



White Ballgowns, Black Lace, and Bling: A Content Analysis of *Say Yes to the Dress*

Chelsea Blackwell, Nancy Ann Rudd, The Ohio State University, USA

KEYWORD: Brides, identity

In recent years, the commercialization of weddings, brides, and dress shopping has become magnified. Mass media has furthered the wedding obsession in America. Television shows dedicated to the wedding planning process, dress shopping, and the actual weddings illuminate the identity of a bride. These resources beg the question of what it means to be a bride in America, especially through a bride's appearance and search for the perfect wedding dress for her wedding day. With little research on bridal identity, examining the appearance and identity of the bride through reality television is worthy avenue of study.

Using identity theory, a woman takes on the role of a bride (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stryker, 2007). This role has socially constructed expectations, particular for appearance. Wearing a white dress and looking one's best is an invented tradition of the last 70 years (Amneus, 2010; Wallace, 2004). It became the expectation of every bride to wear white since World War II. The bridal dress manufacturers of the 1940s declared that wearing white was entitled to every bride, which has since filtered down to become a part of the role of the bride. With that expectation, weddings have become commercialized, resulting in a big industry making billions of dollars every year (Howard, 2006; Jellison, 2008).

Since wedding gowns are gowns of ritual, they are essential artifacts of the bridal role that many women have thought about since they were little (Wallace, 2004). This creates expectations for the bride and for others as to what the bride should look like on her wedding day. With this anxiety, body image issues and appearance management practices are observed in the process of wedding planning. Many women have felt pressured to exercise more and lose weight in order to look better for their wedding (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008, 2011; Princhard & Tiggemann, 2009).

Using a content analysis of *Say Yes to the Dress*, this paper sought to answer these questions:

1. What does it mean to be a bride in America?
2. What are the appearance expectations of being a bride?
3. Does the original vision of the bride match what she buys?
4. Do brides experience body image issues while searching for a wedding dress?

The content analysis of season 3 of TLC's reality television show *Say Yes to the Dress* was recorded. Eighteen episodes of brides searching for bridal gowns were observed. The number of brides totaled 50. The units of analysis included the stated vision or silhouette of the

bride, stated body dissatisfaction, if the dress bought matched the stated vision, and if bride had a “magical” dress moment.

Preliminary results yielded that many brides do state what they are looking for in a wedding gown, including such visions as looking like a “princess” or a “perfect Southern bride”,. However, few brides express body dissatisfaction on the show. Few brides expressed fear that nothing would look good on them or felt bigger than they were. While the silhouettes of gowns varied from ballgowns, trumpets, sheath columns, and even a pantsuit, most brides purchased a white dress that matched their original vision. Many experienced a moment when they knew that they found a dress that could be their wedding gown. A few brides did say yes to a dress that was not their original vision for themselves. The results indicate that the image of a bride in white still holds strong for many women. For many, this is the most expensive dress they will ever buy and they are willing to spend thousands for dollars to attain their dream gown that expresses this identity. Spending thousands of dollars on a gown also indicates a certain level of commitment to the role of being a bride.

Limitations to this research include the limiting nature of reality television. However rich in content, producers edit many hours of footage into a 20- minute episode. For future research, other bridal television shows, such as *David Tutera’s My Fair Wedding*, *Bridezillas*, and *Four Weddings* could be investigated for bridal identity. Also, surveys and observations could be conducted to delve further in to the expectations and identity of a bride.

References

- Amneus, Cynthia. (2010). *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns*. In C. A. Museum (Ed.). London: Giles.
- Hogg, Micheal, Terry, Deborah, & White, Keatherin. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255-269.
- Howard, Vicki. (2006). *Brides, Inc.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jellison, Katherine. (2008). *It's our day : America's love affair with the white wedding, 1945-2005*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas.
- Prichard, I., & Tiggemann, M. (2008). An examination of pre-wedding body image concerns in brides and bridesmaids. *Body Image*, 5(4), 395-398. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2008.05.001
- Prichard, I., & Tiggemann, M. (2011). Appearance investment in Australian brides-to-be. *Body Image*, 8(3), 282-286. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2011.03.001
- Princhard, Ivanka, & Tiggemann, Marika. (2009). Unveiled: Pre-wedding Weight Concerns and Health and Beauty Plans of Australian Brides. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14(7), 1027-1035. doi: 10.1177/1359105309342905
- Stryker, Sheldon. (2007). Identity Theory and Personality Theory: Mutual Relevance. *Journal of Personality*, 75(6), 1083-1102. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2007.00468.x
- Wallace, Carol. (2004). *All dressed in white: The irresistible rise of the American wedding*. New York: Penguin Books.