

WEDDING DRESS DESIGN UNDER RAVE AESTHETICS: INTEGRATING SUBCULTURAL CODES, LUMINOUS MATERIALS, LIGHT AESTHETICS, AND CONTEMPORARY RITUAL

Sorapong NGEWTHONG¹

¹ Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Bangkok University Pathumthani, Thailand;
sorapong.n@bu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

This research examines how rave aesthetics can be integrated into wedding dress design to reflect contemporary identities while preserving the ritual significance of marriage. It first reviews scholarship on the white wedding dress as a symbol of purity, romantic love, and family continuity, and traces its shift from a fixed “ritual uniform” toward a flexible medium of identity expression that accommodates diverse genders, lifestyles, and cultural backgrounds. It then engages with literature on subcultures, commodification, and rave culture, highlighting rave’s role as a still-dynamic counterculture structured around electronic music, coloured lighting, distinctive dress codes, and the PLUR ethos of Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research-through-design approach. The PLUR philosophy is translated into design principles that guide a five-stage process encompassing visioning, research and concept development, sketching and material selection, prototyping, and final construction. The outcome is a prototype wedding dress that maintains a recognisable bridal silhouette and ritual signifiers while incorporating fluorescent accents, reflective and luminous textiles, UV-responsive details, and asymmetric, body-adaptive forms. The results show that the dress performs in dual registers: conventional and solemn under daylight, yet rave-coded and sensorially intense under coloured or UV lighting. This hybrid performance enables negotiation between family expectations and subcultural self-expression. The study contributes a design-based model for integrating rave-inspired, light-oriented aesthetics into ritual bridalwear, opening new directions for fashion design and the anthropology of ritual dress.

Keywords: Rave Aesthetics, Wedding Dress Design, Ritual Dress, PLUR, Light-Oriented Fashion, Subcultural Style

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INTRODUCTION

In mainstream wedding traditions, the wedding dress is commonly understood as a symbol of purity, idealized love, and the continuity of family values, expressed through classical silhouettes, white tones, and romantic materials such as lace and fine sheer fabrics (Clearwell Castle, 2017; Elsa Bridal, 2025). This convention has turned the image of “the bride in a white dress” into a norm that is repeatedly reproduced both socially and industrially within the wedding fashion sector (AriaMo Bridal, 2023). However, in contemporary society, where the roles and identities of couples have become increasingly diverse in terms of gender, lifestyle, and cultural taste, expectations toward the wedding dress have begun to shift from merely a “ritual uniform” to a space for expressing the wearer’s identity and cultural stance, including the experimentation with new materials and aesthetics that reflect specific subcultural affiliations (Elsa Bridal, 2025).

At the same time, subcultures have long served as a crucial source of reference for contemporary fashion, ranging from punk, grunge, and skate culture to Y2K aesthetics (LUXUO, 2025). Scholars and fashion writers have noted that many of these subcultural currents have been appropriated to the point that their distinctiveness has been flattened and reduced to a surface style rather than a deeper structure of meaning (LUXUO, 2025). Within this context, rave culture is often regarded as one of the few remaining countercultures that still retain strong dynamism, functioning as a “temporary utopian space” in which young people can experiment with identities, release themselves from social constraints, and form communities through electronic music, colored lighting, and distinctive dress codes (nss magazine, 2022). These codes include fluorescent color palettes, reflective and luminous materials, Kandi-inspired accessories, and the PLUR ethos (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect), which emphasizes equality and mutual acceptance within party spaces (Freedom Rave Wear, 2023).

Over the past three decades, rave aesthetics have been increasingly integrated into high fashion through designers who reinterpret the silhouettes, colors, materials, and light effects associated with rave scenes on the runway (nss magazine, 2025). Fashion discourses have also discussed the commodification of rave culture through fashion and music festivals, which translate rave aesthetics into both runway and streetwear (iEDM, 2025). However, the application of these aesthetics—particularly luminous materials and light aesthetics—to “ritual garments” such as wedding dresses remains relatively underexplored, especially in contexts that seek to systematically connect rave visual language with the ritual meanings of marriage.

This scholarly gap raises the question of how the aesthetic language of rave and its subcultural codes, intertwined with colored light, sound, luminous materials, light technologies, and a sense of community, can be integrated into wedding dress design without diminishing the ritual significance of marriage. Such integration could open up the wedding dress as a medium for expressing couples’ new identities and for supporting contemporary reinterpretations of the wedding ceremony (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; nss magazine, 2025). Accordingly, this research explores wedding dress design under rave aesthetics by integrating subcultural references, luminous materials, and light aesthetics with contemporary ritual interpretation. The study develops a prototype wedding dress that experimentally bridges rave visual language and the wedding ceremony in a contemporary context, with the aim of proposing new perspectives in both fashion design and the anthropology of ritual dress.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1. Wedding Dress, Purity, and Ritual Symbolism

Scholars and industry commentators consistently describe the white wedding dress as a potent symbol that condenses ideals of purity, romantic love, and the continuity of family values (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; Elsa Bridal, 2025; Vesna Wedding, n.d.). In Euro-American wedding

traditions especially, the white gown has been framed as an emblem of moral virtue and emotional sincerity, visually distinguishing the bride as the central ritual subject. Historical overviews of bridal fashion trace how white gradually became codified as the dominant wedding color, particularly after its association with royal and celebrity weddings, which helped to naturalize the link between whiteness, sanctity, and respectability (Clearwell Castle, 2017; Vesna Wedding, n.d.).

At the same time, the wedding dress operates as a ritual object that mediates between personal emotion and social expectation. Its silhouettes, materials, and styling conventions crystallize broader cultural narratives about gender, domesticity, and class, while lace, tulle, and other delicate fabrics not only create a romantic visual effect but also signal an idealized femininity that has been reproduced through bridal media, marketing, and venue branding (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; Clearwell Castle, 2017; Elsa Bridal, 2025). This historical sedimentation has turned the image of “the bride in a white dress” into a taken-for-granted visual template that structures how weddings are imagined, staged, and remembered (Vesna Wedding, n.d.).

2. From Ritual Uniform to Identity Expression

Recent scholarship on contemporary weddings suggests that the wedding dress is shifting from a relatively fixed “ritual uniform” toward a more flexible medium of identity expression (Elsa Bridal, 2025; LUXUO, 2025). As legal, social, and cultural frameworks around marriage have diversified, the roles and identities of couples have also expanded to include LGBTQ+ pairings, non-traditional family formations, and individuals with hybrid or globalized cultural backgrounds. In this context, the gown is increasingly treated as a site where wearers can negotiate their gender expression, lifestyle, and personal values rather than simply conforming to inherited norms (Elsa Bridal, 2025).

This shift is reflected in the growing presence of colored gowns, unconventional silhouettes, and personalized styling that incorporates tattoos, accessories, or non-bridal garments into the ceremony. Designers and bridal brands have begun to market collections explicitly targeted at “non-traditional” couples, highlighting choice, authenticity, and self-representation (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; Elsa Bridal, 2025). The dress thus becomes a vehicle for articulating difference—whether through subtle departures from convention or overt rejections of the white-dress ideal—while still operating within the ritual frame of marriage. This reconfiguration opens conceptual space for integrating subcultural references and experimental materials into wedding dress design (LUXUO, 2025).

3. Subcultures, Fashion, and Commodification

Subcultural studies have long emphasized how groups such as punks, goths, skaters, and ravers construct distinct identities through dress, music, and shared codes (LUXUO, 2025). In fashion theory, these styles are often understood as forms of symbolic resistance or alternative belonging that articulate difference from the mainstream. Over time, however, the visual markers of subculture—specific silhouettes, color palettes, or styling techniques—tend to be detached from their original social and political contexts and recirculated as marketable aesthetics (LUXUO, 2025).

This process of commodification frequently flattens complex subcultural practices into easily consumable “looks.” What once signified dissent, marginality, or community can be repackaged as seasonal trends, brand collaborations, or festival capsules, illustrating an ongoing tension between the creative energy of subcultures and the fashion industry’s tendency to absorb that energy into commercial cycles (iEDM, 2025; LUXUO, 2025). Yet even within this dynamic, subcultural references remain a key resource for designers and marketers seeking novelty, authenticity, or an aura of edge. Understanding this lifecycle is crucial for positioning rave aesthetics in relation to bridal fashion, where questions of ritual seriousness and commercialization are particularly sensitive (iEDM, 2025; nss magazine, 2025).

4. Rave Culture as Counterculture

Within debates about the “death” or dilution of subculture, rave culture is often cited as a countercultural formation that continues to retain a strong sense of collective energy and transformative potential (nss magazine, 2022, 2025). Originating in underground party scenes and electronic dance music movements, raves have been described as “temporary autonomous zones” or “temporary utopian spaces” in which participants can experiment with identity, affect, and embodiment outside everyday social constraints. The sonic and spatial design of raves—high-volume electronic music, immersive lighting, and non-hierarchical dance floors—supports a form of *communitas* that blurs boundaries of class, gender, and sexuality (nss magazine, 2022, 2025).

Rave culture also generates a recognizable set of visual and material codes. Fluorescent and neon color schemes, reflective and holographic surfaces, UV-reactive prints, and body-revealing cuts are combined to create a sense of heightened visibility and sensory intensity (iEDM, 2025; nss magazine, 2025). Practices such as Kandi bead exchange and the articulation of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) express a normative ethic of mutual care and equality within the party environment (Freedom Rave Wear, 2023; Travel Begins at 40, 2025). These codes function simultaneously as aesthetic choices and as markers of belonging, providing a rich semiotic repertoire that can, in principle, be translated into other design domains (iEDM, 2025; Freedom Rave Wear, 2023).

5. Rave Aesthetics in Contemporary Fashion

Over the past three decades, fashion designers and brands have increasingly drawn on rave aesthetics, reworking clubwear silhouettes, high-visibility colors, and technical fabrics for both runway and commercial collections (iEDM, 2025; nss magazine, 2025). High-fashion shows have incorporated elements such as strobe-like lighting, metallic or iridescent textiles, and styling inspired by 1990s and early-2000s rave scenes, with references ranging from literal quotations of iconic rave imagery to more abstract evocations of nightlife, speed, and sensory overload (nss magazine, 2022, 2025).

Parallel to the runway, festival fashion and EDM-inspired streetwear have become major commercial categories. Retailers and online platforms promote “rave outfits” as curated ensembles of crop tops, mesh layers, bodysuits, reflective harnesses, and LED accessories, making rave-derived style accessible to broad consumer groups (iEDM, 2025; Freedom Rave Wear, 2023). Critics note that this commercialization can detach rave style from its subcultural roots, turning it into another trend within the global festival economy (iEDM, 2025; LUXUO, 2025). Nonetheless, the migration of rave aesthetics into mainstream fashion has expanded the vocabulary of what counts as fashionable, legitimizing luminous materials and light-responsive textiles as serious design elements rather than mere novelty (iEDM, 2025; nss magazine, 2025).

6. Ritual Dress, Light Aesthetics, and Research through Design

Studies of ritual dress emphasize that garments used in ceremonies do not only decorate the body; they materialize transitions between social states and encode shared cosmologies. Wedding dresses, religious vestments, and other ritual garments typically employ specific colors, forms, and material properties—such as shine, opacity, or layering—to signify spiritual purity, social status, or liminality (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; Clearwell Castle, 2017; Vesna Wedding, n.d.). By contrast, the role of artificial light, reflective textiles, and technologically mediated luminosity in contemporary ritual dress has received comparatively limited attention, despite the growing prevalence of LED lighting, projection, and stage effects in modern ceremonies (iEDM, 2025; nss magazine, 2025).

Within design research, “research through design” approaches propose that new knowledge can be generated by creating and reflecting on experimental artefacts. Applying this paradigm to ritual dress enables designers to test how alternative materials, light behaviors, and subcultural codes might reconfigure the meanings of established ceremonies (iEDM, 2025; nss

magazine, 2025). In the context of rave-inspired bridal wear, this involves exploring how fluorescent or light-emitting fabrics, responsive surfaces, and rave-derived symbols can coexist with, or reinterpret, the ritual gravitas of marriage (iEDM, 2025). Such an approach positions the prototype wedding dress not only as a fashion object but also as an ethnographic probe into how couples and audiences negotiate evolving understandings of purity, love, and community (AriaMo Bridal, 2023; nss magazine, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Design Approach

Table 1 Interpreting the PLUR Philosophy into Design Elements

PLUR principle	Meaning	Expression in design
2	Peace	Inner calm
		Balanced structure, intentional negative space, soft white tones
Love	Warmth and openness	Gentle curves, soft-touch materials, warm colour accents
Unity	Harmonious integration	Material blending, layered fabrics, gradient (ombre) colour transitions
Respect	Acceptance of difference	Body-adaptive silhouettes, asymmetric compositions

2. Design Process

The design process for the wedding dress under the rave-inspired concept consists of five main stages.

2.1 Defining vision and inspiration

The process begins with understanding the bride's identity, her relationship with rave culture, and the intended atmosphere of the wedding, including venue, time, and overall theme.

2.2 Research and concept development

Visual references are collected from rave-inspired runway collections, the history of rave culture, and cutting-edge bridal design. Key elements that can be re-coded and translated into bridalwear are identified and analysed.

2.3 Sketching and material selection

Mood boards and design sketches are developed to explore how a classic bridal silhouette can be hybridized with rave-inspired elements such as exaggerated volume, cut-outs, and modular accessories, generating multiple variations of proportion, layering, and movement. Materials are selected with particular attention to their optical properties and responsiveness to the lighting conditions of the wedding venue.



Figure 1 Final sketching phase

Note: Photograph by the author

2.4 Prototyping

A toile is developed to test structure, fit, and material behaviour. Light effects are evaluated under both UV lighting and natural light to refine the balance between ritual clarity and rave aesthetics

2.5 Final construction and finishing

The final stage involves detailed craftsmanship, including hand embroidery, the application of sequins and crystals, assembly of layered fabrics, and final testing of the dress under different lighting scenarios

RESEARCH RESULTS

The application of the PLUR framework to bridal design resulted in a coherent set of aesthetic principles that guided all stages of the process. Peace, interpreted as inner calm, was successfully translated into a balanced structural composition, generous negative space, and soft white tones that maintained the visual language of traditional bridalwear. Love was expressed through gentle curves, warm-touch materials, and subtle warm colour accents, while Unity informed the blending of materials, the use of layered fabrics, and carefully graded ombré transitions that visually linked the different parts of the dress. Respect was operationalised through body-adaptive silhouettes and asymmetric compositions, allowing the design to respond to diverse body types and to accommodate non-conventional preferences without losing its ritual legibility.

Across the five design stages, these principles were progressively concretised in the prototype wedding dress. The visioning phase clarified the bride's identity, her relationship to rave culture, and the desired atmosphere of the ceremony, which established boundaries for how far rave codes could be introduced while still meeting family expectations. Research and concept development then identified transferable elements from rave-inspired runway looks and rave

culture history—such as fluorescent accents, reflective surfaces, and PLUR-related symbols—that could be re-coded for bridal use. During sketching and material selection, the interaction between conventional bridal silhouettes and rave-derived details was refined through mood boards and trials of textiles with distinct optical properties, ensuring that fabrics responded appropriately to both venue lighting and UV effects.

The prototyping phase showed that a toile was essential for testing fit, structure, and light behaviour; experiments under daylight and UV illumination confirmed that concentrating fluorescent and reflective elements in specific zones allowed the dress to shift character with changing light while preserving a clear bridal identity. Final construction and finishing—particularly hand embroidery, placement of sequins and crystals, and assembly of layered fabrics—enhanced the luminous effects without visually overwhelming the base silhouette, resulting in a prototype that embodies PLUR values while functioning convincingly as a wedding dress. Overall, the results indicate that the proposed design approach offers a practical pathway for integrating rave-inspired, light-oriented aesthetics into ritual bridalwear, yielding a garment capable of negotiating between tradition, subcultural affiliation, and individual expression.

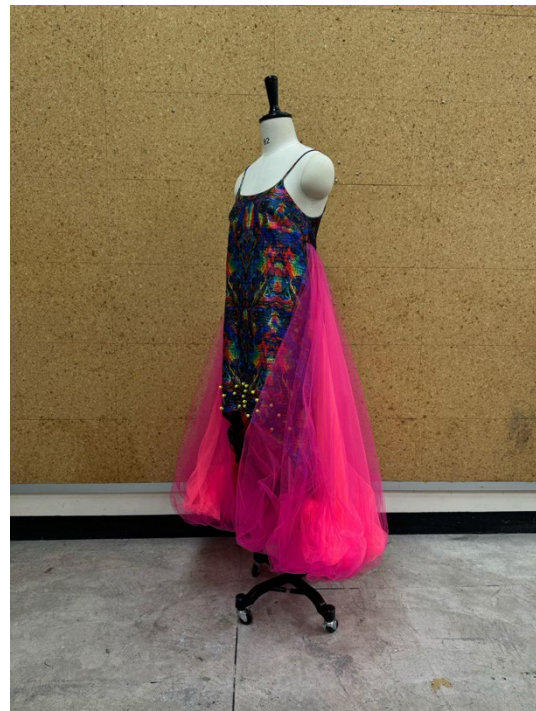




Figure 2 Prototype wedding dress
Note: Photograph by the author



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Figure 3 Implementation of the dress in real wedding contexts

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research has proposed and tested a rave-inspired approach to wedding dress design that bridges ritual symbolism, subcultural codes, and light-oriented aesthetics. By operationalising PLUR as a design framework and applying a research-through-design methodology, the study produced a prototype that negotiates between the expectations of mainstream bridal culture and the expressive possibilities of rave fashion. The results suggest that such hybrid garments can support new forms of bridal subjectivity in which individuality, fluid identity, and collective joy are foregrounded alongside ideals of purity, love, and family continuity.

While the study does not aim for statistical generalisation, it offers a situated, design-based contribution to fashion design scholarship and the anthropology of ritual dress by demonstrating how rave aesthetics can be thoughtfully adapted to ceremonial contexts. Future research could build on this work by involving participants in wear-tests during actual ceremonies, experimenting with interactive or programmable light technologies, or extending the framework to other ritual garments beyond the wedding dress. Together, these directions highlight the potential of light, subcultural affiliation, and design experimentation to reshape how contemporary societies materialise and celebrate the institution of marriage through dress.

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