

From Objects to Possessions: Development of Meaning in the American Wedding

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Consumer socialization is defined as a process by which individuals develop consumer-related skills, knowledge and attitudes within the marketplace to function as a consumer (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Consumer socialization occurs at all stages in life, but is most commonly found when a consumer enters a new life stage. This study explores the consumer socialization in the context of an American wedding. Wedding is a unique life event that involves consumption practices including the location of ceremony, music, cake, and flowers, catering and photography. Wedding exposes people to consumption of various unfamiliar or risky products. For example, most male consumers are unfamiliar with engagement rings and brides perceive high level of risk in purchasing wedding dress.

Literature on meanings covers the important meanings of possessions (Wallendorf & Arnould 1988), how meanings serve as extensions of self (Belk, 1988), consensus of meanings (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001), and types of meanings (Richins, 1994). There has been limited research on how individuals assign meaning to objects (Kleine & Kernan, 1991). Drawing upon the literature on consumer socialization and meaning, this study explore the process how objects obtain meanings that are adapted in the process of becoming one's personal possession. In other words, the purpose of this study is to investigate what experiences individuals go through to arrive at particular meanings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 participants who were in the process of getting married or who have been married in the past two years. Individual interviews and couple interviews were conducted. Transcripts and field notes were analyzed through a process of open, axial, and selective coding. The transcripts were coded by one of the author and a colleague. The inter-coder reliability between the coders was calculated at 83%.

Findings suggest that the consumption process of wedding coincides with the consumer socialization perspective. Participants stated that they developed the necessary skills needed to purchase goods and services in the marketplace. Followings are the three overarching themes that show how participants attach private meanings: 1) effort, 2) approval, and 3) memories.

Making various *efforts* emerged as a process of making sense of consumption experiences. Participants stated they put forth effort into learning about products they were about to purchase or receive as a gift. Five types of behavior that reflect participants' efforts were identified: 1) educating, 2) negotiating, 3) role-taking, 4) postponing, and 5) directing. To emphasize the transformative nature of learning, we named the first type of behavior as *educating*, not information search. Educating includes voluntary learning through books or mass media and seeking out information from friends, family, or sales representative. They learn not only product information but also public meanings of objects and wedding-related custom such as so called

two month salary guideline for engagement ring. *Negotiating* was commonly reported when registering for wedding gifts. For many participants this was their first experience of making a joint couple decision. Through this experience, the couples realized the need to negotiate and merge their personal styles. *Role-taking* emerged as a device that generates personal meanings. Participants had to dispose of their past possessions so that they were able to make room for new objects. The past possessions were from their college years or from the past marriage. The disposal means discarding the past identities. New acquisitions mean that they take and perform the role as a married couple or husband and wife. Meanings associated with marriage are then attached to the objects. *Postponing* refers to their decision to put off opening gifts because of the relocation plan. It was to preserve the meaning until they can embrace the new roles properly or the possession can function and develop meanings as they wished. *Directing* shows the active participation in assigning private meanings. Many participants elaborated the process of planning and implementing the event such as proposal and wedding dress shopping.

Approval emerged as an important process through which objects gain personal meanings. Participants spoke about how they made purchase decisions in an attempt to “stand out” (i.e. societal approval) or to “impress their spouse” (i.e. interpersonal approval).

Memories are special stories of an important moment or experiences. Therefore, memories emerged as a critical conduit of participants’ meaning of various consumption experiences in the wedding. Participants discussed how the personalization of objects or an event used in their wedding helps create special memories and makes the wedding more meaningful.

When objects become one’s personal possession, they hold multiple meanings. Richins (1994) made distinctions between private and public meanings ascribed to possessions. Public meanings refer to means that society has ascribed to an object owned by others. Private meanings refer to what the owner has ascribed. Public and private meanings were sometimes overlapped but not necessarily the same. Findings warrant the need for a more elaborate distinction of private meanings. Findings shows that consumers create a perception in their mind about what others believe about their possession as well as a very personalized meaning for their possession. We propose layers of meanings that individuals create: *objective private* and *subjective private meanings* for their possession. We define objective meanings as the meanings one believes society has placed on an object. Subjective meanings are defined as the meanings that have been placed on an object from a highly personal point of view. The former is obtained mainly through education and the latter is developed when objective private meanings are intertwined with personal experiences such as negotiating, role-taking, postponing, and directing and the process of getting approval and making memories. Consumers retain both objective private and subjective private meanings. Individuals are inherently concerned with consuming the objective meaning of an object thus seeking societal approval. However, the subjective meaning becomes highly important because they involve personal memories and stories about a possession.

Moschis, G. P., & Churchill, Jr. G. A. (1978). Consumer Socialization: A Theoretical Empirical Analysis. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 15(4), 599-609.

Richins, M. L. (1994). Valuing Things: The Public and Private Meanings of Possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 504-521.