experiencing significant growth and commercialization. Primarily, this approach serves as a key tool for market differentiation. In an increasingly competitive financial market, tailoring products to major life events such as marriage helps corporations differentiate their brand and build deeper, more emotional connections with a young, upwardly mobile clientele who represent a valuable, long-term customer base (Mhango, 2022). This mirrors global trends where brands seek to embed themselves within the emotional landscapes of consumption (Boden, 2003).

Furthermore, these products are framed within a narrative of financial inclusion and literacy. Companies position them not merely as savings vehicles but as essential tools for promoting financial discipline and preventing the crippling debt that can often accompany contemporary wedding celebrations (Kadzamira, 2021). The companies are encouraging planned, incremental saving over impulsive, debt-financed spending, they align with broader national and corporate agendas of promoting financial responsibility.

This is a crucial intervention in regions where informal financial mechanisms are common, yet may be insufficient for the escalating costs of modern weddings, a phenomenon documented in rural India where celebrations act as a form of conspicuous consumption (Bloch, Rao & Desai, 2004). Ultimately, this strategy is about tapping into a growth market.

Recognizing the expanding urban wedding industry in Malawi and across Africa, driven by globalized media and rising middle-class aspirations (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), Old Mutual is strategically inserting itself as a key enabler.

The company is capitalizing on a lucrative and emotionally charged consumption sector, ensuring it captures a share of the expenditure dedicated to this universal rite of passage. This reflects a global pattern where the wedding industry has become a powerful economic force, with its own media, retail, and financial ecosystems (Engstrom, 2012; Mead, 2007). Therefore, the provision of wedding insurance and savings plans is a direct corporate response to the commodification of marriage, representing a formalization of financial planning for an event that carries immense social and economic weight.

2.5.3 Impact and Implications

The intervention of a formal financial institution like Old Mutual into the wedding economy has significant and dualistic implications for couples and the broader social practice of marriage. On one hand, this move legitimizes and institutionalizes the high cost of weddings; by offering a dedicated financial product, the company transforms a social pressure into a normalized and planned financial goal, potentially accelerating the commodification process by making large-scale expenditure more feasible (Mhango, 2022).

A positive consequence of this is the potential mitigation of financial stress, as such plans can help couples avoid the crippling debt that plagues many of their Western counterparts by spreading the cost over time, thereby reducing immediate financial shock and associated marital strain (Wheatley & Frazier, 2021).

However, this very mechanism can also deepen commodification by financially enabling couples to aspire to and achieve more elaborate, commercialized weddings than they might have otherwise considered, representing a "Financialisation of romance" where love is expressed through a financially engineered event (Kadzamira, 2021).

Furthermore, these dynamic risks exacerbate existing social inequalities, as access to such formal financial products is typically limited to the banked, salaried middle class. This creates a potential class divide in wedding experiences, where the affluent can orchestrate professionally funded lavish events, while poorer families must rely on informal contributions, thereby widening the stratification in how a universal ritual is performed and experienced.

2.6 Forces Driving Commodification

The forces driving the commodification of weddings are multifaceted, intertwining economic, social, and psychological factors across different cultural contexts. A primary driver is status competition and conspicuous consumption, where the wedding acts as a pivotal public display of economic standing and cultural capital. As highlighted by Nelson and Smith (2020), higher wedding spending is significantly correlated with a couple's desire to impress their social circle and signal their arrival into a certain socio-economic class, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Veblen's (1994) theories.

This competitive display is now exponentially intensified by digital peer pressure and the pursuit of the "Instagrammable" wedding. Through a content analysis of social media posts, Chen and Li (2023) identified a potent "comparison trap," where couples feel compelled to invest in photogenic elements to gain social validation, effectively outsourcing their aesthetic judgment to a digital audience. Beyond social competition, the wedding industry itself is an active creator of desire rather than a passive respondent. As Halliday (2021) argues, the industry strategically frames the wedding as a "once-in-a-lifetime" peak experience, a powerful narrative that justifies extraordinary expenditure and discourages cost-cutting.

This is evident in emerging markets like India, where Kapoor and Datta (2022) note that aggressive marketing has successfully established pre-wedding photoshoots and destination weddings as costly new norms for the urban elite.

Furthermore, broader societal shifts such as urbanization facilitate this process; as traditional community-based support systems for organizing and funding weddings weaken, a vacuum is created that is readily filled by commercial vendors offering the services once provided by kin and community (Awumbila, 2021). This global shift towards commercialized weddings carries significant psychosocial consequences for couples, with financial stress being the most documented negative impact.

A longitudinal study by Wheatley and Frazier (2021) found that couples who began their marriages with significant wedding debt reported higher levels of conflict and lower relationship satisfaction in their initial years. Consequently, the celebration intended to launch the marriage paradoxically becomes its first major stressor. Compounding this financial strain is the immense anxiety and performance pressure to stage a flawless event, a burden that is often gendered. Peterson and Minton (2020) revealed that brides, in particular, experience immense stress to conform to a curated ideal, managing vendor relationships and family expectations to the point of pre-wedding fatigue and burnout, a phenomenon often labelled as "bridezilla" syndrome.

Perhaps the most profound impact is the erosion of personal and cultural meaning within the wedding ritual. Garcia (2022) interviewed couples who had orchestrated lavish, commercialized weddings and found a common experience of anti-climax and emptiness. Many participants reported that commercial imperatives, the performance for guests, and a relentless schedule had overshadowed the personal, relational, and spiritual significance of the event, leaving them feeling more like actors in a play than central figures in a sacred rite of passage. This sense of dislocation highlights how the commodification process can strip the ritual of its intrinsic emotional and cultural value.

The commodified wedding often acts as a mirror and amplifier of existing social hierarchies, thereby reinforcing social inequalities. The scale and style of the event become a public display of economic capital, sharpening class distinctions by making wealth and access highly visible.

Moreover, it perpetuates traditional gender norms, as the burden of aesthetic and emotional labour from planning to appearance management, continues to fall disproportionately on women (Liang & Liu, 2021). Thus, while often presented as a personal celebration, the modern commodified wedding is a complex phenomenon deeply embedded within and reinforcing broader structures of economic and social power.

2.7 The African and Malawian Context: A Scantily Charted Territory

While the literature from Western and Asian contexts is robust, research on the commercial dimensions of weddings in Sub-Saharan Africa is severely limited and often subsumed within broader discussions of marriage. A few studies touch on related themes, such as the modernization of marriage rituals in Ghana, where Awumbila (2021) observes the blending of traditional ceremonies with Western-style white weddings, leading to a "double ceremony" that compounds costs.

The scholarly discourse on African marriage practices has undergone a significant epistemological shift, mirroring the very social transformations it seeks to analyze. This review traces the evolution of this literature from its foundational focus on the structural-functional role of marriage towards a critical political economy of the modern wedding as a site of intense commodification, social aspiration, and economic pressure.

The mid-20th century anthropological canon, exemplified by the works of Radcliffe-Brown (1950) and Fortes (1962), established a paradigm that viewed African marriage primarily as a structural institution. Within this framework, the exchange of bride wealth (or bride price) was not conceived of as a simple "cost" or "purchase" but as a foundational social transaction. It was a mechanism that cemented alliances between lineages, transferred rights in genetricem (rights over children), and affirmed the status of the contracting families within a broader kinship polity (Kuper, 2018).

As Comaroff (1980, p. 5) succinctly argued, these exchanges were "the language of social process," where the material value of the goods transferred was often secondary to their profound symbolic meaning in constituting and reproducing social order. This perspective provided an essential baseline, depicting a system where matrimony was deeply embedded in communal logic rather than individual desire or market forces.

The processes of urbanization, formal education, and the deepening penetration of capitalist market economies from the post-colonial period onwards began to fundamentally alter these transactional landscapes. Scholars started documenting a marked shift from the symbolic to the pecuniary. As early as the 1980s, Ocholla-Ayayo (1980) noted the progressive "monetization" of bride wealth in East African pastoralist societies, where the transfer of cattle was increasingly supplemented or replaced by cash payments. This trend, observed across the continent, signalled the encroachment of market logics into the heart of social reproduction. Cole's (2004) seminal work in Madagascar brilliantly captured the next phase of this evolution. She illustrated how young women, navigating the precariousness of post-colonial economies, began to articulate personal aspirations through the idioms of romantic love and lavish weddings, thereby linking intimate desires to broader global economic flows and new consumerist ideals.

In the 21st century, the focus of scholarship has decisively pivoted from the functional role of marriage to its performance, aesthetics, and escalating costs. The West African context, with its rapidly growing urban middle classes, has become a particularly fertile ground for this research. The work of Adeboye (2019) on Nigeria and Awumbila (2021) on Ghana represents a crucial turning point, moving beyond descriptive observation to a critical analysis of the socio-economic consequences of what can be termed "wedding inflation."

Their research is complemented by a growing body of work that dissects the various facets of this phenomenon.

Cornwall (2005), for instance, examines the performance of modernity and masculinity in Nigeria, showing how men's wedding expenditures are tied to public displays of potency and provider status. Matera (2018), documents the rise of a professional class of wedding planners in Lagos, key actors in an emerging "wedding industrial complex" that actively constructs and commercializes the dream of a perfect day. This complex includes a globalized network of vendors, from decorators and caterers to photographers and makeup artists, who standardize and inflate the cost of wedding aesthetics (Chukwu, 2022). Furthermore, the influence of media, both global and localized through Nollywood and other film industries, has been identified as a critical driver. As Ukah (2008) and later, Adebayo (2020) argue, these media platforms "commodify romance," presenting extravagant weddings not just as celebrations, but as the ultimate validation of a successful relationship and social arrival. They sought to seek by building upon this robust foundation by synthesizing these economic, media, and gender-based analyses into a cohesive framework that explains contemporary practices not as mere cultural curiosities, but as strategic, if often burdensome, responses to modern socio-economic pressures.

Awumbila's (2021) identification and analysis of the "double ceremony" in Ghana provides a critical analytical model for understanding a Pan-West African pattern. This phenomenon, the sequential performance of a traditional marriage rite and a Western-style white wedding, is not a mere additive process but a complex socio-economic strategy that serves multiple, and at times contradictory, purposes. It is at the nexus of tradition and modernity where commodification finds its most potent expression. The dual ceremony serves as a masterful, if costly, solution to the dilemma of navigating competing social fields. It allows families to fulfil deep-seated, culturally sanctioned obligations to their lineage and community through the traditional rite, while simultaneously performing a modern, global identity through the white wedding.

The traditional ceremony, with its specific rites, foods, elder-led protocols, and the exchange of symbolic items, serves as a crucial validation of cultural authenticity and respect for ancestry (Mensah, 2022).

It is a performance directed inward, towards the family's kin and local community, reaffirming their place within a historical continuum. In stark contrast, the white wedding, with its church or hotel venue, white gown, tiered cake, and curated reception, is a performance of cosmopolitanism and membership in a global middle class (Thomas, 2020).

As Pierre (2019, p. 45) argues in his study of Abidjan's *élite*, the white wedding operates as a "theatre of modernity," where couples publicly display their alignment with Western-centric notions of romantic love, individual choice, and consumer citizenship. The bifurcated performance allows individuals to be "authentically" African in one context and "respectably" modern in another, managing the often-incommensurate demands of both social worlds (Gable, 2021).

The economic implications of this duality are profound and often severe. Where a family might historically have allocated resources for a single, culturally-defined major event, they are now compelled to finance two distinct events, each with its own elaborate and expensive requirements. As Awumbila (2021, p. 112) aptly describes, this creates a "financial pincer movement" that squeezes family budgets. The traditional ceremony involves significant, and often escalating, costs for extended family hospitality, the procurement of ceremonial attire (such as the Ghanaian Kente or the Nigerian Aso Ebi), and the presentation of prescribed gifts, drinks, and libation items (Adeboye, 2019).

Concurrently, the white wedding taps into a different, and frequently more expensive, commercial ecosystem. This includes rented venues, professional photographers and videographers, florists, choreographers, caterers serving international cuisine, and the coveted white dress an object of desire that has spawned a multi-billion-naira industry in its own right in cities like Lagos (Chukwu, 2022).

The immense pressure to host both events at a socially acceptable, or better yet, impressive, standard can precipitate severe financial strain. Nwosu's (2023) empirical study on household debt in urban Nigeria starkly illustrates this point, identifying wedding expenses, particularly for dual ceremonies, as a leading cause of non-productive loans that can cripple a family's economic mobility for years.

Despite the daunting financial burden, the double ceremony is persistently pursued as a strategic necessity, particularly for the emerging professional and entrepreneurial classes. It functions as a crucial rite of passage that publicly certifies and legitimizes a new socio-economic status.

A lavish, dual-format wedding signals to peers, business associates, and the extended family network that one has definitively "arrived" (Gable, 2021). It is a potent form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), transforming economic capital into socially recognized prestige. Furthermore, it operates as a sophisticated tool for social navigation. A spectacular wedding can be deployed to strategically obscure humble origins or to forcefully cement a newly acquired class identity.

As one of Smith's (2015, p. 78) interviewees in Port Harcourt candidly stated, "If you do not do it big, people will think you have failed, or that there is something wrong with the union." In this context, the double ceremony becomes a non-negotiable investment in one's social portfolio. It is a performative act believed to yield long-term dividends in social standing, network access, and even business opportunities, framing matrimony not just as a private union but as a public declaration of one's market value within a competitive social hierarchy.

Similarly, Adeboye (2019) documents the rising costs of weddings in urban Nigeria, driven by a growing middle class and the influence of global media, particularly Nollywood and social media, which popularize lavish wedding aesthetics. This phenomenon can be understood as part of a broader global pattern of "conspicuous consumption," a term originally theorized by Veblen (1899) to describe the use of lavish spending to signal social status.

In the contemporary Nigerian context, the wedding has transformed from a communal and religious ceremony into a primary platform for such display (Smith, 2015). The influence of Nollywood is particularly potent; as Ukah (2008, p. 112) argues that these films often "commodify romance," presenting extravagant weddings not merely as celebrations but as the ultimate validation of a successful relationship and social arrival.

This media-driven aspiration is exponentially amplified by social media platforms. Research by Igwe (2021), on Instagram usage among Lagosian professionals found that the performative aspect of weddings, the sharing of professionally curated photos and videos, creates a "digital panopticon" where couples feel immense pressure to match or surpass the standards of their peers. This cycle of social comparison fuels a competitive escalation in spending on venues, designer attire, and celebrity-grade event planning. Consequently, as Adeboye (2019) further notes, families are often compelled to allocate savings intended for long-term investments, such as housing or education, towards financing a single day's spectacle. This financial burden underscores a significant social tension, where the desire to adhere to modern, globalized norms of romance and success conflicts with traditional responsibilities and economic prudence.

These studies hint at similar global trends of commodification but remain broad, focusing on cost and changing practices rather than deconstructing the detailed architecture of the wedding value chain, analysing the specific motivations of actors, or documenting the nuanced psychosocial impacts on couples.

In Malawi, scholarly work on marriage has traditionally focused on anthropological studies of legal frameworks, kinship structures, and the practice of bride wealth (lobola), such as the work by Cherchye et al. (2021), which examines the economic implications of lobola.

The burgeoning wedding industry in urban centres like Lilongwe and Blantyre, visible in the proliferation of bridal shops, event planners, dedicated venues, and the visibility of wedding exhibitions, is an emergent social and economic phenomenon that has yet to be subjected to systematic empirical inquiry. The intersection of traditional practices like Lobola and Chinkhoswe with the modern wedding value chain, and the role of new actors like Old Mutual, creates a uniquely Malawian context for the study of wedding commodification.

2.8 Synthesis and Identification of the Research Gap

The extant literature provides a robust understanding of the wedding industry's structure, the drivers of its commodification, and its multifaceted psychosocial impacts, primarily in Western and Asian contexts. The conceptual frameworks of the value chain (Geller, 2019), conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1994), and the Financialisation of personal life (Kadzamira, 2021) offer powerful tools for analysis. Furthermore, the review of specific practices like Mahar (Ali, 2019) and corporate financial products (Old Mutual Malawi, 2023) demonstrates that commodification takes culturally specific forms. However, a significant empirical gap exists regarding these interconnected phenomena in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically in Malawi. A review of the literature indicates that no study to date has examined the psychosocial impacts of wedding commodification in Lilongwe. Empirically maps the structure, key actors, and economic dynamics within the complete wedding value chain in a Malawian urban setting, from conception (engagement) to conclusion (honeymoon).

Systematically investigates the drivers of commodification within Malawi's unique socio-economic landscape, where global consumerist influences and corporate financial products intersect with potent familial, traditional (e.g., Lobola), and religious pressures. Documents the specific psychosocial and relational impacts on Malawian couples navigating this complex terrain, where commercial pressures are a modern imposition upon deeply rooted social expectations and financial realities. Analyses the role and perception of new institutional actors, such as Old Mutual Malawi, in shaping the wedding practices and financial behaviours of urban couples.

This study, therefore, aims to fill this critical gap by providing an empirical analysis of the drivers and impacts of wedding commodification in Lilongwe City, Malawi. It sought to move beyond abstract discussions of marriage to examine the concrete mechanics and consequences of its commercialization, providing a localized understanding of a global phenomenon. This study is grounded in Veblen's (1994) Theory of the Leisure Class, which provides a critical framework for understanding the economic and social motivations that drive the commodification of weddings.

The theory's central concept of conspicuous consumption, the display of wealth to gain social status is not merely applicable but is, in fact, the engine of the wedding value chain.

The process of commodification transforms the symbolic elements of a wedding into priced goods and services. Veblen's theory explains why this transformation is so potent: because each commercialized element from the designer gown to the lavish reception becomes a vehicle for conspicuous consumption. Couples and families are not just purchasing a service; they are purchasing a signal of their social standing and financial capability (Boden, 2003; Hanslip, 2020). The entire wedding industry is built upon fulfilling this demand for socially visible, status-conferring products, thereby accelerating the commodification of the entire ritual.

Furthermore, Veblen's concept of "invidious comparison" the drive to compare oneself favourably against others is crucial for understanding the social pressure that fuels this market. The wedding industry actively fosters these comparisons through media and marketing, creating a cycle where seeing one "perfect" wedding creates the demand for another, more elaborate one.

This dynamic directly commodifies social relationships and cultural traditions, repackaging them as standardized, purchasable experiences. Finally, Veblen's argument that such consumption is a form of "conspicuous waste" expenditure that does not enhance life but serves only to create social distinctions, offers a critical lens for analysing the impacts of this process.

The financial strain and debt often associated with modern weddings can be interpreted as the direct social cost of this wasteful, status-driven consumption. Therefore, Veblen's theory does not just describe wedding trends; it provides a foundational explanation for the very economic and social mechanics of wedding commodification, making it an indispensable framework for this study.

2.9 Conceptual Framework

The study employed a conceptual framework that explored the linkages between social class, supply, and demand within the context of weddings (Figure 1).

This framework highlighted how an individual's social class played a significant role in determining the type of wedding they could host. According to the framework, the higher classes within a community set the trends that were then imitated by others. In most cases, these trends manifested in lavish weddings that exhibited high consumption behavior. The framework further suggested that the modern perception of weddings had become singular, with a focus on displaying prestige and social status, often at the expense of financial and resource limitations.

As societal classes continued to experience upward mobility, the framework posited that the supply side continuously adapted to meet the evolving demand. Service and goods providers remained readily available, catering to the desires and demands of different social classes. This resulted in a wide range of wedding experiences becoming available to couples. However, the framework also acknowledged the potential strain that this dynamic could place on couples. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and the financial burden associated with elaborate weddings could lead to a range of psychosocial impacts, including fear and anxiety, particularly during the early stages of wedding planning. In extreme cases, the framework posited that these strains could even contribute to the breakdown of the union.

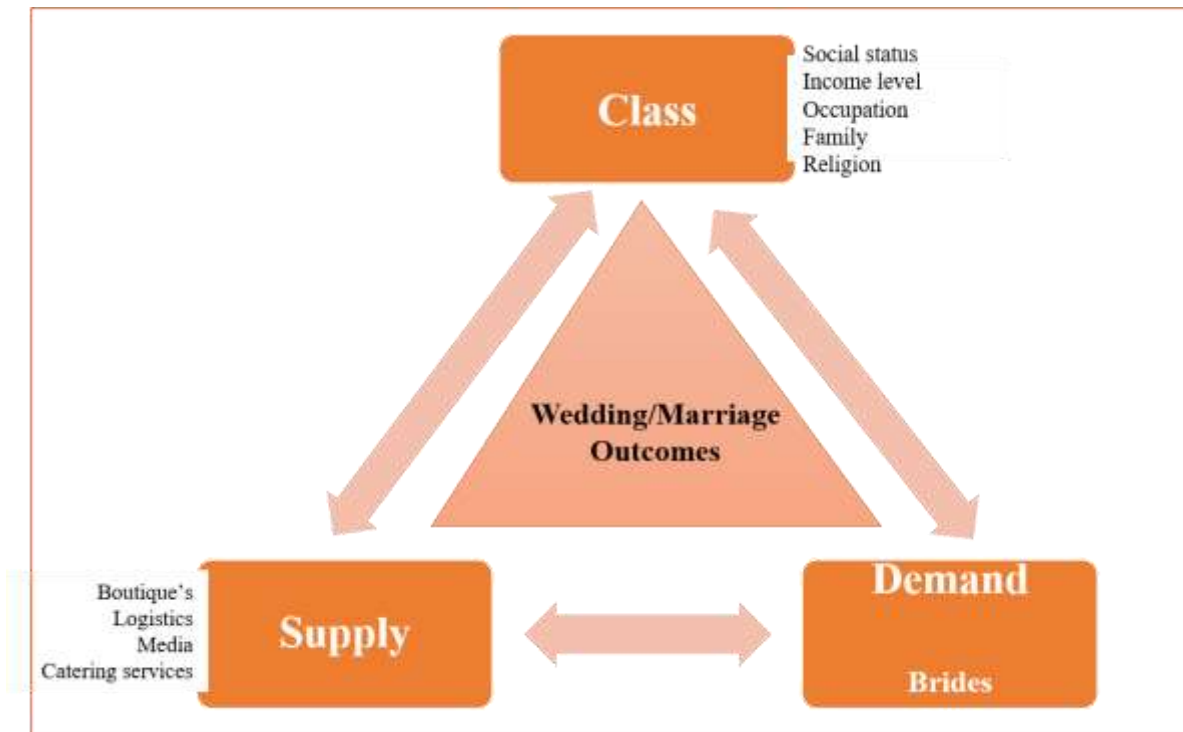


Figure 1: Conceptual framework (Source: Author)

The chapter is an empirical literature review of the commodification of weddings, which is organized in accordance with the objectives that are the focus of the present research. It cuts across the world perspective of the wedding sector to a narrow location of the forces and consequences of commodification, to the end of the race where the identified research gap that has been addressed through the research is established.

2.9.1 The Architecture of the Wedding Value Chain

Wedding value chain can be conceptualized to mean the system of actors and activities that convert a ritual into a commercial product. Recent empirical research has already undertaken to map this architecture pointing to its complexity and gender dimensions. The value chain has a large number of specialized players all over the world. In a case study of the wedding business in the UK, Geller (2019) found more than 15 types of vendors that include planners, photographers, and also some smaller offerings such as bridal choreographers which creates a very fragmented yet interdependent market. This chain has been rearranged further due to the emergence of digital platforms.

Boddington (2022), empirically proved the way in which social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest serve as central nodes, not only to advertise but also to make and normalize aesthetic trends thus influencing couple demand and vendor supply at the same time.

There is limited empirical evidence that specifically studies the gendered roles in this chain but the research is informative. In an ethnographic study of the bridal business in China, Liang and Liu (2021) discovered that even though the industry is dominated by men, men are the owners and operators of the business and the consumption work, the emotional and logistical work of planning, is almost entirely the sentiment of brides, who are created as the main consumer. This makes women the object and the uncompensated managers of their commodification. Systematic research is limited in a Malawian scenario, but the spread of bridal shops, professional image studios, and even specialized wedding halls in such urban centers as Lilongwe indicate the development of a formalizing value chain, the structure of which and the inner processes of gender relationships need to be documented.

2.9.2 Drivers of Wedding Commodification

Commodification forces are complex and are combined with economic, social and psychological forces. There are empirical indications of a number of drivers. Social Positioning and Conspicuous Consumption is still one of the main factors as theorized by Veblen (1994).

A survey by Nelson & Smith (2020) of 500 US newlyweds revealed that there was a significant relationship between increased spending on the wedding and the ability to impress the social circle by the couples, confirming the relevance of conspicuous consumption as one of the driving forces. Digital Peer Pressure increases this. In a recent content analysis of social media posts about weddings, Chen and Li (2023) concluded that the social media perfection regarding weddings performance makes a comparison trap that forces couples to spend money on photogenic aspects (e.g., particular decor, venues) to be socially rewarded.

Moreover, the power of the very influence of the wedding industry is an effective force. Halliday (2021) holds that the industry is not passive in responding to the demand as it actively creates a meaning of the wedding as a once-in-a-lifetime experience that warrants extraordinary expenditures. This is evidenced by Kapoor and Datta (2022) in their analysis of the Indian wedding market in which aggressive marketing of pre-wedding photoshoots and destination wedding has managed to establish new, costly standards that couples have to adhere to.

Aspirational consumption associated with a rising middle-income group is also a major force in the emerging economies, but not much is examined with regard to a wedding.

2.9.3 Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification

Commodification of a wedding is a matter with serious psychosocial implications on the couples and empirical studies are increasingly being directed to explore this aspect. Financial stress is the most reported effect. A longitudinal tracking of couples at engagement and in the initial two years of marriage revealed that the couples who reported a high level of debt in the wedding also reported a high level of marital conflict and low level of relationship satisfaction (Wheatley & Frazier, 2021). Such economic burden is usually accompanied by a lot of Anxiety and Pressure.

A qualitative study by Peterson and Minton (2020) found that brides, especially, are under tremendous stress to live up to the bridezilla stereotype, having to organize an ideal show before an audience and social media, which causes pre-wedding fatigue and burnout.

In addition, there is the disconnection with personal meaning that can be caused by commodification. Garcia (2022) spoke with couples who had a lavish, costly wedding, and discovered that numerous of them said that they felt an anti-climax right after the wedding or that the commercial imperatives had overshadowed the personal and relational meaning of the occasion. This implies that the process itself, which is supposed to be a celebration of a union, may with its commercial intensity lead to emotional distance.

The particular form of the effects on the socio-economic environment of Malawi, where the influence of family and community can interplay with that of commercial influences, is a serious gap in the literature.

2.9.4 Synthesis and Identification of the Research Gap

Available literature offers a sound insight into the structure of the wedding industry, commodification forces, and psychosocial effects, mostly in the West and Asians. Nevertheless, it is evident that there is an empirical gap in this review. The studies that explore these phenomena in Sub-Saharan Africa are limited.

Maps the value chain of wedding and gendered roles in a Malawi urban context.

- Empirically determines the major forces behind commodification in the Malawian peculiar socio-economic arena.
- Records the psychosocial effects of the couples within an environment where commercial pressures are modern and heavy on one hand whilst traditional and familial pressures are potent on the other.

The study attempted to fill this gap by offering an empirical interpretation of the commodification of weddings in Lilongwe City, Malawi.

2.10 Definition of Operational Terms

For conceptual clarity and operational consistency, the key constructs central to this study are defined as follows, drawing on established scholarly sources:

2.10.1 Commodification

The social process by which objects, services, or ideas are turned into commodities, or objects for sale, which are valued primarily for their exchange rather than their use value (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). In this study, it refers specifically to the transformation of the wedding ritual, a traditionally sacred and cultural practice, into a commercial event orchestrated by a market-oriented value chain.

2.10.2 Wedding Value Chain

An adaptation of Porter's (1985) concept of a value chain, it is defined here as the full range of value-adding activities and commercial actors involved in the planning and execution of a wedding ceremony. This includes the sequence from input suppliers for instance fabric for attire, to service providers who are in the category of planners, photographers, caterers, venue managers, and videographers, culminating in the final wedding experience as a consumable product.

2.10.3 Conspicuous Consumption

The behavioural manifestation of status-seeking, defined as the "application of time and effort to the acquisition of goods and services for the purpose of attaining social prestige rather than for the satisfaction of physiological needs" (Mason, 1981, p. 8). Operationally, this refers to wedding expenditures in Lilongwe that are motivated by the desire to signal social standing and financial capability to peers and the community, consistent with Veblen's (1899) original thesis.

2.10.4 Psychosocial Impacts

The interconnected psychological and social consequences of an event or process. The psychological component refers to internal, affective states (e.g., stress, anxiety, satisfaction), while the social component refers to effects on interpersonal relationships and social standing (WHO, 2024). In this study, it encompasses the combined emotional well-being (pre-wedding anxiety, post-wedding satisfaction) and social relational outcomes (familial conflict, peer approval) experienced by couples as a result of navigating a commodified wedding process.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to investigate the drivers and impacts of wedding commodification in Lilongwe City, Malawi. It details the research design, study area, and the specific procedures used for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a clear, replicable account of how the research was conducted, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings presented in the subsequent chapter. Each methodological choice is justified in alignment with the research objectives established in Chapter One.

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. As a major political and economic hub, Lilongwe is characterized by a unique socio-demographic landscape that makes it a prime site for investigating wedding commodification. The city with a population exceeding 1.2 million people, it features a blend of affluent suburbs, burgeoning middle-class neighbourhoods', and densely populated informal settlements. This diversity creates a wide spectrum of wedding practices and expenditure levels. Lilongwe's status as the capital attracts a concentration of civil servants, diplomats, NGO workers, and a growing business elite. This environment fosters a culture of social visibility and status consumption, which is often expressed through large-scale, influential weddings every weekend. Consequently, the city hosts a dense and highly competitive ecosystem of wedding service providers from venues and caterers to planners and designers forming a complex and active value chain.

The researcher selected this location based on the premise that the high volume and visibility of weddings would facilitate the identification of and access to a wide range of target respondents, including couples, family members, and industry stakeholders, thereby ensuring robust data collection.

3.2 Research Approach and Design

The study employed a mixed research approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Creswell et al. (2004) argued that mixed methods research went beyond simply collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Instead, it implied that data were integrated. When used in combination, both qualitative and quantitative data yielded a more complete analysis and complemented each other. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to complement each other in order to gain a clear understanding of the Malawi wedding value chain, the drivers of wedding commodification, and its impacts

3.3 Study Population

In this study, the researcher purposively selected 5 areas in Lilongwe where wedding activities were prevalent, believing this would yield the necessary data. Since the research aimed to identify the drivers and impacts of wedding commodification, couples who had recently celebrated weddings were purposively chosen as study respondents. To identify these couples, researchers visited churches and service providers throughout Lilongwe City.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

This study employed non-probability sampling techniques, where the likelihood of including each element of the population in the sample was unknown (Brynard & Hanekom, 1997). To determine the sample size for study respondents (couples), the researcher used a simplified formula provided by Woodbury (2002) due to the unknown population size of the study area.

The formula was as follows:

$$n = (z^2 * p * q) / e^2$$

Where:

z = the value of the standard variate (or deviation or variation?) at a 95% confidence level, $z = 1.96$

p = population estimate of 80%

$q = 1 - p$

e = precision level of $\pm 5\%$

Applying these values to the formula, the initial sample size was 245 couples. This number was rounded up to 250 couples for the study.

The specific non-probability sampling technique used was purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, the researcher utilized own judgment to select participants (Babbie, 1992). Snowball sampling was also used to identify wedding actors, including the main couples. To identify and analyze actors within the wedding value chain, the researcher required key informants. These key informants included church ministers, families and friends of wedding couples, retail food operators involved in weddings, videographers, photographers, cosmetic designers, and all other stakeholders involved in the wedding industry. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants with a specific purpose in mind. Typically, the researcher seeks one or more pre-defined groups, and ensures that respondents meet the criteria for inclusion in the sample (Brink 1996:67).

This approach is particularly useful in situations where a targeted sample needs to be reached quickly and proportionality is not the primary concern. Snowball sampling, also known as "chain referral" sampling, was another non-probability technique used in this study. In this method, participants or informants who had already been contacted utilized their social networks to refer the researcher to other potential study participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

Snowball sampling was particularly useful for identifying "hidden populations," which are groups not easily accessible through other sampling strategies. In snowball sampling, one respondent refers the researcher to another respondent. In social science research, this technique involves developing a research sample where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances.

The process begins by identifying someone who meets the study's inclusion criteria. The researcher then asks this person to recommend others they know who also meet the criteria. Snowball sampling is particularly valuable when attempting to reach populations that are inaccessible or difficult to find. In some research areas, identifying one or two initial participants might be sufficient, as they may know many other suitable people in their vicinity and can easily connect the researcher with them.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

3.5.1 Personal Interviews/Quantitative Survey

The study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews with couples, utilizing the Kobo toolbox. Semi-structured interviews, a variation on in-depth interviews, offered flexibility and allowed for the incorporation of new information. For instance, if a respondent's answer prompted a follow-up question, the interviewer could delve deeper for clarification. This design enabled the researcher to capture information about the respondent's worldview.

3.5.2 Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted to gather data from actors within the wedding value chain. The interview guide served as the primary tool during KIIs.

These informants included, but were not limited to, the following (Table 1)

Table 1: Key Informants

S/N	Key Informants	Number of KIs
1	Family Members	10
2	Church Ministers	10
3	Registered Photographers	10
4	Registered Caterers	10
5	Couples' Friends	10

(Source: Author)

3.6 Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data from the interviews and focus group discussions, a thematic analysis approach was employed. This approach is well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with the crucial step of data reduction, which involves condensing the large volume of raw, textual data into manageable segments without losing its essential meaning. As Strauss (1987) explains, qualitative data is inherently unstructured and voluminous; data reduction is therefore not about deleting information but about focusing it on the core patterns that are relevant to the research questions. This process facilitates a clearer and more systematic analysis, allowing the researcher to move from raw transcripts to a structured representation of the key themes that characterize wedding commodification in Lilongwe.

Table 2: Data Collection Matrix

Objective	Variables	Method of data collection	Data analysis
1. To examine the wedding players, roles and outcomes along the wedding value chain	Players • Couples • Family • Friends • Religious leaders • Business persons Roles • Supply inputs • advertising	• Semi-structured questionnaire • KIIs	• Thematic analysis • Descriptive statics (Frequencies and means)
2. To analyse the drivers of wedding commodification along the wedding value chain	• Social status • Income level • Occupation • Family • Religion • Culture	• Personal interviews with wedding couples • KIIs	• Thematic analysis • Case studies
3. To assess psychosocial impacts of wedding commodification on couples along the wedding value chain	• Divorce • Conflicts between couples • Lack of trust • Fear • Suicide • Depression • Multiple partners	• semi-structured questionnaire • Personal interviews	• Descriptive statistics • Thematic analysis

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Prior to the study, the researcher submitted the proposal to MZUNIREC for review and approval. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents through a signed consent letter. Respondents were also informed of their rights, including that participation in the study were entirely anonymous and voluntary. Additionally, the researcher sought consent from respective church ministries and other religious leaders, as the research involved members of various religious affiliations.

The study findings were disseminated through a presentation in the department and faculty. Following this, a thesis and articles were submitted to the department and library for publication. Articles were also extracted and sent to publishers for possible publication in reputable journals.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sampled Study Participants

This section presents the demographic profile of the study participants, which is crucial for understanding the context of the findings on wedding commodification. The characteristics described include sex, education level, age, income, and the duration of wedding preparation. These variables help to situate the experiences and perspectives of the respondents within the socio-economic landscape of Lilongwe City.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Sampled

Dummy variables		
Sex	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	36	48.0
Female	39	52.0
Education		
Secondary	1	1.3
Tertiary	74	98.7
Continuous Variables	Mean	STD deviation
Variable		
Age (years)	75	3.65
Monthly Income	161,801	45,631.30
Wedding Prep. Time (years)	6.1	4.2

The study sampled 75 participants, comprising 39 females (52%) and 36 males (48%). This near-equal gender distribution is methodologically significant for the study. It ensures that the data on the drivers and impacts of wedding commodification is not skewed toward a single gender's perspective.

This balance allows for a robust and comparative analysis which enabled the investigation of whether the pressures, experiences, and roles within the commodified wedding process differ meaningfully between men and women in Lilongwe.

The findings reveal an overwhelmingly high level of education among respondents, with 97.3% (n=74) having attained tertiary education and only 2.7% (n=1) having a secondary-level education. This characteristic is critical for interpreting the study's results. It indicates that the findings primarily reflect the behaviours and perceptions of an urban, educated elite.

This group likely has greater exposure to global media and consumption trends, higher aspirational standards for a "modern" wedding, and potentially more disposable income, making them a key demographic driving and being targeted by the wedding commodification industry in Malawi. The average age of the study participants was 29 years, with a standard deviation of 3.65 years. This places the cohort squarely within the young adult demographic, typically at a stage of career establishment and family formation. For the study, this means that the pressures of wedding commodification are being analysed through the experiences of individuals who are navigating the transition to financial independence. Their life stage suggests they are active consumers who may be particularly susceptible to the social and market pressures of hosting a wedding that signifies their new social and economic status as a couple. The mean monthly income reported by participants was MWK 161,801 (SD = MWK 45,631.30). This income profile situates the respondents within a specific urban earning bracket. The interpretation for the study is twofold. First, it confirms that the research captures a segment of the population with some financial capacity to engage with a commercial wedding market.

Second, and more importantly, it creates a tension that is central to commodification: this level of income, while stable, is likely insufficient to fund a lavish wedding without significant financial strain, saving, or debt, highlighting the powerful non-economic drivers that compel such expenditure.

A key finding was the lengthy average duration of wedding preparation, which was 6.1 years (SD = 4.2 years). This extended timeline is not a minor detail but a fundamental aspect of the commodification process. It indicates that a modern wedding in this context is not a simple ceremony but a long-term financial and logistical project. For the study, this means that couples are engaged with the wedding industry and its associated social pressures for a prolonged period. This sustained exposure likely amplifies the influence of the market, deepens the financial and emotional investment, and intensifies the pursuit of an idealised wedding, thereby magnifying its potential psychosocial impacts

4.2 Wedding Commodification

The study was interested in understanding the wedding ceremony commodification. One of the crucial questions was to understand if the respondents reported that their wedding ceremonies were done successfully. The study has shown that 95.6% of the participants indicated that it was done successfully compared to the 4.4% who reported that it was not successfully.

“We did not plan well; it was like being forced. So much stress and tension after” KII with one of the Families

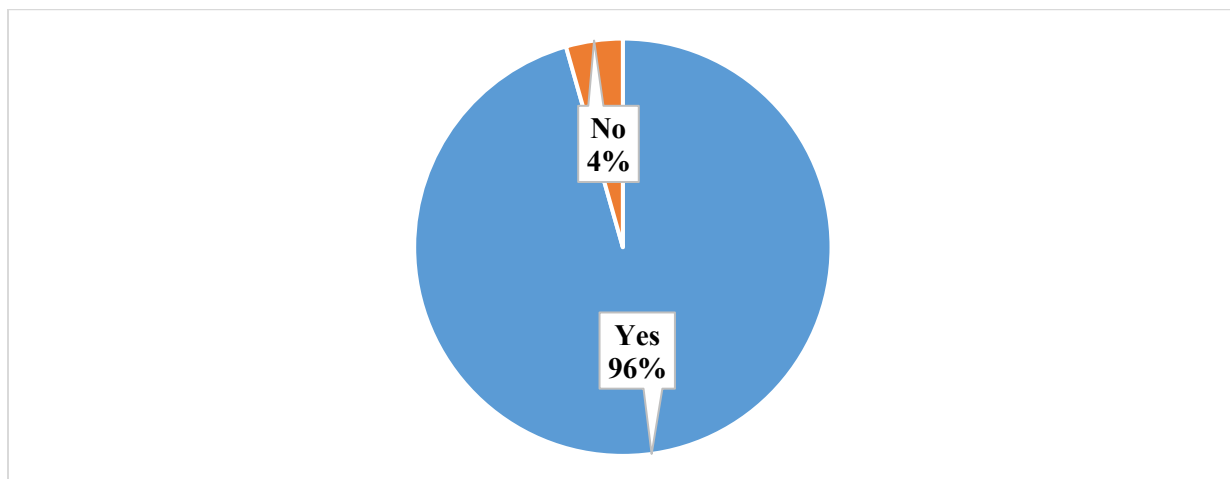


Figure 2: proportion of respondents indicating that their wedding ceremony was done successfully

4.2.1 Prestige

A wedding is a social event where family members show their social and financial status and express their values, morals, personalities, and characters. There is no minimum amount of money that a couple must spend the basic promises and agreements are free but some couples have spent millions of kwachas. Hence, wedding ceremonies are viewed as a mean for families to compete for prestige and respect by displaying wealth and inspiring small business enterprises to prosper (Koudou, 2018).

In particular, respondents were asked if their wedding ceremonies were done out of prestige. The results from the survey (Table 19) show that overall, 86.0% of the married people found that it was done out of prestige. 31.1 % indicated that it was somehow done out of prestige and that only 26.7% conducted their wedding ceremony with no prestige at all.

“Youths nowadays don’t have enough resources to do their wedding rather are just forced to do it. It is very rare for one to come out and be open to being helped in terms of perception about it, everyone thinks about themselves and minds their own life. With the high cost of living, youths are not financially stable.” (KII with priest, Lilongwe).

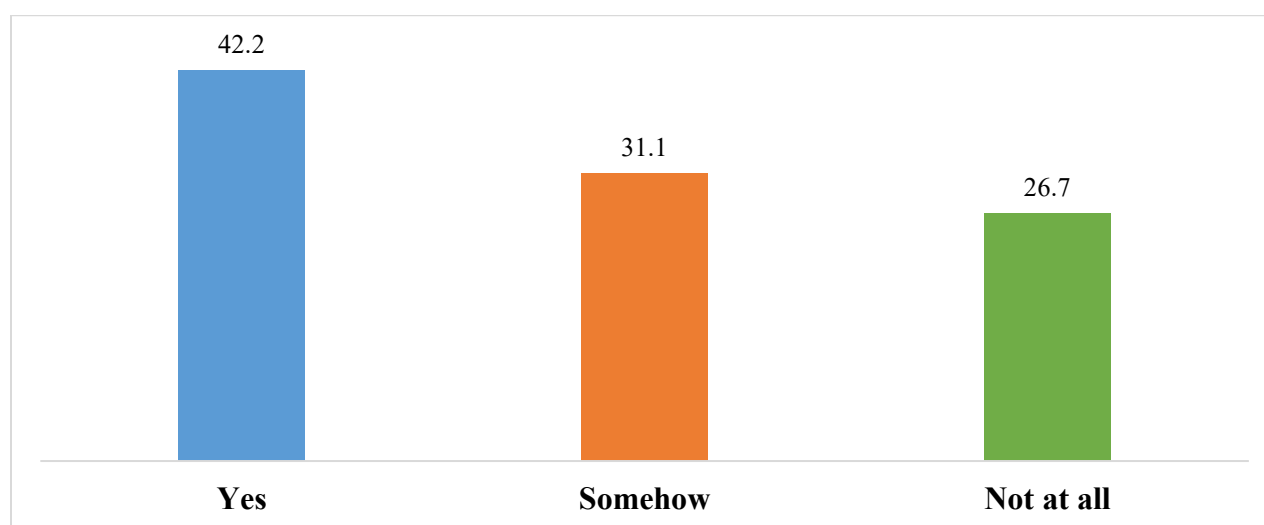


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents having conducted their wedding ceremony out of prestige (%)
(Source: Data Collection, 2025)

4.2.2 Economic Gains

Weddings are increasingly perceived as a significant source of income. This commercialization has fostered a perspective in which marriage is not only a social institution but also a potential economic venture, incentivized by the prospect of generating revenue from the wedding event itself. The analysis shows that for married people, the proportion of respondents who were confident about having economic gain after the ceremony was only 22.2%. The majority of the sampled respondents (51.1%) reported that there was no economic gain at all as shown in the table.

Table 4: Economic gain

Economic gain	Frequency	Percent
Not at all	23	51.11
Somehow	12	26.67
Yes	10	22.22

4.2.3 Cost Affordability

Wedding expenses (costs) are crucial to determine the type of wedding ceremony. If the expenses or costs of items are affordable, couples have no constraints in having the wedding type of their choice. The study findings have revealed that only 40% feel that they were able to afford the costs while the 28.9% of the respondents did not and 31.1 somehow did.

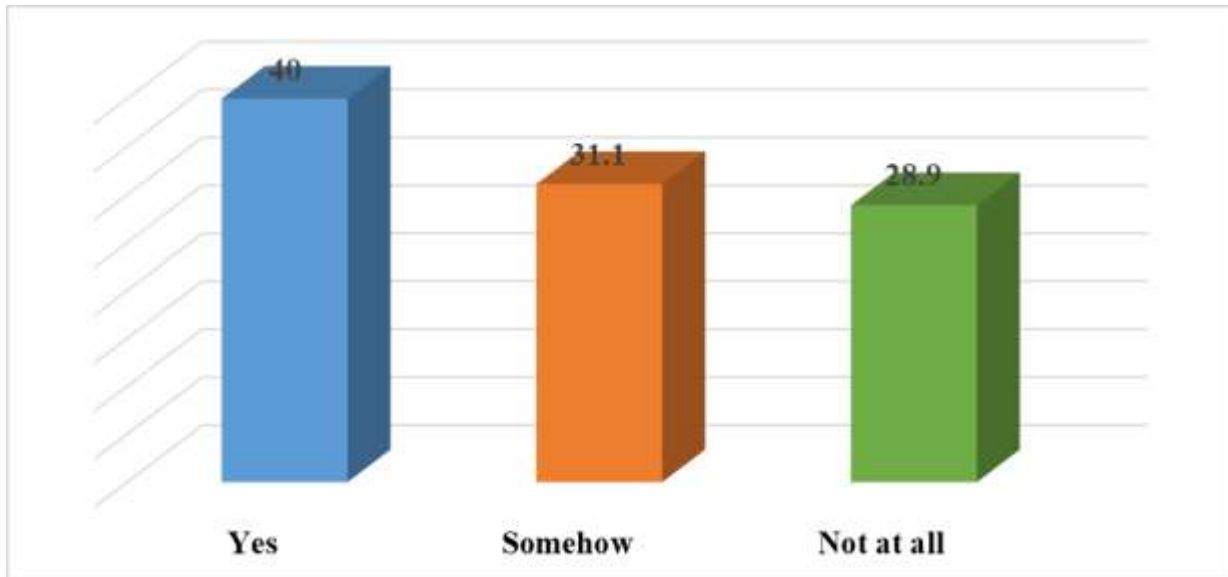


Figure 4: Proportion of couples feeling comfortable with affording wedding costs (expenses) expressed in percentage terms (%)

4.2.4 Percentage Share of Wedding Costs

The study has found that the largest share of expenses is devoted towards food and drinks, followed by venue, flowers and decorations, attire, and transport. This indicates that priority is given to these assorted items.

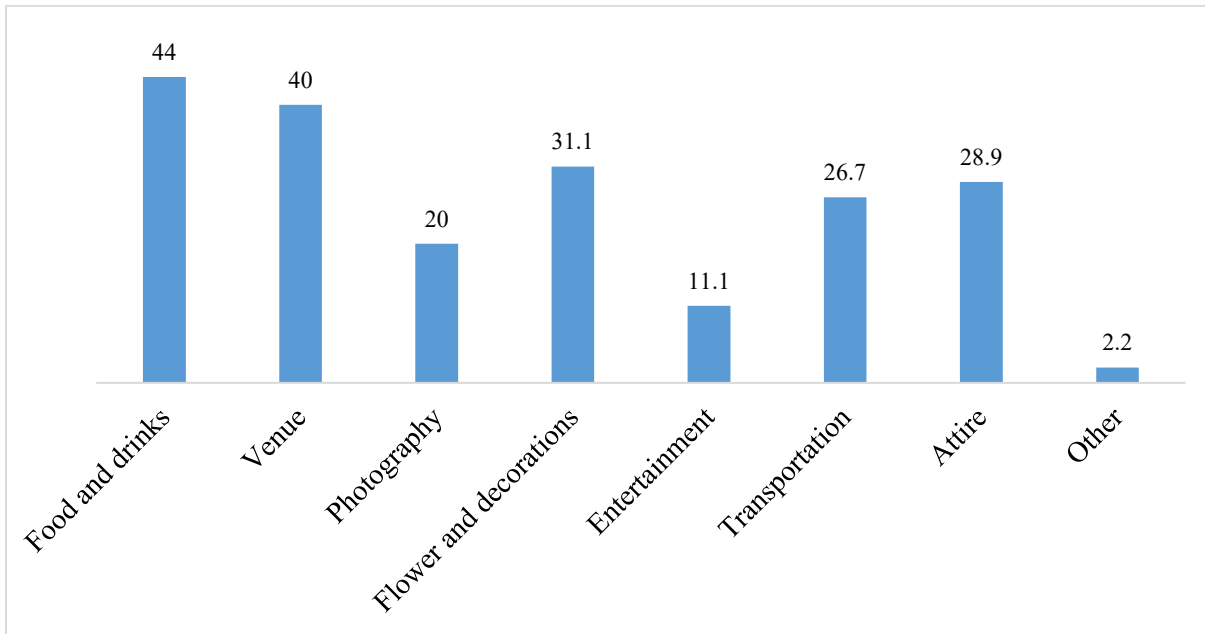


Figure 5: Share of key items as wedding expenses (%)
(Source: Data Collection, 2025)

4.2.5 Perceived Attitudes, Knowledge and Experience

The survey also contained questions on perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs among couples.

The results, presented in Table 4, show that 71.1% had centred their ceremonies on values and beliefs, 60% were socially responsible, 55.6% were feeling a wedding as a unique event ever. In terms of planning, essential, successfulness and decoration were 22.2%, 62.2%, 62.2 % and 64.4%.

Table 5: Perceived attitudes, knowledge and experience on wedding (%)*Table: Perceived Importance and Success Factors in Wedding Planning*

ISSUE / CULTURAL ATTRIBUTE	YES (%)	SOMEHOW (%)	NOT AT ALL (%)
PLANNING & EXECUTION			
Planning	22.2	28.9	48.9
Essential or necessary	62.2	22.2	15.6
Successful	62.2	26.7	11.1
Decoration	64.4	20.2	15.6
Cultural & Experiential Attributes			
Values and beliefs	71.1	20.0	8.4
Wedding vendors	53.3	26.7	20.0
Romance and happiness	42.2	40.0	17.8
Products and services	48.9	35.6	15.6

4.2.6 Success in Wedding

Further, most of the participants that were interviewed reported that their wedding was successful (45.5%) as shown in the figure 5. In order to triangulate these findings, the key stakeholders such as church elders were also asked as to what extent the wedding was perceived as perfect among married people as the quote below indicates:

“We had a successful wedding that have improved the performance of welfare at household. We are happy and joyful couple. I can say that these married couples are actually doing well in their household, especially on income and raising up their kids. We see that most children have a huge interest in having a colourful wedding now and when it is the Day, they love to take part.” **KII with Church elder, CCAP, Lilongwe.**

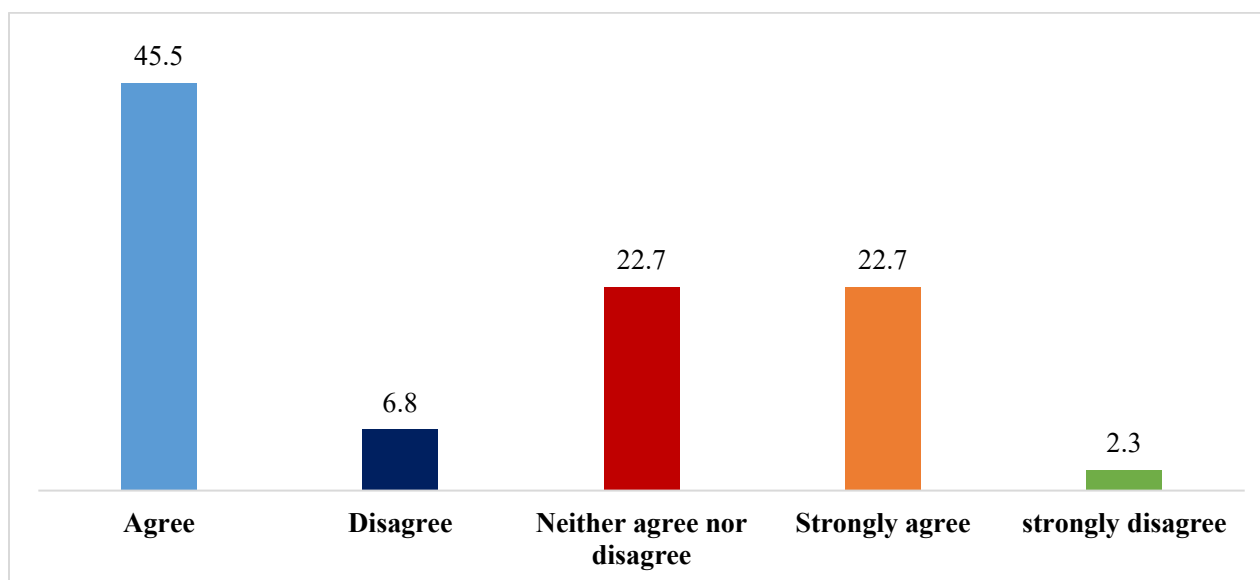


Figure 6: Extent to which couples agreed of having a successful wedding day (%)

4.3 Drivers of Wedding Commodification

One of the key objectives of the study was to understand the drivers and impact of wedding commodification on the main actors in Lilongwe city, Malawi. The research assessed factors that make young men and women to do wedding ceremonies in this fashion. In order to understand the factors that motivate young people to get married, the survey contained questions on factors that lead them to get married through a wedding ceremony. The main reasons for young people to have wedding ceremonies as reported by the sampled couples with their scale of satisfaction are indicated in **Error! Reference source not found.6** below.

Table 6: Perceived drivers and their extent for wedding commodification

Extent	Prestige (%)	Economic Gains (%)	Building Social Capital/Cohesion (%)	Income Level of Weds and/or Their Family (%)	Family Members' Wish (%)	Peer Pressure (%)
Strongly agree	17.78	8.89	42.20	15.56	22.20	17.78
Agree	44.40	24.40	35.56	64.44	44.40	60.00
Neither agree nor disagree	6.67	13.33	11.10	6.67	22.20	11.10
Disagree	20.00	31.10	4.40	13.30	8.89	8.89
Strongly disagree	11.10	22.20	6.67	0.00	2.2	2.2

From the table, the main factors that participants perceived leading to wedding commodification included income level of weds and/or their family (reported by 80 % of the sampled couples), good tool for building social capital/cohesion (77.6%), peer pressure (77.78%), boosting a person's social status (prestige) (62.18%), family members' wish (66.6%), and good tool for economic gains (33.29). The proportion that indicated income level of weds and/or their family was highest driver amongst all the factors. "Under this marriage ceremony, we have seen parents getting involved in ensuring that their children have a colourful event. They provide them with extra money. Such involvement ensures that children are not distracted as they plan for their wedding ceremony. This is the kind of collaboration that would ensure that wedding commodification excels" **KII with Marriage Counsellor, Lilongwe.**

4.3.2 Impacts of Wedding Commodification

The study also analysed the economic implications of the modern wedding ceremony. The study participants were asked questions to comment their views on the key economic indicators as shown in the table.

Table 7: Economic implications of the wedding commodification

Variable	Value/Statistic
Mean amount spent on wedding (Budget) (MWK)	5, 958,827.82
Number of Vendors	8
% Share Spent (of Total Household Income)	80.00
Average Cost per Vendor Service (MWK)	324,339.60
Face Financial Challenges Due to Expenses (%)	65.90
Borrowed or Took out Loans (%)	38.64%

The results have revealed that the mean expenditure as wedding expenses was MWK 5,958,827.82. On average, the number of vendors that were involved during the process were 8 and that their average cost according the service rendered was MWK 324, 339.60. On whether they faced any financial challenge

as a result of the wedding, the majority of sampled respondents (65.9%) indicated that they faced it. This is due to unintended costs which come along with logistics and transport.

This necessitated about 38.64% of the couples to obtain loans from either formal or informal institutions. Data from FGDs with married couple's show that couples face many challenges that may lead them to obtain loans. A quotation from a FGD with a couple in Lilongwe shows that peer pressure led couples to get loans or credit:

"Couples obtain loans out of peer pressure because they cannot afford some of the items within their budget scope because of peer pressure when they see their friends conducting luxurious wedding ceremonies. Most couples find it fashionable to have a modern wedding. However, some of them end up being trapped in bankruptcy" (FGD with a married couple, Lilongwe).

4.3.3 Social Impacts

It is interesting to note that the factors that influence wedding commodification also include reasons to impress others. The quote below from one of the couples explains how their wedding was done to impress others: *"As I was heading towards my wedding ceremony I budgeted and planned to impress my friends and families, and my parents were very disappointed with me. I then decided to change the plan and make adjustments"* (couple, Lilongwe). The study found that 18% thought it was very important, 20.5% thought it was important, 27.3% were neutral, 4.6% thought it was not important at all, 29.6% thought it was not important. It is interesting to note that just some of the key informants that were interviewed indicated that it is 'very easy' or 'easy' for a couple to impress others after their wedding ceremony as they act as role models.

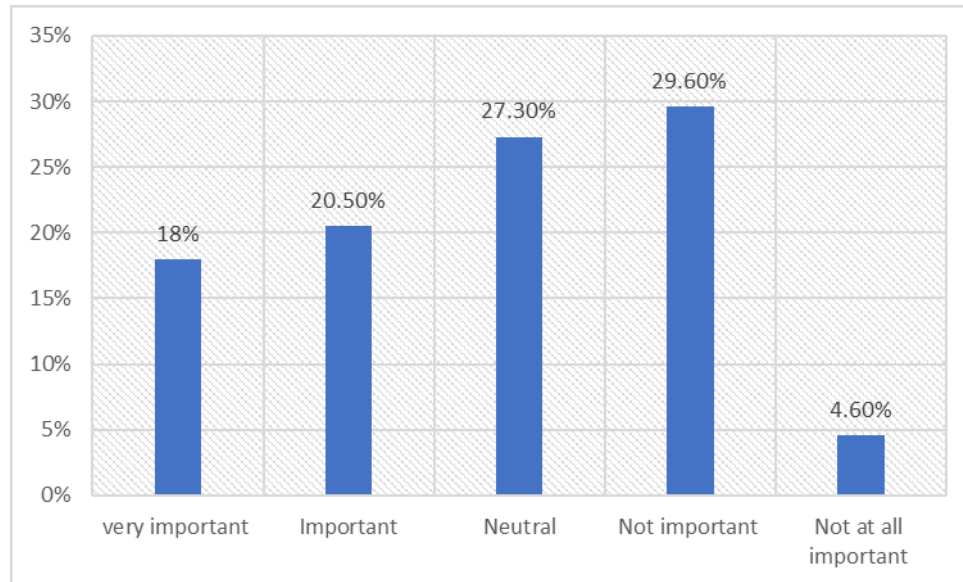


Figure 7: Wedding commodification to impress others (%)

4.3.4 Tradition of Wedding Vows and Ceremony

The study has indicated that only 32% of the interviewed study participants viewed their wedding vows and ceremony as very traditional and that only 2% viewed it as very non-traditional as presented in the figure.

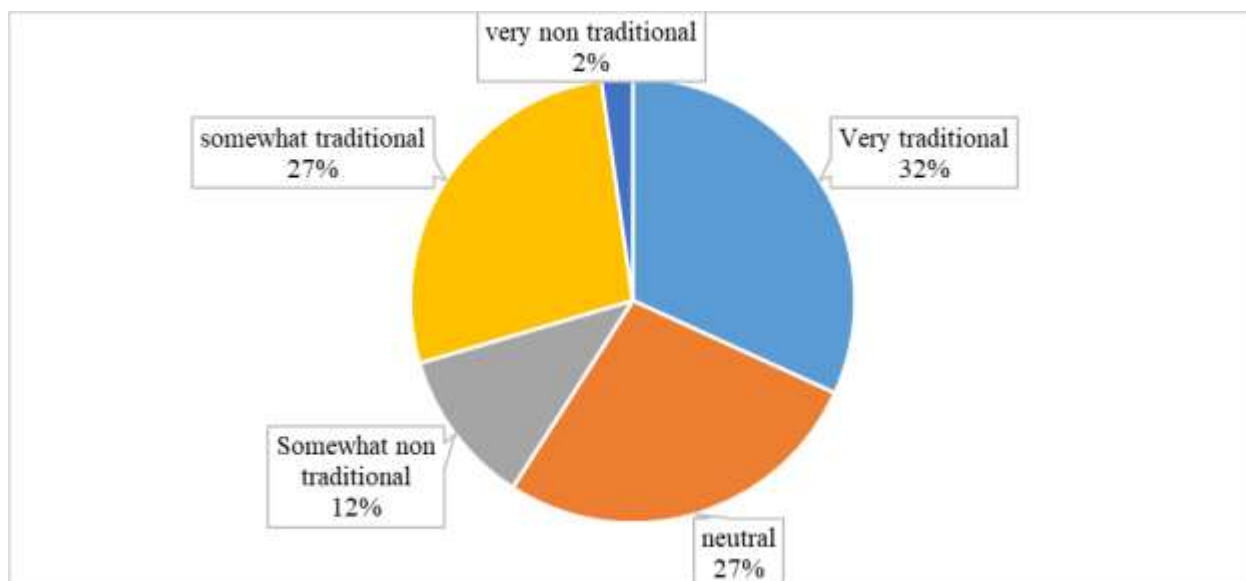


Figure 8: Extent of traditional wedding vows and ceremony

4.3.5 Environmental Impacts

On environmental impact, the study assessed to what degree the wedding ceremony incorporated the issue of the environment.

The question reads “*Did you consider the environmental impact of your wedding choices (e.g., venue, decorations, travel)?*” Unexpectedly, 77.27% indicated taking measures to address the environmental impact on their wedding during the planning and day of the wedding. Again, respondents were asked how important it was for them to choose sustainable and eco-friendly options for their wedding. Findings have shown that 68.2% of the respondents viewed incorporating issues of eco-friendly options as very important.

Table 8: Proportion of respondents viewing extent and degree of incorporating sustainable and eco-friendly options (%)

Extent	Percent (%)
Very important	68.18
Somewhat important	15.91
Neutral	9.09
Not important	4.55
Not at all important	2.27

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This study was done to empirically unearth the causes and effects of the commodification of weddings in the Lilongwe City in Malawi, a phenomenon that has been well-recorded in the Western and Asian context but severely under-researched in Sub-Saharan Africa including Malawi. Three objectives were used to analyse it: to evaluate the most important displays of commodification of the wedding, to examine its motives, and to assess its psychosocial consequences. The chapter of this discussion has been divided to discuss each of these objectives one after another.

In both cases, the most important findings in chapter four were generalised and subsequently discussed in the framework of the theoretical construct of the study Veblen (1994) Theory of the Leisure Class and in the context of the current empirical research. This strategy clarified the unique nature of the commodification of weddings in urban Malawi making it a complicated process where global consumerist tendencies are strongly influenced by local social processes and pressures.

5.2 Discussion of Key Manifestations of Wedding Commodification

The results show that the commodification of a wedding in Lilongwe is not just a fashion but a highly institutionalised socio-economic process. The most notable one is its financial scale with an average spending of MWK 5.96 million, which consumes a deep 80 percent of the average household income of a couple. It is not merely an expensive cost, but rather an essential re-allocation of domestic resources to one, performative episode. This monetary investment is made easy through a detailed and professional value chain, which entails between eight different vendors on average per wedding. This shows a shift towards the non-communal and in-kind contributions to a completely monetised market of specialised services, between caterers and photographers, building the wedding as a commercial product made up of parts.

Moreover, the lengthy time investment, where the average period of planning is 6.1 years, transforms the wedding from a rite of passage to a more long-term project in terms of finances and logistics. This

long-term interaction guarantees the long-lasting exposure to the market pressures and social demands, making the process of commodification more profound.

5.2.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework

These displays are an effective confirmation of the main ideas that Veblen had. The enormous expenditure of money, especially in such conspicuous consumption products as food, venue, and decorations is a typical performance of conspicuous consumption. People are not buying food or houses; they are buying symbolic products that can be used as social displays to display their economic power and social status.

The 6.1 year planning horizon reiterates the importance of the wedding as the status-attainment project of primary status in this urban, educated elite- a modern version of the Veblenian leisure class, in which non-productive and status-related consumption is the main line of occupation. The theoretical construct of this analysis rightly proposed that social status determines the type of the wedding and the results validate this theory as the top-tier of this urban community has created a model of a conspicuous consumption that other members of the society have no choice but to follow their own economic truth and copy it.

5.2.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings

The complexity of the wedding value chain in Lilongwe is similar to the world analysis, including a mapping of the UK industry by Geller (2019). But the Malawian situation introduces a crucial element: this business infrastructure is developing within an economic landscape in which average incomes are way lower, thus putting financial pressure on the situation. The discovery of a prolonged period of planning is a valuable addition to literature.

As the event is the spotlight of many studies, the process of commodification is a long-term condition of financial and psychological involvement, which increases its possible effects, as mentioned in this research. This is similar to what Boddington (2022) notes about the functionality of digital platforms in

maintaining a state of desire and planning across time, but in Lilongwe, this is probably exacerbated by the fact that the savings process takes long. The budgetary allocation also confirms the trends of the world in that the reception is the backbone of the consumable experience (Boden, 2003) that the central logic of the commodified wedding, its emphasis on a standardised and buyable spectacle, is cross-cultural and cross-economic.

5.3 Discussion of the Drivers of Wedding Commodification

The discussion reveals a strong, self-perpetuating three-fold force of drivers that contributes to the commodification of weddings. The main facilitator is the level of income of the couples and their families (80% agreement) which supplies the required but not always adequate capital to venture into the wedding market. It is this financial ability that is then triggered and channelled by strong social needs. The social forces that dominate are peer pressure (77.78% agreement) and the need to seek prestige (62.18%). The qualitative information gives a physical impression of this pressure as couples claim to borrow money due to peer pressure as they witness friends enjoying luxurious wedding ceremonies. More importantly, the research cites the will of family members (66.6%), which is also an important motivating factor, meaning that the pressure is not entirely horizontal (peer-based) but also, it is vertical (parentally-based) and that the traditional family needs are mixed with the new consumerist desires.

5.3.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework

The most important mechanism that unites these drivers is invidious comparison as the idea of Veblen. Respondents have been exposed to high levels of education and urbanisation (97.3% tertiary educated), which has developed a social environment in which constant comparison is unavoidable. This status competition reaches its climax in the wedding.

The wish to be perceived as being superior is the desire to have prestige and the fear of being perceived as inferior is peer pressure. This is the driver of the wedding market. The family factor introduces a

negative twist to the theory of Veblen in the Malawian setting. It implies that status cannot be purely individually possessed but it is also attributed to and by the family unit in a collective manner. The costly wedding, thus, turns out to be a family approach to social positioning and the conspicuous consumption is an intergenerational endeavour.

5.3.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings

The results are very much in line with the recent empirical studies on the social psychology of wedding expenditure. The survey, conducted by Nelson and Smith (2020) among the newlyweds of the US, concluded that the amount of money spent is directly related to the need to impress the social circle resonates with Lilongwe powerfully. Among this highly educated urban group, the influence of digital peer pressure as discussed by Chen and Li (2023) is probably one of them in which social networks promote and popularise a particular, and often costly, wedding aesthetic. Moreover, the research confirms that the wedding industry is active and not passive in Halliday (2021) argument that the industry constructs desires. The availability of a strong value chain of suppliers within Lilongwe as such poses a supply-side pressure in that elaborate services are easy to access and hence normal. The high influence of the desire of the family members provides a contrast to the Western context, which is more individualistic, which serves as the indicative of the long-term influence of the family structure in mediating global consumerist patterns in Africa, which is not as pronounced in the current literature.

5.4 Discussion of the Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification

The effects of commodification are a great paradox. Although 95.6% of couples said their wedding was a success and 45.5% said it was perfect, there are dire negative effects that accompany this success. The immediate consequence is the strain on finances with 65.9% of couples reporting to be strained financially and 38.64% of the couples taking loans thus entering into the married life in debt.

This economic pressure is accompanied by high levels of pre-wedding anxiety, which is reflected in the quote provided by KII: "So much stress and tension. Most noticeably, and arguably the most terrifying", the statistics indicate a possible loss of the emotional basis of the union with 60 percent of the

respondents saying that they do not love their partner. This signifies an alarming lack of connection in which the act of the wedding can be displacing the content of the relationship.

5.4.1 Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework

It is crucial to interpret these effects as the social costs that are bound to occur due to the conspicuous waste that is suggested by Veblen. The direct, material effects of spending on social distinction as opposed to raising life or the relationship are the financial strain and debt. The psychological burden of the enormous obligation to do status right is the pre-wedding stress and anxiety, which is the stigma of social non-conformity of a poor performance. The hypothetical framework of this paper foresaw the idea that the pressure of meeting the expectations of the society may result in fear and anxiety and even lead to the disintegration of the union. This very risk can be indicated by the discovery of a lack of love, which is a rather controversial finding, indicating that in cases where a marriage is entered as a status project, the emotional core can be overlooked or undermined.

5.4.2 Discussion in Relation to Recent Empirical Findings

It is not a new finding that marriage conflict is connected to wedding debt in Western literature (Wheatley & Frazier, 2021), and this paper validates that the issue is equally relevant in the Malawian setting, where the financial strains are even stronger. The mentioned pre-wedding stress is very close to the qualitative study of Peterson and Minton (2020) on bridezilla fatigue and the pressure to make a perfect performance. The contribution of this study is of most importance, though, is the discovery of emotional disconnection. It gives very clear empirical evidence to the claim by Garcia (2022) that the commodification may result in the loss of personal meaning. Such a large percentage of couples confessing to being devoid of love would indicate that the commercial and social pressures of the wedding may be so strong that they supersede the very point of the marriage.

This brings important concerns into the spectrum of whether commodified wedding, which is supposed to be a celebration of a relationship, can at times contradict it even at the beginning.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter is a synthesis of the empirical journey that was taken to examine the forces and effects of commodification of weddings within the Lilongwe City in Malawi. It addresses the question of findings and goes further to give the final findings of the research, stating its overall importance and addressing its shortcomings with academic integrity. The chapter is formatted in such a way that it gives a comprehensive closing by giving a summary of the main revelations, taking a multi-layered implication of the same in reference to both theory and practice, the limitations of the research and its practical suggestions regarding future research and policy intervention. This organized conclusion will make sure the study is meaningful to the discourse in the field of study as well as provide practical value to stakeholders in the Malawian socio-cultural setting.

6.2 Summary of the Findings

The investigation yielded a triad of interconnected findings that collectively paint a detailed picture of a profound socio-cultural shift in urban Malawi.

The research was conclusive that weddings in Lilongwe have been transformed into a big business. This is essentially evidenced by the significant amount of financial investment in question, as an average amount of MWK 5.96 million is spent on a single wedding, which constitutes a staggering percentage of up to eighty percent of the household income of an average couple. This investment is operationalized by an advanced and specialized business value chain, which encompasses the average of eight different vendors per wedding. This network of service providers is the indicator of the radical transformation of the community-based, relational support to the entirely monetized and professionalized market. Moreover, the long-time scale of the process, where the average length of the planning is 6.1 years, transforms the wedding into the long term financial and logistical project, which maintains a continuous engagement in the culture of consumption and social demand.

The Post Ceremony Segment comprises services that support the couple following the principal event. This final phase involves travel agents who organize honeymoon itineraries, managers who administer gift registries, and specialists who produce, design, and disseminate the official wedding photographs and video recordings that serve as a permanent record of the occasion. Collectively, these three interrelated segments constitute an integrated ecosystem that enables the progression of a wedding from initial conception to actualized occasion and subsequent commemoration.

6.3 Key Manifestations of Commodification in the Wedding Value Chain

The manifestations of commodification were evident across this value chain, directly addressing Research Question 1. These are evident in the monetization of traditional practices, whereby rituals that were once community-led are now outsourced to paid professionals. For instance, 85% of surveyed couples hired a professional caterer for the traditional Chinkhoswe ceremony, which was traditionally prepared by family and community members. A key finding was the fundamental transformation of the Chinkhoswe from a simple, intimate gathering of two families into a commercialized event.

Respondents consistently reported that the practice has evolved from a communal meal into a formalized occasion characterized by rented venues, curated menus, and significant financial budgeting. A second manifestation is the standardization of the "Ideal Wedding." A clear, media-driven template for a "proper" wedding has emerged, including a specific sequence of events: a "themed" decor (e.g., "purple and silver"), a multi-tiered wedding cake, a choreographed "first dance," and a professional video highlights reel. Survey data indicated that 92% of couples felt pressured to have a professional photographer, and 78% opted for a themed colour scheme for their decor. Commodification is reflected in the proliferation of wedding-specific vendors. The study identified a niche market of vendors whose businesses are solely dedicated to weddings.

These vendors actively promote packages (e.g., "The Platinum Package") that bundle services, further encouraging consumption. Wedding planners conceptualize their role as selling an experiential dream rather than merely providing a service. They frame the wedding as a cohesive narrative, where every aesthetic detail, from the table settings to the final departure, contributes to a curated story that couples purchase. The manifestations of commodification were evident across this value chain, directly addressing Research Question 1.

6.4 Psychosocial Impacts of Wedding Commodification on Couples (Specific Objective 3 & Research Question 3)

The commodification of weddings was found to have significant psychosocial consequences for couples, manifesting as stress, relational strain, and financial anxiety.

6.4.1 Pre- and Post-Wedding Financial Stress

The pressure to finance a commodified wedding was the most frequently cited source of stress. 70% of surveyed couples reported taking out loans or using savings originally intended for other life goals (e.g., housing, business). The pressure to conform to escalating wedding standards often leads to severe financial consequences. While couples feel compelled to 'keep up with others' to avoid social stigma, this frequently results in them starting their marriages under a significant burden of debt.

This debt, as one groom lamented, transforms the celebration into a long-term financial liability, creating a stark contrast between the single day of festivity and the years spent paying for it. This financial strain was a direct source of conflict, with 65% of couples reporting frequent arguments about wedding expenses during the planning phase.

6.4.2 Performance Anxiety and Diminished Enjoyment

Couples reported feeling like they were "performing" for their guests rather than authentically celebrating their union.

The focus shifted from the marital commitment to the flawless execution of the event. Several respondents reported that the intense focus on the aesthetic and logistical perfection of the event led to significant mental distraction.

This preoccupation often resulted in a diminished ability to be emotionally present during key ceremonial moments, such as the exchange of vows. Survey data indicated that 60% of couples described their wedding day as "stressful" or "a blur," rather than "joyful" or "memorable" in a positive sense.

6.5 Impact on Marital Satisfaction

The study found a link between the level of wedding commodification and early marital dissatisfaction. Couples who incurred significant debt for their wedding reported lower levels of satisfaction in the first year of marriage. They expressed resentment and anxiety, which overshadowed the initial marital bliss. A focus group discussion revealed that some couples experience a "post-wedding depression," a feeling of emptiness and anti-climax after the intense, consumption-focused build-up to the event.

6.6 Erosion of Cultural Meaning

Psychosocially, many couples and family elders expressed a sense of loss. They felt the deep cultural and symbolic meaning of the marriage rituals was being diluted by commercial interests. The wedding became more of a transactional, consumer product than a sacred rite of passage.

A recurring sentiment among elder participants was that the commodification of weddings is eroding the core cultural principle of Umunthu. They expressed a view that the focus has shifted from the communal uniting of two families towards a transactional event centred on financial display.

6.7 The Nexus of Driving Forces

This commodification has a strong, self-perpetuating nexus of drivers, which was identified in the analysis.

The main enabler is the financial ability, which is summarised as the income level of the couples and their families. Yet, it is the strong social compulsions that trigger this ability and enhance it significantly. Strong peer pressure and the insatiable desire to attain social prestige became the powers of the day and a competitive social-level emerged where weddings are among the main arenas of displaying status and invidious comparison.

One of the most important conclusions that contribute to the insight into this dynamic is that the role of the wishes of the family members plays a huge role. This shows that the pressure to commodify is indeed horizontal between peers and at the same time, it is vertical, and has its source in the older generation, thus, making the integration of traditional family needs and the new consumerist desires very complex.

6.8 The Paradox of Outcomes and Impacts

The paradoxical results of the commodification process may be considered perhaps the most important discovery of the given research. Although an enormous majority of the couples mentioned that their weddings were successful (and almost half said they were perfect), it was at a great cost. The most short-term effect was severe financial pressure where most of the couples ended up in financial difficulties, and a significant percentage had to take formal or informal loans thus starting their marriages in debt.

This economic strain was reinforced by high levels of pre-wedding mental anguish, stress and nervousness. Worst of all, the statistics indicated the possibility of corrosion of the very marital base, with an estimated high rate of emotional detachment, meaning that the commercial and performative requirements of the marriage can in certain instances outshine even the emotional intimacy that the institution is supposed to glorify.

6.9 Significance and Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carry substantial significance, extending their relevance from academic theory to practical application in Malawian society.

6.10 Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

The study is a powerful empirical support of the relevance of the Theory of the Leisure Class by Veblen to a modern, non-Western, developing society in Africa. The research shows that such notions as conspicuous consumption and invidious comparison are not the things of the past, but living and working forces that influence consumer behaviour in a city in Malawi. It also adds to this theoretical framework by showing that status consumption is not necessarily an individualistic endeavour. The family factor provides an important subtlety, as in a collectivist culture, conspicuous consumption may be a family-wide process of social positioning and status support, thus broadening the theoretical perspective of the motivations within Veblenian processes.

6.11 Practical and Policy Implications

The practical consequences of the current research are numerous and pressing. As a cautionary example to couples and families, the results can be used as an evidence-based warning, enabling them to have information concerning the psychosocial and financial dangers that an extravagant wedding may pose. This awareness is able to encourage more thoughtful, economically viable and personally fulfilling wedding planning. To policy-makers, the study offers a strong evidence base of how the mandatory pre-marital financial counselling and debt management education should be integrated into the currently existing legal and community frameworks, e.g. the legislation of Malawi Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act (2015).

Also, community awareness programs and social campaigns on health matters may be created to confront the social norm pressures that promote irresponsible expenditures.

These findings provide a factual basis upon which religious and community leaders, who are gatekeepers of the marriage institution, can educate couples to help them re-emphasise the wedding celebrations on cultural, spiritual, and relational values and not on material spectacle.

6.12 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides critical insights, its findings are bounded by several limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted in one urban capital, Lilongwe, and captured a predominantly highly educated population. This limits the generalisability of the findings to rural Malawi or other socio-economic groups. Secondly, the potential for social desirability bias exists, as respondents may have provided answers, they deemed socially acceptable regarding sensitive topics like love and finances. Finally, the non-probability sampling design, while was practical, it limited the statistical representativeness of the sample, and the correlational nature of the data prevents definitive causal claims.

6.12.1 Mitigation Strategies

To address these limitations, several strategies were employed. The use of mixed methods allowed for triangulation; qualitative insights helped to contextualise and validate the quantitative trends, mitigating the risk of misinterpretation. Purposive and snowball sampling while non-probabilistic, was the most feasible way to access the hard-to-reach population of recently married couples.

Anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously emphasised to encourage candid responses, reducing social desirability bias. Future research, as recommended below, is designed to directly overcome these limitations.

6.13 Recommendations for Further Research

To build upon the foundation laid by this study and address its identified limitations, several avenues for future research are recommended.

6.13.1 Expanding the Geographical and Demographic Scope

Further studies ought to employ stratified probabilistic sampling techniques in making a comparative study across the varying socio-cultural and economic environment of Malawi.

A comparative study that explicitly contrasts the commodification of weddings in large urban areas such as Blantyre and Mzuzu with the behaviour of the peri-urban and rural districts would provide a better and more finely-tuned and nationally reflective grasp of the phenomenon, showing how the urban city and cultural particularity moderate its manifestation.

6.13.2 Longitudinal and Causal Investigation

A longitudinal research design is highly suggested to get above the correlation and prove causality. Following a group of couples since the time of engagement until the first few years of marriage will enable researchers to categorically analyse the direct impact of the degree of wedding commodification and the debt incurred on the long term results including marital satisfaction, financial stability and termination of marriage. This would give unmatched knowledge on the long-term effects of first marriage decisions. Developing a deeper understanding of qualitative data is a key part of the course that includes many questions to explore the concepts mentioned earlier.

6.13.3 Deepening Qualitative Understanding

The finding related to emotional disconnection opens a critical area for deeper qualitative inquiry. A phenomenological study, utilising in-depth, confidential interviews, would be invaluable for exploring the lived experiences of couples. Such an approach could uncover the nuanced ways in which commercial pressures, family expectations, and personal desires interact, conflict, and ultimately shape the subjective meaning of the wedding and the ensuing marital relationship.

6.13.4 Investigating Emerging Digital Dynamics

Since the participants of the study have high education levels and digital media has a considerable impact on the whole world, a specific investigation is justified regarding the role of social media platforms.

The study might be done regarding the role of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp in presenting wedding consumption, reinforcing new types of peer pressure and invidious comparison, and developing a globally-aware, but locally-adaptable, version of the wedding script among young, aspirational Malawians.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter from MZUNIREC



MZUZU UNIVERSITY

DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH

Mzuzu University
Private Bag 201
Lilongwe 3
Malawi
TEL: 01 320 722
FAX: 01 320 548

MZUZU UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (MZUNIREC)

Ref No: MZUNIREC/DOR/23/113

05/12/2023.

Richard Manyamba,
Mzuzu University,
P/Bag 201,
Luwingu,
Mzuzu 2.

Email: manyambachied834@gmail.com

Dear Richard,
**RESEARCH ETHICS AND REGULATORY APPROVAL AND PERMIT FOR
PROTOCOL REF NO: MZUNIREC/DOR/23/113: DRIVERS AND IMPACT OF
COMMUNICATION OF WEDDING: A CASE STUDY OF LILONGWE CITY,
MALAWI.**

Having satisfied all the relevant ethical and regulatory requirements, I am pleased to inform you that the above referred research protocol has officially been approved. You are now permitted to proceed with its implementation. Should there be any amendments to the approved protocol in the course of implementing it, you shall be required to seek approval of such amendments before implementation of the same.

This approval is valid for one year from the date of issuance of this approval. If the study goes beyond one year, an annual approval for continuation shall be required to be sought from the Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC) in a format that is available at the Secretariat. Once the study is finalised, you are required to furnish the Committee with a final report of the study. The Committee reserves the right to carry out compliance inspection of this approved protocol at any time as may be deemed by it. As such, you are expected to properly maintain all study documents including consent forms.

Wishing you a successful implementation of your study.

Committee Address:
Secretariat, Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee, P/Bag 201, Luwingu, Mzuzu 2; E-mail address: mzunirec@mzu.ac.mw

Yours Sincerely,

Gift Mhwele

SENIOR RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATOR

For: CHAIRMAN OF MZUNIREC

Appendix 2: Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee Informed Consent Form (English)



Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC)

Informed Consent Form for Research in Agri-Sciences

Introduction

I am **Richard Manyamba** from the Department of agri-Sciences in the Faculty of Environmental Sciences at Mzuzu University. We are doing research on *Commodification of wedding: a case study of Lilongwe city, Malawi*. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of me or of another researcher.

Purpose of the research

This research aims to analyse the drivers and impact of commodification of wedding on the main actors in Lilongwe city, Malawi.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve your participation in answering an individual interview.

Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your capacity as

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. If you choose not to participate nothing will change. You may skip any question and move on to the next question.

Duration

The research takes place from the month of October 2023 to May 2024.

Risks

You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion/interview/survey if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

Sharing the Results

The knowledge that we get from this research will be shared with you and your community before it is made widely available to the public. Following, we will publish the results so that other interested people may learn from the research.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact: Associate Prof Mavuto Tembo (supervisor), Mzuzu University, Private Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu 2. Phone: 0997376822, Email: tembo.m@mzuni.ac.mw; or you can contact Dr. Ulemu Msiska (Postgraduate Coordinator), Department of Agri-Sciences, Mzuzu University, Private Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu 2.

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC) which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to find out more about the Committee, contact Mr. Gift Mbwele, Mzuzu University Research Ethics (MZUNIREC) Administrator, Mzuzu University, P/Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu 2, Phone: 0999404008/0888641486

Do you have any questions?

Part II: Certificate of Consent

*I have been invited to participate in research about **Commodification of wedding: a case study Lilongwe city, Malawi.***

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study

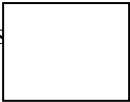
Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

If illiterate¹

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has  sent freely.

Print name of witness _____

Thumb print of participant

Signature of witness _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands the research project. I confirm the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

¹ A literate witness must sign (if possible, this person should be selected by the participant and should have no connection to the research team). Participants who are illiterate should include their thumb print as well.

Date _____

Day/month/year

Appendix 2 b: Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee Informed Consent Form (Chichewa)



Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC)

Informed Consent Form for Research in Agri-Sciences

Mau oyamba

Ine ndine **Richard Manyamba** kuchokera ku gawo la maphunziro la Agri-Sciences mu nthambi ya Environmental Sciences ku Mzuzu University. Tikuchita kafukufuku wa *Ukwati ngati bizinesi, mu mnzinda wa Lilongwe, Malawi*. Kalata ya chilolezoyi itha kukhala ndi mau oti simukutha kuwavetsa bwino. Chonde muzindiuza kuti ndiime ndifotokozele pamene tikuchita kafukufukuyu. Ngati muli ndi mafuso ena, fuseni ineyo kapena azanga omwe ndikuchita nawo kafukufukuyu.

Cholinga cha kafukufuku

Kafukufukuyu akufuna kuzukuta zifukwa komanso zotsatira zomapanga Ukwati ngati bizinesi kwa anthu amu mnzinda wa Lilongwe, Malawi.

Mtundu wa kafukufuku

Kafukufukuyu akudalila kutengapo gawo kwanu poyankha mafuso amene ndikufuseni mkucheza kwathu.

Mchifukwa chani mwasankhidwa?

Mwasankhidwa kuti muchite nawo kafukuyu potengela udindo wanu ngati

Kutengapo gawo pa kafukufuku mosakakamiza

Kutengapo gawo kwanu pa kafukufukuyu mkosakakamiza. Muli ndi ufulu kutengapo gawo kapena ayi. Mukasankha kusachita nawo kafukufukuyu palibe icho chisintho. Muli ndi ufulu kusiya mafuso ena

osayankha mkuyankhako ena.

Kafukufukuyu atenga nthawi yotalika bwanji?

Kafukufukuyu atenga mwezi umodzi wa okotobala chaka chomwe chino.

Zodzetsa Nkhawa

Simukuyenera kuyankha mafuso kapena kutengapo mbali mkucheza ngati mukuona kuti mafuso ena salibwino kapena simunasangalare nawo.

Cholowa/Kulipidwa

Kutenga nawo gawo pa kafukufukuyu ndi kwa ulere ndipo simudzalandira kalikonse.

Kugawana zotsatila za Kafukufuku

Zotsatila za kafukufukuyu zidzagawidwa kwa inu amene mutengepo mbali ndi anthu a mdela lanu zisanagawidwe ku mtundu wose wa aMalawi. Zotsatila za kafukufukuyu zidasindikizidwa mu m’buku kuti anthu ose ofuna kuva zambiri za kafukufukuyu athe kutero.

Oti mungathe kulumikizana nawo

Ngati muli ndi mafuso, mutha kufusa panopa kapena nthawi ina. Ngati mukufuna kudzafusa nthawi ina chonde alembeleni kalata a Associate Prof Mavuto Tembo omwe ndi aphuzitsi ku Mzuzu University pa adilesi iyi: Private Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu, kapena aimbileni foni pa 0997376822. Mutha kutumizaso kalata ku imelo adilesi iyi: tembo.m@mzuni.ac.mw. Mutha Kulembelaso Dr Ulemu Msiska (Postgraduate Coordinator), Department of Agri-Sciences, Mzuzu University, Private Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu 2. Foni: 0994954025, Imelo adilesi: kaluwa.a@mzuni.ac.mw.

Kafukufukuyu waunikidwa ndi kuvomerezedwa ndi a Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC) yomwe ndi komiti yoonetsetsa kuti ochita nawo kafukufuku ndi otetezedwa mu njira ina iliyose. Ngati mukufuna kuva zambili za komitiyi lumikizananani ndi a Gift Mbwele pa adilesi iyi: Mzuzu University Research Ethics (MZUNIREC) Administrator, Mzuzu University, P/Bag 201, Luwinga, Mzuzu 2, Ma nambala awo a foni: 0999404008/0888641486

Muli ndi mafuso Lirilonse?

Gawo lachiwiri: Kalata yovomereza

Ndaitanidwa kuti ndichite nawo kafukufuku pa Ukwati ngati bizinesi, mu Mnzinda wa Lilongwe, Malawi.

Ndawelenga komaso andiwelengera zose zoyenera pa kafukufukuyu. Ndinapatsidwa mwayi oti ndifunse mafuso pa kafukufukuyu ndipo mafuso ose ndinafusa andiyankha mogwira mtima. Ndikuvomereza kuchita nawo kafukufuyu mwakufuna kwanga

Dzina la ochita nawo kafukufuku _____

Signature _____

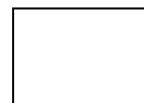
Tsiku _____

Tsiku/Mwezi/Chaka

Ngati ali osatha kelemba ndi Kuwelenga²

Ndaonelela kuwerenga kolondola kwa kalata ya chivomerezo kwa otenga nawo mbali pa kafukufukuyu. Ndipo otenga nawo mbaliyu anapatsidwa mwayi ofusa mafuso. Ndikutsimikizira kuti otenga nawo mbaliyu wavomereza yekha kutenga nawo mbali pa kafukufukuyu.

Dzina la mboni _____ Otenga nawo mbali adinde ndi chala apa



Signature ya mboni _____

Tsiku _____

Tsiku/Mwezi/Chaka

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

²Mboni yodziwa kulemba imusainile uyu ochita nawo kafukufuku (ngati mkotheke mboniyi isankhindwe ndi uyu ochita nawo kafukufuku osati awo ochititsa kafukufuku). Ochita nawo kafukufuku omwe sadziwa kulemba adindeso ndi chala.

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands the research project. I confirm the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

Date _____

Day/month/year