

Virtual Vows: Social Media Influence on the Guwahati Wedding Curation and Conventions

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Abstract

The Assamese marriage demonstrates a blending of several cultural rites due to different social structures that have evolved, and numerous alterations in wedding practices have been taking place. It is no longer an emotional affair but celebrated like festivities with extravagance, made popular by the Bollywood films and the magnum opus called 'Social Media'. This paper explores the influence of social media on Assamese weddings and its trends in Guwahati city. It locates the choice, usage patterns, transition, and applications of various social media platforms in wedding photography. An intensive interview was conducted with local wedding photographers to elicit their experiences. The paper provides a broad picture of the shifting cultural environment in Assam, the intricacies of various cultural interactions, and the rise of the popularity of social media.

Introduction

The Indian wedding celebrations reflect the country's pluralistic culture. In some parts, the events start months before the actual wedding day. The Assamese wedding, 'Biya', is an amalgamation of various ethnic communities and a blend of traditions, customs, and rites. The Hindu weddings of yesteryears followed the age-old Hindu Vedic rules, and one of the significant rituals of Assamese weddings is 'Juron', which takes place before the wedding day. During this ritual, the groom's family, particularly female relatives and the mother of the groom visit the bride's family to present various wedding gifts.¹

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These include the traditional *mekhela chadar*, jewelry, cosmetics, and various accessories, serving as a symbolic gesture of the groom's family's support, blessings, and acknowledgment of the bride's transition into marriage.² In addition, in the '*Pani tula*' ceremony, water is collected for the sacred bath of the bride and groom. Family members collect water from a nearby pond or river using metal jars or earthen pitchers. In 'Nuoni', the water collected from the river or pond, the bride and groom are made to bathe by the mothers in their respective homes.³ Several other items like black gram pulses, raw turmeric paste, and other oils and herbs are used for this ceremonial bath. During the 'Tel Diya' ceremony, the groom's mother places a ring and betel nut on the bride's hair parting and pours oil over the betel three times. Following this, she applies sindoor (vermilion) on the bride's hair partition and gifts her marriage attire. '*Nau-purush shraddha*' also performs, worshipping the forefathers, and praying for the well-being of the bride and the groom.



Photograph-1: Juron Ceremony⁴

As time evolved, there have been numerous alterations in the marital custom. It is no longer an emotional affair but rather celebrated like festivities that demonstrate the blending of several cultural rites made popular by Bollywood films and the magnum opus called 'The Social Media' (Facebook and Instagram). Social media's low cost, easy accessibility, and quick information transformation have made it an important platform for people to consume.⁵ In this context, the

paper examines how wedding photography has changed as a result of consumer expectations and personal preferences. It demonstrates the influence of social media on Assamese weddings, its trends, choices, transition, and applications of various social media platforms in wedding photography in Guwahati city. To elicit the experiences, an intensive interview was conducted with the local wedding photographers that provided a broad picture of the shifting cultural environment and the intricacies of various cultural interactions with the rise of social media. The paper rationalized the theoretical frameworks through Media Dependency Theory⁶ (MDT) to comprehend the trends in wedding photographs in Guwahati city. MDT holds that the audience is the larger social structure, and the media are all interrelated. Media usage on a large scale creates audience dependency and the related phenomenon in people's lives today is the result of new media and internet usage. There is a symbiotic relationship between people and new media showcasing new trends and status of social media scenarios and serves as a novel form of communication necessary for communicating and constructing one's own identity.

Wedding practices transition - documentation in photography

The shift in Assamese wedding customs is significantly influenced by both digitalization and globalization. Appropriation of cultures is quite visible, making weddings look more like festivals, which has become a norm in contrast to bringing people together. The pre and post-wedding rituals and ceremonies are the most noticeable alterations such as the application of haldi and mehendi. There was a time when wedding memories were stored in photo albums. However, it has changed drastically in recent times with the growth of digital platforms, and the demand for photography has increased manifold. Nowadays, photographs have been taken during pre-wedding, wedding, and post-wedding events. On such occasions, Instagram-worthy picture-perfects are immediately published. Even new updated expensive cameras are easily available and have made it easier for people to document day-to-day activities. Professional photographers and cinematographers have increased over time as their creative skills help in capturing stunning snapshots.

Cinematography has found an outlet with the growth of technological advancement in photography. Photographers generate a narrative-driven film that follows the couple from their initial meeting to their wedding day.

Popularity in social media

Social media is predominantly used by people of all ages and has become an important platform for weddings. When the wedding season arrives, Facebook and Instagram are primarily overrun with the photographs. Assamese weddings on the other hand, often feature customary rituals documented through photography including changes in terms of grandeur, and one's capacity for luxury spending, decoration, food, fashion, and entertainment. The proliferation of social media identities and accounts among aspiring wedding photographers is another trending aspect of having the option to sell and grow their companies. They gain awareness and recognize the aesthetic value of photography by sharing their photos on social media and finding inspiration from a variety of sources. Today, the majority of wedding and company inquiries are made online, making it mandatory for service providers to promote their work on social media platforms. As per the market data from 2020, the wedding sector accounts for the majority of the \$78 billion market.⁷ According to candid wedding photography brand ZGP (2017) weddings in India are currently a booming \$30 billion industry. Wedding photography, formerly an optional expense, has evolved into an essential component of the entire event. The Indian wedding industry is growing at a rate of 25-30% annually.⁸ Indians spend Rs 60,000 crores on jewelry and roughly Rs 10,000 crores each year, hotel booking for wedding-related Rs 5000 crores, and KPMG estimated that the Indian wedding sector generated Rs 3.68 trillion.⁹

Visual thematic based wedding photographs

To understand the changing characteristics of weddings in Guwahati, a few wedding photographers were interviewed. The following themes emerge from the interview which are codified and represented in a graphical form. The themes are Social Media and Cultural Diffusion, Status Quo, Romance in Social Media, Visual Aesthetics, and Commodification (fig 1).

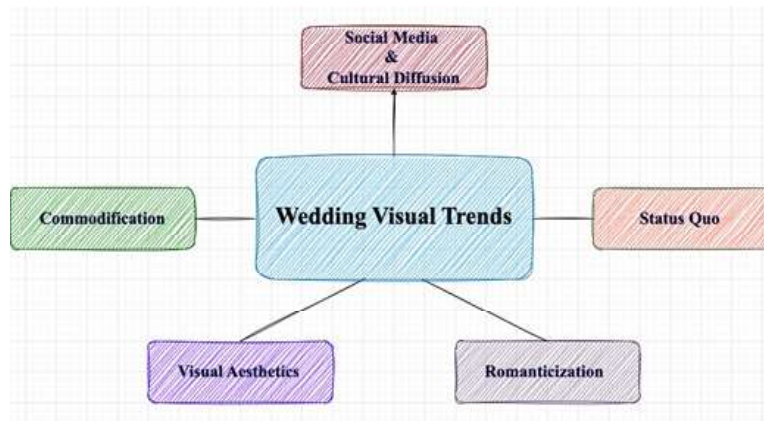


Fig.1. Thematic Illustration of Wedding Photographs

Social media and cultural diffusion

The culture of diffusion occurs under the mechanism of interaction of cultures that are not static. The interaction between individuals from various cultures leads to the diffusion of cultural components.¹⁰ Assam weddings today are a blend of regional customs inspired by mainstream Bollywood films and celebrity pages on different social media platforms. The extension of the pre-wedding or post-wedding celebrations is the result of this cultural fusion. Photographer Tiku Baishya claims that *"nowadays, everyone uses social media...photographed...captured the entire event...traditions and customs, there is a glaring contrast. Assamese weddings used to be simple but it has become a common practice to adopt new rituals from different cultures...mehendi and haldi are seen in contemporary Assamese weddings today; images of this celebration can be found on social media"*. The use of social media has significantly affected people and the mindset which has led to new developments in Assamese wedding traditions.



Photograph-2: Mehendi Ceremony¹¹

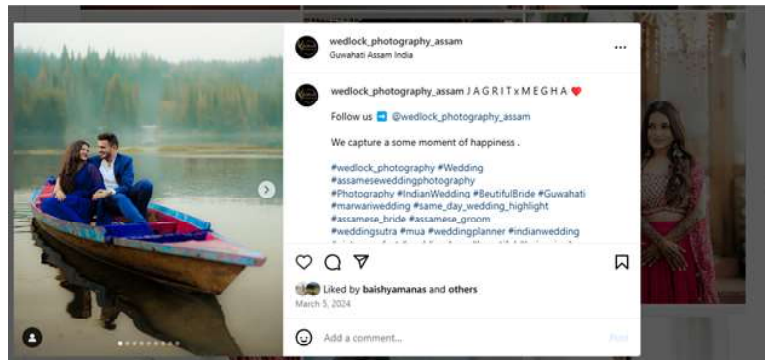
Status quo

Media performs ideological functions in many ways. The main purpose of the media is to propagate the ideas of the ruling class and uphold the status quo, which perpetuates the current unequal capitalist system.¹² The new norm now involves following the dominant trends on social media to keep up with new customs and trends. Following current trends of wedding practices, which are primarily learned through social media allows people to adapt and maintain the status quo. In exchange, the photographer provides varied services. Guwahati-based wedding photographer Unique Borah stated that *"wedding photography is extremely in high demand and the upper middle class or wealthy class from the city has fundamentally altered what a wedding is and how it is conducted. Wedding planning including photography are all enhanced, and people want to establish a position in the community by spending lavishly, while the lower middle class also tries to follow the trend. Even if there is a division of income, it is clear that people spend practically all of their life's earnings or take loans for weddings"*.

Romanticisation

Through their social media accounts, romanticization is molded and formed into images of self-presentation that are ultimately made public on these platforms. The self-presentation is an attempt to control images of self to others specifics of personal identity, social dynamics, influence of the environment, and the flow and interactive

meaning of information.¹³ Actors employ a variety of verbal and nonverbal cues to sway audiences' perceptions of their identities, whether they are their ideal selves or their true selves. The couples are thus constructing the self-presentation of themselves in passionate harmony in the wedding photographs, in addition to announcing their new relationship on screen.



Photograph-3: Post-Wedding¹⁴

Visual aesthetics

Visual aesthetics in communication techniques relates to the presenter's artistic impressions of themselves and the extent to which other viewers regard these presentations to be visually appealing and aesthetically impressive.¹⁵ There is a pressing demand for improving the wedding venue's aesthetic presentation and outstanding location shots. Couples are eager to experiment with the décor for wedding ceremonies to create a sensory experience including color theme, clothing, etc.¹⁶ Wedding photographers claim that, in contrast to earlier times, the venue's design and construction have altered. The best way to find ideas and inspiration is through the social media pages of similar events of friends or celebrities. People follow the designers and celebrities they adore on Instagram or Facebook to obtain style inspiration from them. Bridals and grooms can now easily communicate with event planners, designers, make-up artists, and photographers because everything can be done through digital platforms. This has strengthened Baishya's assertion regarding the visual aesthetic, "Today, one's digital appearance is extremely important. The photographer also makes an effort to give it his all, which helps to distinguish him in the increasingly fierce social media

rivalry. The couples want the nicest photo to share on social media because it makes them feel satisfied. People want to select the best and the most well-known wedding photographers, therefore to stand out, the photographer must be exceptional and the best at what he does".

Commodification

People do not hesitate to spend large sums of money to make their weddings unforgettable because they believe that it is the biggest financial investment of their lives.¹⁷ Additionally, this has to do with how the wedding is advertised and commercialized on social media platforms. Photographer Unique Borah expressed, "Social media is a free platform that is open to all users and so the growing number of photographers. As a result, the usage is more than in the past. It is a crucial component, and favor it above all other media that run commercials". Consequently, everything in the celebration, from the flowers to the food, has been made into a commodity via ways of offering different services exclusively for the wedding. Even, the majority of the wedding photographers were involved in wedding planning. Wedding planning as a commodification process of family life with a profession has just lately developed and grown quickly inside the commodity frontier.¹⁸ The wedding planners have replaced the family's involvement in arranging for the celebration whereas some of the assignments were given to the photographers.



Photograph-4: Wedding Ceremony¹⁹

Discussion and conclusion

With an annual increase of 25% to 30% and Rs 3.75 lakh crore spent on weddings in 2021, the wedding business is booming in India. It is anticipated that the wedding sector will generate Rs. 3.75 lakh crore in sales and 2.5 million marriages occurred within the same period, generating revenues of Rs. 3 lakh crore.²⁰ This information shows the current state of costs and the amount of money the wedding business brings in. The services that range from ordering hotel rooms to hiring a florist are all included in the commodity of wedding planning. The business owner who disregarded the importance of online presence has undoubtedly realized the impact of social media on how people communicate and grow the base of their consumers.²¹ Social media providers have created tools specifically for business branding and urged entrepreneurs to use social media as a marketing platform.

The wedding industry in Assam also meets the needs of the populace as it no longer has to spend time coordinating and planning for wedding arrangements.²² With the advent of the internet, the wedding companies of Assam promote their services on social media with customized ideas to suit the needs of the clients. Photographers, wedding planners, influencers, and celebrities are so drawn to and are encouraged to use their creative inventions in the wedding. Photographers and wedding planners use social media to advertise and market their services. Wedding celebrations in Assam, especially in Guwahati city, now tend to post their wedding photos on social media and share them with online friends and relatives highlighting the apparent cross-culture. Lavish wedding outfits made of 'pat-muga' silk in the form of gowns, extremely extravagant cakes, and Assamese biya naam were replaced by Bollywood peppy songs. The bridal entry with a custom-made flower bed and color theme is one of the significant examples of cross-cultural rituals adopted in Assamese weddings. The Assamese weddings are a good illustration of cultural diffusion in the 'haldi' tradition, a recent change, celebrated with utmost zeal. While the application of 'haldi' or raw turmeric, is just one component of the wedding day ceremonial. Mehendi and Sangeet were never a part of an Assamese wedding but it has turned into an important part of the wedding. Besides, the visual creative display in the celebration with an amalgamation of the bride and groom's dresses,

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a combination of regional traditions and customs, influenced by popular Bollywood films. The couple creates a presentation of their ideal selves by exhibiting their affection in photographs that announce their relationship status. With the rapidly expanding wedding industry, various other industries like the hospitality industry, tourism industry, beauty and fashion industry, photography industry, etc have also expanded their market.²³ The cost bearing was modest before the debut of the wedding services currently offered, but now the service providers manufacture and weave the wedding case-by-case basis.



Photograph-5: Wedlock Photography²⁴

This study is consistent with the media dependency theory which suggests that apart from seeking information, social media is used for entertainment and sociability, and people become more dependent on satisfying their needs. In this context, a dependency has formed between people and social media to upload photographs of important events, especially weddings. The inclination towards social media has turned out to be a new obsession among people as they spend long hours scrolling and borrowing ideas. The transformation of Assamese weddings is influenced by Bollywood and Western culture. The traditional folk dance originated in Punjab, 'Bhangra' is performed in some of the Assamese weddings. People find a superior sense by imitating the culture, values, practices, and beliefs of other communities. Social media today is one of the prominent establishments that people use for their benefit, inculcating foreign ideas and beliefs, and somehow side-lining their native culture.

In conclusion, numerous customs that had never been a part of Assamese weddings are appropriated from Instagram and Facebook as people emulate fashion trends.

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