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Women and Wedding Gowns: Exploring A Discount Shopping Experience

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This paper explored the experiences of eleven women who either searched for or assisted in purchasing a wedding gown at a discount retailer’s quarterly bridal gown sale. Because of the nature of the good purchased and the fact that almost all of the participants of this sale are women, gender plays a substantial role in the construction of this event. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, the authors discovered a chaotic shopping experience that participants chose, which seemed to contrast with many of the role prescriptions of the wedding rite of passage. The authors explore the meaning of the event through their own observation of eight sales and through the words of eleven women who used the sale not merely to acquire a bargain, but also to regain control, bond with family or bridal party members, or assure that their unique sense of self was preserved.

INTRODUCTION

Women commonly see their wedding much as the media presents the event: a (or the) most special day in their life, the day when they will (and must) be most beautiful, a perfect day, the day that they and their groom are like a prince and princess royally claiming each other. On the face of it, this search for beauty and perfection should not be consistent with a descent into subterranean chaos in order to get a really cheap wedding gown. Nevertheless, thousands of women a year for over 50 years have done just that – gone to the Filene’s Basement Bridal Event (hereafter FBBE) in Boston, MA, and bought a wedding gown for hundreds or thousands or even more, but only for what they got there: a wedding gown for hundreds or thousands of dollars less than they could get it anywhere else. The women who participate span all strata of society and include all ethnicities – they are rich, poor, black, white, old, young. The only common demographic variable is that they are women and the only common psychographic variable is that they are preparing to participate in a wedding.

What is at the heart of this sale? At first it seems to be the relationship between women and wedding gowns. This product is perhaps the most socially gendered product that exists in the marketplace because of the social construction of gender roles in western society. Wedding gown purchase is almost exclusively a woman’s domain and is related to the gender role of wife prescribed by Judeo-Christian culture. The wedding gown’s sacred nature is expressed in the traditions of only wearing it once, not letting the groom see the dress, and saving the dress for the next generation’s transition from singlehood to marriage.

The sale was also interesting because of the powerful social meaning of wedding gowns. We were drawn to study the event from a consumer behavior perspective by the paradoxical juxtapositions of perfection with chaos, royalty with bargain-hunting. Our intent was to discover why women put themselves into this unique and chaotic buying environment, given the goal of transformation that most are trying to achieve through their wedding gowns.
We were initially unable to make sense of the event. What we saw appeared difficult, chaotic, and crazed when viewed the perspective of traditional models of consumer behavior. What we saw as an egregious affront to our rational interpretation of consumer behavior was, from the participants' perspective, an exciting, interesting, fulfilling way to obtain a wedding gown while saving some money, bonding with wedding participants, and exercising some control over the meticulously prescribe process of wedding planning.

This paper explores the discount wedding gown purchase using principles of postmodernism as presented by theorists in marketing (Firat 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). In the next section, the wedding, a rite of passage in which the wedding gown is a necessary element, is discussed. The FBBE itself is then described. A brief discussion of the methodology is followed by an interpretation of the sale and conclusions.

WOMEN, WEDDINGS, AND WEDDING GOWNS

Weddings are narratives: as with many rituals, the details differ from culture to culture but convey similar meanings. In the case of a wedding, the story is one of passage from one stage of female life to another (virgin to wife/mother). There are books written to convey this story; there are consultants who make their living communicating the details of the story to women who intend to marry. These consultants, and often relatives and social others of the women who will marry, also communicate what types of products and consumption are required in order to live out the wedding so that it transmits the meaning prescribed in the narrative. That is, they prescribe the signifiers for the bride-to-be so that the event will be interpreted properly by those who watch it, the story will be "read" correctly.

In the traditional story, both the objects and the participants become signs for some universal meaning. Thus, the bride and groom are simultaneously representations of their respective families, which are being joined, and of Everyman and Everywoman, whose union is sanctified by the marriage sacrament. The flowers, the rings, and especially the bridal gown all carry their own significance in the traditional narrative. In this traditional narrative, the wedding gown signifies the purity, royal status, and virginity of the bride. Weddings are generally understood as rite of passage, religious sacrament, and/or developmental transition. They are seen as central to normal life, ideally permanent, and permanently transformational.

A world where not everybody marries, where not all marriages are permanent, and where people's roles are less (or not at all) altered by marriage, views weddings somewhat differently. Instead, weddings are viewed as spectacle and collage. With no central significance unifying interpretation of the wedding, the occasion offers the opportunity for -- in fact, demands -- creative reinterpretation of the rituals and objects associated with the event (Firat and Schultz II 1997). Some reinterpretation is fairly straightforward, as when women and their fiancés rewrite the wedding vows or whole ceremony in order better to communicate their personal understanding of marriage. Other weddings evidence a more extreme imposition of personal significance on the event, as in those that take place underwater, while skydiving, or in caves reached by spelunking. Such weddings gain meaning and intensity because they are paired with activities the bride and groom find personally significant -- and because they often involve wedding guests as active participants instead of passive witnesses.
The role of the bridal gown in modern culture has also become more complex. Some women struggle with what their bridal gown should "say" – what it should communicate about them when they wear it. They may wish to retain some but not all of the gown's traditional meanings, or add to traditional meanings – for example, convey purity and experience / expertise, thus expressing the "either/either" position of postmodernism (Adair 1992). Some women, of course, reject the bridal gown altogether, finding it as false or empty of meaning as the traditional ceremony, and thus take a "neither/neither" stance.

The alteration of meaning of the bridal gown comes not only from the women involved with the wedding but from the media and marketing. For example, the media's portrayal of weddings influences women's choices when it comes to wedding gown decisions. Many women will see the dress of their dreams on actresses in soaps, bridal magazines, or displayed in museum exhibits (Foxman and Dobscha 1997). Interestingly, although the gown is discovered in the media, the woman then creates her own meaning for it once she finds and buys the gown.

From a marketing perspective, the fashion industry has also altered potential meanings of bridal gowns. Unlike traditional gowns, designer gowns now often portray a frankly sexy image. This new image can make brides' construction of their bridal gown's meaning more a negotiation or compromise than a simple choice. Bridal magazines are often purchased for their advertisements only so that women can see the latest styles of dresses. For many of these women, the dresses seen in these magazine advertisements are more than their budget can bear. By attending the sale, women are able to creatively appropriate the gowns' meaning advanced by the media and marketing, while maintaining control over the expenses of the wedding.

THE SALE

Filene's Basement was the U.S.'s first discount retailer and continues to be known worldwide as the place for bargains. This fame is evidenced by Filene's Basement's status as Boston's second most visited tourist attraction. This retail sale started in 1946 and has become a cultural fixture for many brides-to-be in New England and elsewhere. The FBBE occurs only four days a year and sells a temporary stock of gowns that are not available on other days.

The sale attracts thousands of participants a year because of the enormous savings to be had for wedding gowns. All gowns are priced at $249.00, no matter what the original cost, which typically ranges from $1000.00 to as much as $8,000.00. Participants engage in behaviors that would shock most consumer researchers: hoarding gowns, arguing with other shoppers, stealing other shoppers' inventory, stripping to bras and underwear in public, employing gown guards, criticizing strangers' choices, and bartering extensively to obtain the dress of their dreams.

A typical sale day begins around 4:00 am when participants start their pilgrimage to the doors leading into the Basement. Participants arrive as early as 5:00 am to ensure a good place in line. When the doors finally open at 8:00 am, participants stampede to racks holding up to 800 gowns. They grab as many gowns as they can without regard to size or style (the gowns are not racked by size, anyway), emptying the racks entirely within 45 seconds.
The rest of the morning consists of shopping groups hoarding their inventory, brides feverishly trying on gown after gown (in their underwear or gym clothes, in full view of others in the store), and latecomers hovering around the shopping teams waiting for the brides to discard unwanted gowns. This process lasts throughout the morning, and many participants walk away with the gown of their dreams, while others depart empty-handed.

The FBBE takes place in a sub-basement most easily entered from the subway. The lighting is fluorescent, the flooring is vinyl tile over concrete. The shopping floor is crowded with discount merchandise even before the shoppers arrive -- more crowded than usual, in fact, as regular merchandise has had to be moved to make room for the gowns. It is always hot in Filene's Basement. Add a thousand or so shoppers, a few television crews and some other journalists, and you have the makings of a truly chaotic shopping environment.

**METHODOLOGY**

The present study's goal was to better understand what initially seemed to be an anomalous consumption event and the experiences of its participants. It is hoped that understanding of this event will lead to better understanding of other consumption experiences that fall "outside the margins." The authors used two forms of data collection: 1) engaged observation (Belk 1991; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Hirschman 1986) and 2) in-depth interviews (Briggs 1986; McCracken 1988; Reinharz 1992). These two forms of data collection were employed over two phases of the data collection.

The first phase of the study began in February of 1995 with the two authors attending their first FBBE. The two authors eventually attended a total of eight sales. The observational aspects of the sale included watching what happened at the event and talking to people who were at the event, including those who had merely come to support, watch, or assist. One author filmed the "events within the event" by focusing on the experiences of three women. The participation aspect included one author becoming actively involved in assisting brides-to-be with their wedding gown purchase. One author became actively involved with one participant, Roberta, by helping her bargain with other shoppers, trying on gowns, and even, in the final stage, telling her how beautiful she looked. The authors gathered data through participant observation at eight sales in order to gain an understanding of the workings of the event from both a retailer and a consumer perspective. This participant observation also afforded the authors the opportunity to solicit participants for the second phase of data collection, the in-depth interviews.

This second phase of in-depth interviews commenced with eleven women who were solicited either from the sale itself through the means of a short written questionnaire or from postings made by the authors to the Internet discussion groups, "alt.wedding" (which was started by one of our participants), "soc.couples.wedding" and "ne.general."

Each woman was interviewed once, with interviews lasting an average of seventy-five minutes. The interview followed a general structure, guided by but not limited to a broad set of initial questions (see Table 1). These questions were intended to generally guide the interview but not impose limits. Interviews took place in locations convenient for the participant, including homes, places of work, and in one case a grocery store café.
Tell us about your sale experience.

If the following topics are not covered, prompt with the following questions:

**Antecedents**
- How did you first hear about the sale?
- Did you know anything about the sale prior to your first experience there?
- Did any planning go into this experience prior to going to the sale?
- What preparations did you make prior to attending the sale?

**Process**
- Did you attend the sale alone?
- With a group? If so what was your role in that group prior to the sale?
- During the sale, did your role change or shift?
- How did participating in this sale make you feel?

**Consequences**
- Was the sale what you expected?
- Did you succeed or fail at the sale?
- Did you or your bride buy a dress?
- Describe the dress
- Would you recommend this sale to others?

**General**
- What does a wedding dress mean to you?
- What does the sale mean to you?
- What did you like best about the sale? The least?
- What elements would you like to see changed?
- Did this sale change the way you perceived the retailer?
- Have you ever seen any media accounts of the sale? What do you think of their portrayal of the sale?

Data for the study consisted of: 1) researcher field notes recorded at the event, 2) videotaped coverage of the sale recorded by the two authors, and 3) transcripts from recorded interviews. The data were then analyzed utilizing a three-stage feminist process as described by DeVault (1991) and Cancian (1992). This process involved first creating a text with each participant by reading and analyzing the text as a whole, then creating a second text from the common elements among the participants, and finally creating a third text designed to combine the authors’ analysis with their original words and actions. The study was feminist in that the authors took steps, as documented in feminist theory, to minimize power relationships (Hirschman 1993), to build trust between participant and researcher (Reinhartz 1992), to focus on the lived experience of the participant (Smith 1987), and to preserve the women’s speech (DeVault 1991).
The final analysis is an interweaving of observation and interview data. This interweaving allows the researchers to blend their interpretation of the event from a theoretical perspective with the experiential perspective of the participant. This blending gives the reader a richer vision of this experience that in turn leads to more and different interpretations of other consumption experiences, no matter how mundane or unique.

INTERPRETING THE SALE

Women at the FBBE exhibited unusual behaviors both as individuals and in groups, and the FBBE itself was clearly an atypical sale. Perhaps because of this, interpreting this phenomenon was not a straightforward matter. Research on shopping tends to focus on efficiency, layout, price sensitivity, and shopping behavioral proclivities. Framing our exploration of the data in this literature stream could illuminate the mechanics of the sale, but would be unlikely to improve our understanding of the personal and cultural meaning attached to the gowns that appears to be related to women's unusual behaviors. We considered the literature on bartering as a possible route into our data's meaning. In bartering, however, price is negotiated between equals. In the FBBE, on the other hand, price is set a priori by the retailer: what is negotiated is personal meaning and value. Further, participants at the FBBE have more or less power in the negotiation process depending on the size and nature of the shopping group they have assembled for the occasion.

The auction as a possible metaphor was also explored, as negotiating value is central to this purchase environment. Successful participation in the FBBE does end in acquiring the gown that one finds most valuable. However, the FBBE includes no acknowledged leader who structures the value determination process through ritual rules and procedures. Fleamarkets, also a purchase environment in which value is negotiated, involve primarily buyer-seller interaction, not buyer-buyer interaction. Fleamarket purchase processes also seemed to lack the central personal meaning attached to bridal gown acquisition.

What seemed unique to the FBBE data were the gowns, the chaotic environment, and women's efforts to construct meaning and behaviors relating to each. The literature on consumers and marketing from a postmodern perspective directly addressed what we saw as unique: the chaotic reality and the imposition of personal meaning to provide structure. For this reason, we explored the FBBE data using the five conditions of postmodernism presented by Firat and Venkatesh (1993) (see also Brown 1993; Firat 1991; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). These are:

Hyperreality: the becoming real of what initially was presented as simulation or "hype." This condition exists because signifiers are only arbitrarily linked to their original referents; they can be detached from their original meaning. The meaning of an event or object becomes "free-floating" and a new meaning can be attached to it.

Fragmentation: disappearance of a central meaning or central character. The norm instead is for individuals to adopt different personalities in different situations. Shopping environments have also become fragmented and bound by momentary experiences that capture consumer attention and excite the senses.

Reversal of production and consumption: production is no longer revered and consumption denigrated; rather, people define themselves based on what they
consume. Instead, consumption is viewed as "very much a social act where symbolic meanings, social codes, and relationships, in effect, the consumer's identity and self, are produced and reproduced" (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, p.235).

Decentering of the subject: because the matter of causality is ambiguous, "There is ... confusion of the subject and the object (products of the market) in terms of who or what is in control.... Rather than the subject controlling the circumstances and processes of life in his/her interactions with the object, the objects generally determine the conditions and procedures of consumption...

Juxtaposition of opposites: anything can be juxtaposed, anything is at once acceptable and suspect. Because of this, consumers increasingly reject reliance on / overrepresentation of the norm(al) and drop out and assert their own realities.

In the next section, we interpret our reactions as well as the interpretations consumers make regarding this shopping experience. The interpretation shows that those who engage in the event change the way they are participating in the marketing world. They construct a new reality from the "hype" of the sale, adopt different personalities, simultaneously produce and consume, become driven by the object, and engage in the event playfully and experientially.

CONSTRUCTING NEW REALITIES -- THE MEDIA/CONSUMER/RETAILER INTERACTION

The FBRE is a spectacle whose construction is obscured by the numerous accounts of it. The FBRE gets periodically redefined by the media, consumers, the retailer, and by our academic interest in it. (Foxman and Dobscha 1997). The original sale was significant only from an economic standpoint (a bargain gown), but the media coverage and unique consumer behaviors related to the sale have allowed people to construct a new reality of the sale and their gowns purchased at the sale. One participant described it this way: "There were people there who felt just like me. That they thought the whole thing was about creating such a frenzy, by having people waiting outside the door like that; ... But obviously, Filene's wanted that frenzy, they liked the media there, they liked seeing it on TV, the screaming women...". Another participant said, "But they don't tell you what it's like (the event). If they told you, why would anybody go?" Both participants found the sale to be jointly constructed by the retailer, media, and other consumers participating.

Another part of the construction of the reality of the event is rule formation: rules change and then change again during the event, and people then enforce the newly formed rules as if they were the stuff of tradition. One participant was disgusted by the behaviors of others because she "is a rule kind of person." The event broke so many norms and rules that she considered writing a letter of complaint. During one event, a "cartel" formed among five buying groups. This cartel successfully obtained well over 100 gowns for exclusive perusal by five brides-to-be. Although the retailer has no rules against such behavior, the other participants of the event became frenzied over an act they perceived as unfair. These consumers who did not have the gowns created a rule ("no hogging gowns by organized groups"), attempted to punish rule-breaking by stealing gowns, and when they were unsuccessful asked for retailer intervention. Management then reformed the rule ("You have 5 more minutes and then you have to put the gowns back") and enforced it.
THE FRAGMENTED SHOPPING EXPERIENCE AT FBBE

The FBBE represents a fragmented shopping experience both in terms of the shopping environment and in the ways in which women behave during the event. On a behavioral level, women who participate in the sale act in an extremely competitive manner, but also collaborate with strangers to find the “perfect dress.” One participant described it this way, “...once you got down there, some people were hoarding gowns and most of the people I met down there were very friendly. I actually met a group of 6 or 7 girls in the line and we were actually helping each other...”

Women simultaneously criticize and enjoy the sale experience. One woman told the author, “I can’t believe we have to resort to this. It’s ridiculous!” and then immediately turned to her fiancé, and with a completely different tone of voice and facial expression, discussed one of the gowns she managed to retrieve from the rack. These simultaneous paradoxical emotions -- fear and excitement, happiness and sadness, disbelief and acceptance, anger and frustration -- are part and parcel of the FBBD experience. Women at the sale have declared they would never have done it if they had known how crazy it was going to be; however, this adamant stance changes immediately if they find the gown of their dreams (researcher field notes, February 1996).

First, the fragmented shopping environment is defined by the line that must be endured prior to the store’s opening. The line is self-governed and self-monitored; no security are present to ensure safety or order. One participant described it this way: “The fact that there is no security, it’s kinda just, you know, people are patrolling themselves outside, trying to create order to get inside.” Once inside, normal shopping rules and social norms are violated. Women are seen everywhere stripped down to bras and underwear, pulling gowns down from the racks en masse, and trying to talk others out of the gowns they have in their piles. One woman found that her fiancé couldn’t handle this tribute to postmodern shopping:

So we were going down the escalator and when we were down there it was incredible. It was like a flurry of white, and there were all these women and mothers, grandmothers in various stages of undress and at the bottom of the escalator this one women just started taking off her clothes and I can’t remember what she was wearing...and Larry looked at that and looked at me and said, ‘I can’t be here’. And he left. I said, ‘come back here.’ He said, ‘no, I really can’t be here and call me when you get home.’ And there he went.

BLURRING THE LINES OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

The FBBD illustrates this blurring of production and consumption lines elegantly. For example, the researchers saw a woman who was buying several dresses in order to construct the perfect dresses for her daughter and herself. She was helping another woman, who she had never met before, by telling her how she could re-construct a dress she was trying on to look or fit better. Also, while trying on dresses, many women speak of alterations and changes that need to be made to the dress, all while considering purchase of the dress. One participant recalled, “I talked to some women at the sale who had purchased two and some of them I like the top of that one and like the bottom of that one and I’m gonna get my seamstress to put them together.” For other women, the dresses were so damaged by the initial frenzy that major alterations were required. This requirement is a factor considered in their purchase decision.
THE GOWN IS THE THING!

For the women who shop at the FBWE, gown acquisition is an integral part of the wedding process, yet their motives in acquiring a gown are varied. One participant wanted merely to get the wedding gown purchase over with because the wedding itself meant nothing to her or her husband, but meant everything to their grandmothers. For others, the transformation from person to bride was the primary goal and often happened immediately upon donning the gown: “Oh my God that’s the dress! And I said what do you mean and she said, no really, that’s the dress so I started crying, and we can get really spiritual sometime, we have a kind of chemistry, and we both started crying.”

Thus, the gown becomes the object that determines the procedures of consumption. The women found that getting a gown this way drives them to act frenzied, work together, hoard gowns, and engage in other atypical shopping behaviors. Yet, through their actions, the women found they can obtain the object and also exert control over a situation they found chaotic.

CONTROL OVER CHAOS

For many of the women, the wedding planning process ended up being more like an attempt to “herd cats.” Given the multitude of relevant constituencies (bride, groom, bride’s family, groom’s family, bride’s friends, groom’s friends, bride’s family’s friends, groom’s family’s friends, bride’s work associates, groom’s work associates, ad infinitum), the women found that planning a wedding became an act of compromise rather than one of communion. Because of these constituencies, the consumption of weddings and wedding gowns became a social act, undertaken in the company of significant contributors, where relationships were fostered or strained, social codes were simultaneously adhered to, broken, and reformed, and the personal identity of the bride was constructed.

The FBWE, however, affords an opportunity for women to control by their consumption choice the meaning and the image that will be communicated while wearing their gown. One participant, who described her relationship with her mother as “adversarial,” used the sale to exert control over her mother’s insistence that she wear a formal wedding gown. Because the gown is so inexpensive, this participant felt comfortable buying a gown that would please her mother, without totally giving in to her mother’s vision of her as the ideal feminine bride. Other women felt intimidated by the bridal salons and used the event to exert control over the situation: “And they sort of pushed her into placing an order for this gown and she went home and she just burst into tears to her mother and they called up and canceled the order.” The FBWE allows for browsing and viewing of many different styles of gowns, with absolutely no intervention from sales clerks, giving the women a sense of control.

CONCLUSION

What can consumer researchers learn from this event and consumers’ reactions to it? Given the narrative presented here, several areas of interest arise. First is the issue of control. Firtat and Venkatesh (1993) assert that products control consumer behavior rather than the opposite. Our reading of this particular instance of consumer behavior suggests that the control issue may be more complex: products do shape consumer behavior and
image, but in this case, consumers alter product significance and indirectly, the image they present by the use of the product.

The second issue is that of participation in a blatantly nontraditional shopping experience. Why do some people enjoy the thrill and others are driven to writing letters of complaint? Given that Filene's Basement's new tag line adorning their world-famous plastic shopping bags is "Filene's Basement - You Just Can't Beat the Thrill," it would seem that the retailer is banking on consumers' willingness to be pulled into and enjoy a chaotic shopping experience that offers extraordinary value. As an embodiment of the retailer's strategic vision, the FBBE is nothing if not thrilling and is only experienced by those people who are willing not to judge it from a privileged perspective (this isn't what shopping is supposed to be like) but from an experiential vantage point (this heightened consumption event will be fun and exciting). In an age of cultural shifts, consumers will have to adapt to a changing marketing landscape. This study shows how in one case how they manage that adjustment while participating in the new environment.

For a sale participant, wearing a FB gown is like bearing the scars of wounds ritually inflicted in some rite of passage: it signifies achievement, braving a chaotic buying environment and obtaining the prize of value, beauty, and frugality. It allows consumers to feel empowered even in the face of challenging odds and gives them a tool to create for themselves a unique identity.

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