Matrimonial Metaphors: Women's Wedding Planning Experiences in the Bridal Salon

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[to cite]:

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This paper explores the roles of American retail bridal establishments in the wedding planning process through the use of interpretive methodology. Specifically, during the summers of 1991 and 1995, thirteen brides were interviewed and observed as they shopped for wedding artifacts. During that time, fourteen trips were made to bridal salons in particular. The text was analyzed to determine the roles of the bridal salon and bridal sales people in shaping the wedding ritual.

The following metaphors emerged from the text: (1) the bridal salon as clearing house; (2) the bridal salon as "one-stop shop"; (3) the bridal salon as school; (4) the salon as dressing chamber; and (5) the salon as singularizer. Discussion of these metaphors reveals the complex, multifaceted roles that salons and sales people express, as women seek the advice of "experts" in planning their weddings. In addition, many brides also bring a set of gender-specific expectations to the shopping experience, relating to the fact that they seek out encounters that allow them to have their "one day to be a princess," and that the artifacts they select can be contaminated with sacredness through their procurement at specific types of retail outlets. Both the interactions with retailers, and the atmospheric aspects of the bridal salons themselves, contributed to positive or negative service experiences. Research implications of these findings are offered.