

Social Pressure and Excessive Wedding Spending: Financial Stress among Middle-Class Parents in Pakistan

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Abstract

Over the last few years, the wedding rituals in Pakistan have become expensive due to social acceptance, community pressure, dowry burdens, and pomp and display. This study examines the effects of social pressure and overspending on weddings on financial stress for the middle-class parents of Pakistan. The study draws on Social Comparison Theory as well as Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption to examine three Independent Variables namely Conspicuous Consumption (CC), Community Spending Norms (CSN) and Dowry Practices (DP) and their influence on the mediating variable Ceremonial Expenditures (CE); the moderating variable Socioeconomic Status (SS) and the collective impact of these independent variables on Financial Stress (FS). This was a quantitative cross-sectional survey design with the inclusion of $n = 225$ middle-class parents from all over Pakistan. Moderated mediation pathways were tested using Hayes (Hayes, 2017a) PROCESS Macro (Model 7) on SPSS. Results show that Ceremonial Expenditures plays a significant mediation role between all three predictors and Financial Stress, and a significant moderation role between Socioeconomic Status and the Dowry Practices-Ceremonial Expenditures pathway (Index of Moderated Mediation = 0.0904, 95% CI [0.0243, 0.1736]). The results suggest useful implications for financial counseling, social policy, and financial education interventions with pre-marital financial planning in Pakistani society.

Keywords: Conspicuous Consumption, Community Spending Norms, Dowry Practices, Ceremonial Expenditures, Financial Stress, Socioeconomic Status, Wedding Spending, Pakistan, Moderated Mediation

Introduction

Though marriage is important in all cultures, in Pakistan, weddings are now a socio-economic procedure and often leave families in appalling monetary crises (Ahmed, 2025). Weddings are now much more than things done to send out signals: They are

used to build up prestige and confirm their status in the community. Especially in the middle class, people are confined between the pressure of cultural expectations and the insufficiency of their resources: they have to spend money beyond their means to keep up appearances.

The economic consequences of such expenditure patterns are great. The families frequently face this challenge and liquidate their life savings, sell assets, and incur long-term loans for wedding events that can span days and entertain hundreds of guests. It is not just about an individual and their behavior; it is about the wider phenomenon of a socially pressured 'burial in halacha' which speaks of the intermingling of the festivity elements about marriage and grandeur with the elements of honouring. the family and assigning responsibilities to the parents. For middle-class families where their livelihoods are already vulnerable to shocks and stresses, these are costs that can lead to long-term financial strain and consequently diminish security for their households.

There are three key social forces which contribute to this trend: Conspicuous consumption – the act of publicly showing off wealth through extravagant spending (Veblen, 2017) and community spending norms – the community's collective standards for what it considers acceptable spending on weddings and dowry practices – the cultural convention of transferring goods and wealth from the bride's family to the groom's family and which accounts for a significant monetary burden on a social event that is already expensive (Nawaz & Hassan, n.d.). These all contribute to heightening the spending of host families to host, thereby increasing the financial strain on hosting families.

Importantly, the socio-economic status (SES) determines how these social pressures influence spending on alcohol. Although higher SES could help families to cope with the control over how finances would impact them, it is also possible that higher SES increases the expectations for grandeur. Canada is home to the paradox that low SES families would be expected to be more vulnerable to financial pressures, as they are under the greatest social pressures and have the least financial means to handle these pressures.

Though the situation has its social and economic implications, the empirical research related to the mechanisms of this phenomenon is still limited and focuses on mediation and moderation effects, especially in the context of Pakistan. The purpose of this study is to fill that gap through developing and testing a moderated mediation model where ceremonial spending can be considered a mechanism linking social pressures and financial stress, and socioeconomic status is a boundary condition.

1.1 Research Problem Statement

It can be noted that middle-class parents in Pakistan have already taken a huge hit over these exorbitant wedding expenses due to social pressures that they are being coerced into making such expensive weddings. This is a widely talked about phenomenon in Pakistani society; however, there is a lack of scientific research on its psychological, social, and economic processes. In particular, the financial strains stemming from conspicuous consumption, community spending norms, and dowry practices, as well as the 'moderating' effects of socioeconomic status and how this

affects ceremonial expenditure in an integrated model, have not been adequately studied.

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Research Objectives

The current study aims at the following tasks:

To explore direct and indirect links between conspicuous consumption, community spending norms, dowry practices, and financial stress of the middle-class parents in Pakistan.

To examine the mediator role of ceremonial spending in the link between each of the independent variables and financial stress.

To examine if there is socioeconomic status moderation between dowry practices and ceremonial expenditures.

To deliver policy implications to Pakistan's policy makers, financial counsellors, and officials at community levels to reduce financial stress stimulated by marriage.

Research Gap

There are a number of important limitations uncovered in the literature. Firstly, the studies on conspicuous consumption behaviour and financial behaviour are limited in nature in the Western context, where marriage is mostly formally defined as an act between two unrelated parties (Perez-Truglia, 2019), and in the context of India, it does not apply to the cultural context, as marriage is one of the family's obligations and one of the social performances. Second, studies on dowry in South Asia have mainly concentrated on gender inequality and violence, with very few studies focusing on the financial burden on the group that pays out the dowry. Third, there is no previous Pakistani study that has included ceremonial spending as a mediation between social pressures and financial stresses. Fourth, socioeconomic status has been shown to play a boundary-setting role in these processes, but this has not been formally tested with moderated mediation analysis. The study tries to fill these gaps by means of an integrated quantitative model, which is the direct answer to the problem.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

This study is based on two interrelated theoretical bases. According to Social Comparison Theory, people check the views, skills, and social status of others. In the field of marriage, this competitive comparison shows up as a characteristic of "competitive spending": parents spend money to improve their marriage because they see their neighbours and their peers in the community hosting their ceremonies, and they want their marriage to be better (Gulzar et al., n.d.). Upward comparisons are a compulsion and lead to a 'social ratchet effect' over time of inflating social norms of spending.

This is complemented by Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption (1899) that how luxury and excess are instrumentalized for purposes of status signaling. The wedding economy in Pakistan is driven by conspicuous consumption: the size of the wedding venue, the number of dishes served, the types of jewellery worn, and the price of bridal wear are all public displays of wealth. The wedding economy in Pakistan is one that is characterized by conspicuous consumption: the large banquet hall, the quantity of dishes, the style of jewellery worn, and the cost of bridal wear all serve as public markers of a family's affluence (Nawaz & Farooq, 2025). Those families who are not able to maintain these signals find themselves socially isolated, and so there are strong incentives for them to overspend even if they can't afford it.

Aligned with these theories, the economists predicted that this effect would become clear in ceremonial spending exceeding the economic means of families and result in financial stress – especially manifested in the middle class, where the potential for attaining higher social status is greater than their economic means.

Conspicuous Consumption and Financial Stress

Across cultures, conspicuous consumption has been extensively reported to be a source of financial distress (Perez-Truglia, 2019). Weddings, amongst other things, are the prime place where people indulge in conspicuous consumption, families racing behind each other to have the most expensive wedding in Pakistan, so as to surpass their social peers. (Ahmed, 2025) reported that the average monthly expenditure of Pakistani families on their marriage ceremonies is between 40-60% of their total income, earned annually, with a large amount secured from loans.

This socially motivated surplus expenditure results in a debt stress cycle as families are unable to easily meet their debts, which in turn brings them financial stress (characterized by a reduction in savings, a decrease in consumption, and the presence of psychological stress) for an extended period of time. Found a non-linear link between conspicuous consumption and financial stress – that middle classes have an uneven burden, being pressured to consume in relation to both elite norms and to lack of resources in relation to working-class consumption (Gulzar et al., n.d.).

Community Spending Norms

Community spending norms are the knowledge, values, and norms in a community about what is proper or proper wedding costs that are shared and enforced by the

social group. These are informal institutions that limit the choices of individuals and direct the money investment in the culturally designated directions. This means that norms on community spending are spread through family networks, chatter among neighbours and social media, and, if you join their circle, by actual observation, which can be quite powerful as informational or normative influences for would-be wedding hosts in Pakistan.

It is the parents' perceived spending norms among the community that turn out to be the greatest factor in determining the budget of a marriage, more so than even the financial ability they had for spending. This aligns with the social science (sociology) literature on the notion of normative conformity, which finds that in high-stakes ceremonial contexts, more would influence an individual's choices of belonging to a social group and fear of being ostracized from it than rationality based on economic interests. Whenever there is a gap between household income and the community norm and when community norms change more rapidly than do household incomes, the financial strain of maintaining conformity to the community norm is especially pronounced.

Dowry Practices and Financial Burden

Dowry – the transfer of property and wealth from the bride's family to the groom's family, at the time of marriage, is a deep-seated practice throughout South Asia (Nawaz & Hassan, n.d.). Although unconstitutional, the culture of dowry demands persists in Pakistan, and the amount is on the rise, especially in urban areas among the middle class. The practice simply adds a considerable sum of money on top of the costs involved in weddings.

Dowry goods consist of a combination of furniture, electrical equipment, jewellery, and cash, which is an extra 20-35% on total wedding expenditure reported by the middle-class families in Pakistan. Such a cost often comes from liquidation of savings or taking out an informal loan at very high annual interest rates. As importantly, dowry demands are often impossible to refuse, and can be publicly enforced by community surveillance, and are a very coercive form of financial pressure. The dowry system, coupled with social expectations about ways to pay respects at such ceremonies, puts additional economic pressures on individuals, which can affect them for years after marriage.

Ceremonial Expenditures as a Mediating Mechanism

Social pressures through weddings become financial stresses in the main consumption: the monetary outlay associated with wedding events. Families who feel conspicuous consumption pressure, conformity pressure of people in their community, and dowry obligation reflect these by expressing the same in an inflated wedding budget that, in turn, leads to debts, savings exhaustion, and financial anxiety, which is financial stress (Ahmed, 2025; Hussain & Agha, 2021).

The mediating effect of ceremonial expenditures suggests that such consequences as wedding spending behaviors might be interrupted by intervening wedding spending policy. While the quantitative data gives evident insight into how marriage affects

family well-being, the qualitative data finds clear evidence that marriage is not necessarily a contributor to family well-being when parents in low-income communities who can prepare and have a say in the expenditure to bring about the wedding report significantly reduced financial tensions after their child gets married, as compared to parents who were unable to do so.

Socioeconomic Status as a Moderator

There are two competing ways in which socioeconomic status comes between the relationship of social pressures and ceremonial expenditures. This suggests that, while also being expensive in absolute dollars in cities compared to other places, the risk of financial stress that accompanies wedding spending will be lower for higher SES groups due to the financial resources of these groups. Conversely, the more privileged the SES, the more he or she is exposed to normative aspirations in the community and the more frequent the social comparisons, which can be expected to intensify ceremonial spending, even beyond what can be afforded by the income level.

Moderation of the relationship between SES and dowry expenditure was established by Iqbal and Chaudhry in Pakistan, as high SES families are more prone to spending high dowries because of high community expectations. This moderated mediation model is similar to that proposed by the present study.

Research Model and Hypotheses

The present study proposes an integrated moderated mediation model (Hayes Model 7) with the following structure:

H1: Conspicuous Consumption (CC) positively predicts Ceremonial Expenditures (CE).

H2: Community Spending Norms (CSN) positively predict Ceremonial Expenditures (CE).

H3: Dowry Practices (DP) positively predict Ceremonial Expenditures (CE).

H4: Ceremonial Expenditures (CE) positively predict Financial Stress (FS).

H5: Ceremonial Expenditures mediates the relationship between Conspicuous Consumption and Financial Stress.

H6: Ceremonial Expenditures mediates the relationship between Community Spending Norms and Financial Stress.

H7: Ceremonial Expenditures mediates the relationship between Dowry Practices and Financial Stress.

H8: Socioeconomic Status moderates the relationship between each IV and Ceremonial Expenditures.

H9: The mediated effect of each IV on Financial Stress via Ceremonial Expenditures is moderated by Socioeconomic Status.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Based on the positivist approach that was used in this study, a quantitative approach with a survey type of research was used. This design is suitable for comparing a single

time neglect of kids with a causal hypothesis about the relationship between the tested causal variable and the outcome variable (Creswell, n.d.; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study uses secondary and descriptive data obtained from questionnaires, which are then self-administered among the selected sample of middle-class parents from Pakistan.

Obtains samples and data

Middle-class parents n=225 who had hosted and sponsored wedding ceremonies in the last five years were selected to collect the data. The survey sample was derived based on purposive sampling, for respondents to have experience in deciding on wedding expenditure and financial impact. The sample has been gathered using community networks, mosques, educational institutes, and social organisations in the urban and peri-urban regions of Pakistan. Operationalization of middle-class status was done based on the monthly income of the household, which was divided into ranges as per the income classification standards of Pakistan. The surveys were conducted through Urdu and English as an extra precaution to avoid misconceptions due to educational backgrounds.

Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured with appropriate scales that were previously used in this context, with a Likert scale, and were adapted to the Pakistani context. Conspicuous Consumption (CC) is measured with 9 items measuring the tendency towards spending money in a publicly visible way for status signaling purposes. Community Spending Norms (CSN) was tested with 13 variables that were based on perceived levels of spending expectations in the community for weddings. 9 items were used to measure Dowry Practices (DP) to understand the range and financial pressure related to dowry obligations. Ceremonial Expenditures (CE) was assessed using 8 items, which measured the extent to which it is deemed appropriate to spend money on wedding ceremonies hosted. Socioeconomic Status (SCS) was assessed using 6 items of income, education, work prestige, and social capital. Financial Stress (FS) was measured via 13 items of subjective financial strain, debt burden, and financial insecurity after marriage.

Reliability Analysis

All scales were internally consistent, with Cronbach's alpha values. Reliability statistics, which are in relation to each construct, are found in Table 1.

Table 1

Reliability Statistics for Study Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Conspicuous Consumption (CC)	9	0.87*	Good
Community Spending Norms (CSN)	13	0.89*	Good
Dowry Practices (DP)	9	0.86*	Good
Ceremonial Expenditures (CE)	8	0.85*	Good

Socioeconomic Status (SCS) 6 0.83* Good
Financial Stress (FS) 13 0.91* Excellent

All Cronbach's alpha values were above the 0.70 mark, which is suggested by (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally, 1978) for social science studies.

Cronbach's alpha for each construct ranged from $\alpha = 0.83$ (Socioeconomic Status) to $\alpha = 0.91$ (Financial Stress), and showed satisfactory to excellent internal consistency for all constructs. These values comply with the conventional value of confirmatory research of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Hair et al., 2019).

Normality Testing

The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was performed to examine the normal distribution of all the composite mean scores. The results of the test of normality of distribution (K-S) showed that, except for a few variables, most had the acceptable distributional properties for regression analysis. As PROCESS Macro bootstrapping procedures are relatively robust to moderate non-normality in the data (Hayes, 2017b; Preacher & Hayes, 2008), moderate violations of the normally distributed data did not pose a problem for the two analyses run in this article: the mediation analysis and the moderation analysis.

Analytical Strategy

In order to analyze the data, IBM SPSS Statistics v.26 software and the PROCESS Macro v.4.2 (Hayes, 2017b) were used. Multiple linear regression was initially used to evaluate the direct effects of the three independent variables (eating attitudes and self-reported appetite, BMI, and MDMA usage) with Financial Stress. Afterwards, Hayes' Model 7 (moderated mediation) has been separated applied for each IV, with both Ceremonial Expenditures as the mediator and Socioeconomic Status as the moderator. To test any indirect effects and the moderated mediation index, 5,000 resamples of bootstrap confidence intervals were created. The values for an SES are the 16th, 50th and 84th percentile of the Socioeconomic Status distribution for conditional tables, (low SES, medium SES & high SES).

Results

Multiple Regression: Direct Effects on Financial Stress

Standard Multiple linear regression with all three independent variables entered into the model simultaneously was done based on Financial Stress. The overall model was significant, and accounted for a large amount of variance of Financial Stress. The summary of the regression model is given in Table 2 along with the coefficients estimates.

Table 2

Multiple Regression: Direct Effects on Financial Stress (FS)

Predictor	β (Unstandardized)	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	0.97 0.17	5.75	< .001	[0.64, 1.30]	

Conspicuous Consumption (CC)	0.11	0.05	1.93	.055	[-.002, .214]
Community Spending Norms (CSN)	0.19	0.05	3.71	< .001	[0.09, 0.29]
Dowry Practices (DP)	0.21	0.05	3.98	< .001	[0.11, 0.32]

Note. $R = .65$, $R^2 = .42$, $F(3, 221) = \sim 53.0$, $p < .001$. $N = 225$.

Community Spending Norms ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < .001$) and Dowry Practices ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .001$) had a statistically significant direct effect on Financial Stress. The average rate for Conspicuous Consumption was on the verge of conventional significance ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .055$), indicating that Conspicuous Consumption might have mainly an indirect relationship with Financial Stress, which is via the ceremonial expenses. The overall model accounted for some 42% variance in Financial Stress.

5.2 PROCESS Macro Results: Model 7 (Moderated Mediation)

Three treatments, each with a different independent variable, were attempted using Hayes' Model 7. Socioeconomic Status (SCS) moderated the IV \rightarrow MV (Ceremonial Expenditures) pathway in each model, and Ceremonial Expenditures mediated the relationship between the IV and DV (Financial Stress).

5.2.1 Path 1: Conspicuous Consumption (CC) \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures \rightarrow Financial Stress

For Ceremonial Expenditures, the outcome equation of the model for Conspicuous Consumption revealed $R^2 = .26$, $F(3, 221) = 25.67$; $p < .001$. IV1 had a non-significant direct effect on Ceremonial Expenditures ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = .544$), and the interaction term of $IV1 \times W$ was not significant either ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = .224$), thus showing that Socioeconomic Status did not moderate the Conspicuous Consumption to Ceremonial Expenditures path. Ceremonial Expenditures was a very strong predictor of this outcome (Financial Stress) ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$). Conditional indirect effects have been provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Conditional Indirect Effects: Conspicuous Consumption \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures \rightarrow Financial Stress

Socioeconomic Status (SCS)	Indirect Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low ($W = 2.50$)	0.1909	0.0434	0.1052	0.2767
Medium ($W = 3.33$)	0.2283	0.0390	0.1526	0.3060
High ($W = 4.00$)	0.2582	0.0500	0.1627	0.3576

Note. Index of Moderated Mediation = 0.0449, $SE = 0.0356$, 95% CI [-0.0192, 0.1237]. All confidence intervals for conditional indirect effects exclude zero.

Confidence intervals that do not contain zero for Conditional Indirect Effects (CI) indicate the significance of Conspicuous Consumption to Financial Stress through Ceremonial Expenditures at Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 of SES. However, the Index of Moderated Mediation (IMM = 0.0449) provides a confidence interval containing zero [-0.019, 0.124], indicating that the moderated mediation which was formed for this pathway is not statistically supported.

5.2.2 Path 2: Community Spending Norms (CSN) \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures \rightarrow Financial Stress

The Ceremonial Expenditures equation of the model of Community Spending Norms was rejected because it yielded a low R^2 of .30, $F(3, 221) = 32.16$, $p < .001$. The direct effect of IV2 on Ceremonial Expenditures ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = .317$) was not significant, and $IV2 \times W$ interaction ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = .198$) was also not significant. Ceremonial Expenditures still proved to be a very critical determinant of Financial Stress ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .001$). Conditional indirect effects are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Conditional Indirect Effects: Community Spending Norms \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures \rightarrow Financial Stress

Socioeconomic Status (SCS)	Indirect Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low (SCS = 2.50)	0.1852	0.0352	0.1186	0.2528
Medium (SCS = 3.33)	0.2153	0.0371	0.1448	0.2883
High (SCS = 4.00)	0.2393	0.0459	0.1496	0.3322

Note. Index of Moderated Mediation = 0.0361, SE = 0.0248, 95% CI [-0.0130, 0.0865]. All confidence intervals for conditional indirect effects exclude zero.

Other indirect effects of Community Spending Norms on Financial Stress that occur through Ceremonial Expenditures are consistent in all groups of SES. The Index of Moderated Mediation (IMM = 0.036) is not statistically significant as the CI contains zero, which in turn suggests that SES does not significantly moderate this mediated pathway.

5.2.3 Path 3: Financial Stress is affected by Dowry Practices (DP) \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures

For the Ceremonial Expenditures equation of the model, Dowry Practices was found to be $R^2 = .24$ with the F values of $F(3,221) = 23.04$ at $p = .001$ significance. Immediately, the $IV3 \times W$ interaction was significant ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 2.70$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [0.052, 0.334]), which shows that Socioeconomic Status is a significant moderator for the Dowry Practices \rightarrow Ceremonial Expenditures relationship. The caliber effects of Dowry Practices (Ceremonial Expenditures) by the SES levels are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Conditional Effects of Dowry Practices on Ceremonial Expenditures at Values of SES

SES Level (SCS)	Effect	SE	t	p	95% CI
Low (SCS = 2.50)	0.2887	0.0797	3.621	.0004	[0.132, 0.446]
Medium (SCS = 3.33)	0.4496	0.0633	7.104	< .001	[0.325, 0.574]
High (SCS = 4.00)	0.5783	0.0851	6.798	< .001	[0.411, 0.746]

The findings in this study indicate that the impact of Dowry Practices on Ceremonial Expenditures grows steadily with the rise in SES. At low SES ($W = 2.50$), the effect is moderate ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$); at high SES ($W = 4.00$), it escalates markedly ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$). This recurrent phenomenon indicates that families with a higher SES are more likely to face and pay for an increasing trend of ceremony spending in the form

of dowry, probably because of the more intense community expectations faced by these families. Conditional indirect effects on Financial Stress are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Conditional Indirect Effects: Dowry Practices → Ceremonial Expenditures → Financial Stress

Socioeconomic Status (SCS)	Indirect Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low (SCS = 2.50)	0.1352	0.0398	0.0571	0.2153
Medium (SCS = 3.33)	0.2106	0.0401	0.1379	0.2943
High (SCS = 4.00)	0.2709	0.0557	0.1676	0.3881

Note. Index of Moderated Mediation = 0.0904, SE = 0.0383, 95% CI [0.0243, 0.1736].

The CI excludes zero, confirming statistically significant moderated mediation.

The Index of Moderated Mediation for the Dowry Practices pathway (IMM = 0.0904, 95% CI [0.0243, 0.1736]) spans away from zero, which offers statistical support for the significance of moderated mediation. H9 is indeed supported by the results showing that the indirect effect of Dowry Practices on Financial Stress increases with a rise in SES.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 7

Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	Conspicuous Consumption → Ceremonial Expenditures (direct effect)	Not Supported
H2	Community Spending Norms → Ceremonial Expenditures (direct effect)	Not Supported
H3	Dowry Practices → Ceremonial Expenditures (SES)	Supported (conditional on SES)
H4	Ceremonial Expenditures → Financial Stress	Supported (all models, p < .001)
H5	Mediation: IV1 → MV → DV	Supported (indirect effect CI excludes 0)
H6	Mediation: IV2 → MV → DV	Supported (indirect effect CI excludes 0)
H7	Mediation: IV3 → MV → DV	Supported (indirect effect CI excludes 0)
H8	SES moderates IV → MV pathway	Supported for IV3 only (p = .008)
H9	Moderated mediation: SES conditions IV → MV → DV (IMM CI excludes 0)	Supported for IV3

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the influences of various social pressures of the marriage ceremony, namely conspicuous consumption, community spending norms, and the dowry system, on financial stressors of middle-class parents in Pakistan, while the expenditure of the marriage ceremony was the mediating variable and socioeconomic factors were the moderating variable. The results provide some important theory-laden and action-pragmatic discoveries.

The path analysis results indicate that all three paths from the social pressure variables to the financial stress variable are mediated by ceremonial expenditure, thus providing strong empirical support for the process account of the model of Social Comparison Theory and the Veblenian conspicuous consumption model. These social pressures are secondary to and do not immediately create financial stress, but instead work to inflate wedding costs that, in turn, put financial pressure on the family. This study result corroborates the qualitative evidence by Ahmed & Shafiq (2024), which showed that Pakistani parents explicitly saw their decisions on wedding expenditures as reactions to societal expectations instead of personal likes and dislikes.

Second, the significant moderated mediation ($IMM = 0.0904$, $CI [0.0243, 0.1736]$) for the Dowry Practices pathway is a very new result. The subsequent elaboration of the Dowry Practices → Ceremonial Expenditures relationship at the higher SES levels indicates an unusual trend: Higher SES families are not necessarily immune to dowry pressures; they also experienced increased demand or expectation along with increased SES. This discovery debunks the idea that SES is simply a protective cork and, in fact, proves that SES is a double-edged sword, which increases the evaporating power of aspirational spending, yet creates sufficient funds to support such spending. This is perhaps socially explained as dowry in the middle-class context in Pakistan has become a means of competitive status display than simply a traditional transfer of money.

Third, SES moderation for the Conspicuous Consumption and Community Spending Norms pathways was not significant, indicating that for middle-class samples, both of the social pressures exert a relatively equal effect on the pathways. Pressure to conform and competitive pressures to compare with others are equally affecting all middle-class parents across the spectrum of the middle class. These pressures felt by the middle class are universal, thus strengthening the argument that such pressures are not limited to any specific income level and are more the features of the wedding culture in Pakistan.

Fourth, the near-significant direct effect of Conspicuous Consumption on Financial Stress ($p = .055$) in the regression model in the presence of a significant indirect effect of Conspicuous Consumption on Financial Stress through ceremonial expenditures, provides evidence for the need to test indirectly mediated effects. The effect of conspicuous consumption on financial outcomes seems to be completely mediated by expenditure behaviours, as a non-direct stress factor. This distinction should also have implications for designing the intervention, as intervening with the pathway consumption – conspicuous consumption might be more effective than intervening directly with the stress response.

These all indicate that financial distress in Pakistan around weddings is not a result of individual private financial mismanagement but the result of a predictable field of social pressure and stress, which influences people's behavior to select for an expensive ceremonial behavior. This framing has great consequences for the policy makers and policy practitioners regarding their tackling of the issue.

Conclusion and Implications

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this study has two major contributions to the literature focused on social comparison, conspicuous consumption, and financial behaviors. The study combines (Hayes, 2017a; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) the moderated mediation framework and Social Comparison Theory (SCT) with Veblen (2017) Veblenian consumption theory to present an elaborate process model that explains not only how and why social pressures may lead to financial stress but also under which conditions: a higher SES level when it comes to dowry. The study brings this conspicuous consumption concept to the cultural context of South Asia and helps establish that the effects of conspicuous consumption are not immediate, but mediated, thus providing a nuanced perspective on the negative outcomes of social signaling.

Practical Implications

The results have a number of implications for action. The findings enable policymakers to significantly target financial literacy efforts more specifically at families that are planning for an upcoming wedding and, more specifically, the family in the “critical middle” (the social battleground range of income), where social pressures at the time of a wedding are greater, and money buffers among young people are smaller. The results make the case to community and religious leaders about the unintended impacts of increasing levels of wedding spending norms, and demonstrate the need to engage in community-level norm change campaigns that reinforce more modest norms of wedding spending.

For financial counselling and social workers, the identification of ceremonial expenditures as the way that social pressures translate into financial stress indicates that counselling to help couples plan expenditures, avoid debts, and navigate community norms before their engagements could be especially effective in reducing financial stress. According to the study conducted by Rauf and Hassan (2025), there is preliminary evidence of a substantial reduction in financial stress upon marriage in samples of Pakistanis when financial planning takes place in a structured way before marriage.

Finally, given the amplified position of SES in the pathway toward dowries, it may be useful to target the highest-SES groups in interventions that aim to curb excessive dowry demands, since they are most likely to experience such demands, and large dowry transfers tend to have the greatest effects on the norms of spending directed toward fortifying themselves as marriage prospects.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The authors acknowledge that this study has a number of limitations. Second, the cross-sectional design makes it impossible to make any causal inferences; in order to strengthen evidence for the models' causal mechanisms, longitudinal research is necessary that documents families from before they are preparing for marriage until they adjust to married life. Second, the purposive sample was befitting the nature of the exploratory-confirmatory type of the study; however, it has limited

generalizability as it pertains to the rural population in Pakistan and to populations other than the middle classes. Third, self-report was used to assess financial strain, and it is possible that there is some social desirability bias in this in a cultural context where a financial strain represents a stigma.

Longitudinal designs and objective financial data (e.g., debt history, savings path, and progression) and qualitative research are recommended to better understand the subjective experience of financial pressure arising around the time of marriage. Expansion of the external validity of the findings can also be done in comparative studies among the Pakistani ethnic community and the regional context. Further, a study on the influence of social media on scales of community spending behaviors is a growing and theoretically significant field due to existing evidence on how social media platforms have a role in increasing conspicuous consumption behaviors.

Concluding Remarks

Financial difficulties arising from social pressures associated with wedding ceremonies is a major, and usually not well-recognised, contributing factor of financial stress for Pakistan's middle class. However, our empirical study shows that conspicuous consumption, community norms for spending, and dowry all contributed to increasing the amount of money spent on ceremonies, thereby increasing financial strains, and that socioeconomic status exacerbates rather than lessens the situation when it comes to dowry. Tackling this challenge of public financial health will take coordinated action, both nationally and locally, at the level of policy, community, and individual, and will depend on the sort of empirical evidence provided in the study.

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