

Marriage registration online? It's about time

Social pressures surrounding weddings can be demanding and stressful for couples getting married. Having the option of an online declaration and solemnisation can help.

Tan Poh Lin

It seems one can do anything online these days. Instead of heading into the kitchen to prepare a meal, or down to the clinic to see the doctor, a hot meal complete with utensils and a medical consultation can be just a few screen taps or a video call away.

At times, digitalised systems are not just convenient or efficient, but agents of mercy. As a parent who went through the Primary 1 registration exercise for the first time this year, I am thankful that the era of nerve-racking in-person school balloting sessions has come to an end.

But, at other times, technology-based interactions can seem just a tad cold. Some things just feel more meaningful when we do them in person.

These considerations feel especially salient when it comes to once-in-a-lifetime events like marriage registration. This will soon be going online, too – from application to the issuing of marriage certificates.

Yes, an online declaration and solemnisation will make getting married more convenient and less costly, especially as there is less reason for a reception and half-day photo shoot. But is that necessarily a good thing?

It can be argued that some things in life, by nature of their significance, ought to be arduous and costly. After all, marriage is a huge commitment, not just a formality. Being willing to tackle the financial costs and endure the time it takes for ceremonial observances is a sign that the couple recognises and accepts the seriousness and difficulties of building a lifelong partnership.

Beyond sentimentality, by lowering registration costs and efforts down to a click, a Zoom call and the \$42 standard fee, might there be a risk that as the barriers to entry go down, the share of less committed couples would go up, leading to more divorces over time?

SPENDING MORE DOESN'T MAKE FOR HAPPIER MARRIAGES

Perhaps surprisingly, research shows that a more elaborate and expensive wedding does not mean that the marriage will last longer.

A study of 3,000 American married couples by Dr Andrew Francis-Tan, my colleague at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, shows that couples who spent more on their weddings were more, not less, likely to get divorced.

One particularly interesting finding, especially to future grooms, is that men who spent

between US\$2,000 (S\$2,700) and US\$4,000 on an engagement ring faced a higher probability of marital dissolution, compared with those who had bought a cheaper ring.

One possible explanation that the authors identified was the economic strain faced by couples who splurged on their big day, resulting in marital problems down the road. Indeed, a local survey finds that disputes over money, along with adultery, lack of communication and marrying for the wrong reasons, are perceived as the main reasons for why marriages fail.

In Singapore, a marriage is generally considered official only after the wedding service and dinner celebration, while the solemnisation ceremony is merely an appetiser. These events can be prohibitively expensive. One widely cited estimate quoted by

the wedding industry is \$30,000 to \$50,000, not to speak of the substantial costs involved in planning and organising.

Most couples, if not all, feel some pressure to splurge due to social expectations, spoken or assumed, and a desire to express the depth of their love and commitment. Moreover, compared with other large financial commitments like housing loans, the costs of weddings may be more upfront.

Given that lavish ceremonies may not be the best start for couples, having couples jump through fewer hoops in the form of fewer ceremonial activities and expenses may not only inspire more couples to finally pull the trigger, but also help them stay together longer.

Online marriage registrations could go some way in making that possible.

Designing the perfect virtual backdrop is easier and lighter on the purse than planning an outdoor event with a weather contingency plan. Couples can then focus their budget and energies on the main wedding ceremony, which already presents enough of a logistical challenge without the add-ons.

WEDDINGS AS PUBLIC AND SOCIAL OCCASIONS

That is not to say that for most couples, the optimal level of spending and planning for weddings should be nothing, or as little as possible.

Weddings are not trivial, but deeply meaningful rituals. Weddings are, in their rawest form, symbols of mutual goodwill which reaffirm the social ties that society is built upon. They stand as formal declarations of a

couple's respect for their family and broader social circles, while also signifying the community's affirmation for the couple's newly embraced status.

Although marriages are sometimes romanticised as the exclusive realm of bride and groom, the support of family and community members is integral to marital health in the post-honeymoon phase. They form a buttress that helps couples see past differences, pull together through hard times, and build resilience through reinforcing informal care infrastructure and intergenerational transfer of resources, especially in the form of childcare.

Consistent with this view, the same research piece by Dr Francis-Tan found that while spending more on wedding expenses doesn't contribute to marital stability, the number of wedding guests does – the higher the attendance, the lower the likelihood of future divorce.

Again, this does not imply that weddings must be costly, but rather, it shows that there could be merit to viewing one's wedding as more of a public rather than a private celebration.

It is, therefore, reasonable that couples and their families may be willing to spend more than a little on the special occasion. Nevertheless, hospitality and creation of memories should be balanced against onerous financial burdens placed on new couples.

Marriage is already a journey fraught with difficulties and frustration. Piling on unnecessary burdens at the start does not only create long-lasting stresses, but also distracts from the necessary self-reflection before undertaking such a momentous step.

How many couples have suspected that they may not be a good fit for marriage, only to be put off from making the right decision by the deposits they have already placed on the pre-wedding catering and wedding banquet?

To this end, having more options on the table, including being able to register marriages online and forgo some of the obligatory bells and whistles, helps couples focus on what really matters, which is building happy lifelong relationships.

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