Image Consumption: the Study of Bridal Photography, Semiotic, and Feminine

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Image Consumption: The Study of Bridal Photography, Semiotic, and Feminine*Jin-Tsann Yeh, Vanung University, **Chyong-Ling Lin, Lunghwa University of Science & Technology, ABSTRACT The growth of bridal photography industry could be a miniature of Taiwanese anthrop-sociology development records. The conservative bridal photography showed exaggerative make-up and bridal costumes that represented a semiotic of contemporary fashion. However, the import of Western information awoke and educated Taiwanese women to reach an ideal state of self-confidence and autonomy. A researcher developed survey instrument to collect data from 550 randomly selected customers from the cluster of bridal photography salons. The finding revealed that modern Taiwanese women could be independent decision makers and were keen-witted and capable. They would ask for bridal photography based on the value of commemoration and self-expression and agreed that bridal photography represented beauty, romance, and happiness.

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appearance and to select the single photograph from each pile that best represented all of the photographs placed in that group. The participants were then asked to provide a word or short phrase of their own that best described the type of look depicted by each group of photos. Finally, each exemplar was rated in terms of overall attractiveness and a list of adjective descriptors (e.g., handsome, attractive, powerful) using a 5-point scale ranging from low (1) to high (5).

Results

Five distinctive clusters emerged from multidimensional scaling analysis.

Classic/Elegant: This category portrayed male models who were elegantly dressed, very well groomed, and with serious facial expressions. These images were rated high on descriptors such as sophisticated, intellectual, classy, confident and intellectual.

European/Fashion Forward: This cluster of images was described as stylish and bold in their commitment to make a fashion statement. The reference to Europe may indicate that the models were considered less typically American-as though coming from the old continent of high fashion and extravagance. The images rated high on sophistication, mysteriousness, and intelligence.

Trendy/Casual: These images scored high on descriptors such as athletic, healthy, casual, outgoing, and rugged. This look was perceived as youthful and highly attractive.

Guy Next Door/Athletic: The guy next door appears to be the antithesis to the Classical/Elegant Look. These male images ranked high on friendliness, strength, and masculinity. On average, the models were perceived as attractive, but somewhat ordinary and regular.

Macho/Masculine/Sporty: Participants described this group as macho, strong, outdoorsy, healthy, yet more stylish than the Guy Next Door. The models in this group were closely linked to sex appeal, power, good health and an outdoor lifestyle.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this analysis suggest that consumers tend to categorize idealized print images of men in terms of types of attractiveness that emphasize lifestyle characteristics. As such, men may compare dimensions other than overall physical attractiveness with that of the models depicted in advertising directed toward them. Further research is needed to better understand which comparison dimensions are most relevant in eliciting upward and downward comparisons for men and under what conditions. It may be particularly worthwhile to study the extent to which idealized male images negatively impact self-esteem for pre-adolescent and adolescent males.

References


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ABSTRACT

The growth of the bridal photography industry could be a miniature of Taiwanese anthrop-sociology development records. In the past, the conservative bridal photography showed exaggerative make-up and bridal costumes that represented a semiotic of contemporary fashion. However, along with the import of Western information a new aesthetic awoke and educated Taiwanese women to reach an ideal state of self-confidence and autonomy. The research was drawn on the premise that the awareness of feminism was an effect of media exposure to women of new images and an overall development of anthrop-sociology as well. A researcher developed survey instrument and a visiting survey were designed and used to collect data from 550 randomly selected customers from the cluster of bridal photography salons. The finding revealed that modern Taiwanese women thought that they could be independent decision makers and were keen-witted and capable. They would ask for bridal photography based on the value of commemoration and self-expression and agreed that bridal photography represented beauty, romance, and happiness. Also, bridal magazines and friends'/relatives' recommendations were the best information resources.
INTRODUCTION

In preindustrial society, bridal photography was not a must-have commodity when two families prepared a wedding ceremony for the new couple-to-be. During that time, bridal photography was only taken at a groom’s front yard on the formal wedding day. However, along with anthrop-sociology development and the economic boom, the modern couple-to-be sees bridal photography as one important step of the wedding ritual; they view bridal photography as their own business rather than old people’s. They visit many bridal photography salons to try on the most fashionable wedding gowns, check the samples, discuss their preferred style with sales representatives, and pick a date prior to the formal wedding ceremony to take shots—it usually is an all-day long and very complex process. All they wanted to pursue was an ideal look for a day that could preserve and fulfill a romantic affair. Lewis (1997) indicated that “wedding photographs are powerful because they are traditional, professional, personal, and seemingly accurate renditions of reality as they help couples remember a key period in their social and personal lives” (p168).

Miller (1995) indicated that consumption could reflect cultural diversity, meaning, and value. Bridal photography consumption and popularization was just an angle which reflected the historical record of the growth of Taiwan society that our people gradually awoke along with the social-economic developing; they were aware of personal meaning and value in the material culture. Also, while foreign media such as modern art, movies, TV shows, and advertisement were introduced, they were disciplined to have different perspectives defining their own values of wedding photography as well as feminine social meaning.

The research draws on many researchers’ premise that how consumers create meaning in their lives toward aesthetic, body image, and design operates interdependently along with anthrop-sociology development and advertising. The purpose of the study was to explore the interaction among the awareness of feminine self-esteem and self-actualization, semiotic, and bridal photography which might affect the new generation to abandon traditional concepts of the burden of marriage and create a new wedding ritual practice of creating an atmosphere of happiness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Development of the Bridal Photography Industry

Once, taking pictures was luxury and seldom happened, in the preindustrial era, only wealthy families could have the chance to take snap shots for fun or even possess a camera. However, most middle-low income families might invite a photographer to take shots for very formal and important situations to record family events such as births, weddings, and funeral ceremonies...etc. The purpose was to prolong a family memory and to unify the sentimental power of the family or a clan to the next generation (Bourdieu, 1990). Hence, it could be understood that photography, in the past, served only a social function instead of satisfying individual demand.

Adrian (1999) indicated that, before 1980, bridal photography salons did not provide full service but only rented white gowns. After several years, some bridal salons such as Lao Mai and Chongshi set the full wedding service package that included photography, head-to-toe styling, florists, and white gowns. Through a successful marketing strategy with advertising and promotion, the bridal industry soon developed their business. The sudden changed was unavoidable for those old-fashioned photo studios that became aware that proper weddings could not be achieved without an integral service package. Based on the demand, the number of full service bridal salons had rapidly grown to over 200 in the Taipei metropolitan district by 1997.

The minimal full package that the modern bridal photography salons provide usually includes at least 20 sheets of 12-15 inch enlargement pictures in an album, plus one additional 36-40 inch enlargement photo with frame which can be displayed on the formal wedding day. However, the price was not very easily met by the new couple-to-be; usually the bridal salons charge at least NTS30,000 for the minimal full package in Taipei. The price was a little bit lower outside of the region.

New Feminism

The social status of women was very low historically in Taiwanese society. The economic boom, that caused feminine involved into working position, led an overall social-economic upgrade in education, income, entertainment, and cultural business. The development modified personal value to pursue higher self-esteem and self-actualization. Moreover, the import of foreign media such as movies, TV shows, magazines, and advertisements exposed people to different perspectives of feminine value, visual communication, and aesthetics (Figure 1 & 2). The women were introduced to a new feminism that changed their sense of aesthetics and their eyes fell on personal appearance and performance. Swinth (2002) pointed out that women in the media were both symbols and icons which helped create a new modern social order and set a new image for women to achieve and imitate.

McCranken (1986) indicated that when a viewer/reader glimpsed an object, a process of transfer would happen to the person. Hence, when the bridal photography industry emerged women became visualizations of ideology, and because of the Cinderella factor, women invested themselves to achieve the ideal beauty and self-realizing image in the bridal photographs as portrayed in public media (Figure 3 & Figure 4). The forming process of the new feminism was socially produced by the new image in the media. It involved a relationship of sharing meaning between people and objects via the power of symbols to communicate images and ideas which would be considered as cultural conventions (Kang, 1997).

Semiotics and Bridal Photography

Otnes and Scott (1996) declared that ritual semiotics were expressions that were designed to identify and transfer metaphors, moods, and arguments for products’ image in particular motifs and for different occasions. Also, the identities and transfers could evaporate into our social constructions which would shift the audiences’ capabilities and preferences to interpret products’ image (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). Therefore, the traditional bridal appearance was gradually changed when the new bridal image was introduced to us through bridal photography in bridal salons, along with the progress of Taiwan society.

According to bridal yearbooks, the traditional bridal photography was composed of black-and-white pictures, which did not have many poses and gestures. The new couple, in the past, was required to stand straight without any close touching (Figure 5) because marriage
meant a turning point for the two persons with new social responsibilities. The heavy and ugly bridal make-up style represented the idea that the woman had a new responsibility to take care of the whole family after removing the mask. However, in the new era, of the new feminism, the bride would like the emphasis to be on showing her inner beauty (double eyelids were no longer a standard of beauty in 21st century of Taiwan) (Figure 6) and her determination to look after a romantic and happy marriage. Their postures and gestures were no longer conservative (Figure 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, & 12), they particularly imitated models in the Western media because they wanted to show that they were sexy and confident. Furthermore, the new semiotic of bridal photography have revealed a reality that women had announced their autonomy from male dominance.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to discuss the moving of the modern Taiwanese’s perspective towards aesthetics, body image, design, as well as feminine awareness that could be told through modern wedding photography. Questionnaires and visiting surveys given to both consumers and bridal salons’ managers were adopted as survey instruments to collect data. The survey’s instruments consisted of demographic data, motivations to have wedding photography taken, brand images, senses of beauty, perspectives towards feminism, photography styles, product values, and symbolic meanings of bridal photography. Fifty consumers, ages 18-35, were chosen to do the visiting survey on the streets; five professional bridal salons’ manager accepted our invitation to complete the visiting survey. Moreover, a sample of 500 visitors was randomly selected to fill in the survey from Aug. 29 to Sept. 11, 2003. The data from the questionnaires was analyzed by using procedures of the SPSS 10.0.

Findings of Visiting Survey

The Visiting Survey of Bridal Salons’ Managers

The motivation to take bridal photography. According to Fang-Yu Lin, the Tia bridal salon’s manager, bridal photography represented public ritual more than a personal demand because it meant a man and a woman decided to join hand in hand for the rest of their lives. Vanessa bridal salon manager, Su-Ching Chiou, said that bridal photography meant a lot for a couple because it represented that fact that they stepped into another phase in the journey of their life. That kind of joy, happiness, and excitement, which they strongly wanted to share with their relatives and friends, existed only in that moment and would not return forever. A groom might be deeply touched suddenly and feel his responsibility to his bride when he saw his lady appearing in a stunning dress. Hence, we would seriously undertake to provide the best service for each new couple.

With regards to preserving the traditional custom, Mei-Lin bridal salon manager Xuan-Min Huang shared her personal experience that some new couples would not dare to disobey their seniors and not have bridal photography done because their seniors seriously considered it to be a public ritual that proved the joining of two families. However, some new couples chose not to prove their marriage by having bridal photography done; they omitted the complicated process because they believed that the happy marriages need to be carefully cultivated and are not guaranteed by stunning wedding gowns or a series of delicately designed bridal pictures.

Marketing of aesthetics. Most bridal salons’ managers held quite similar perspectives in that they totally agreed that aesthetics was interdependent with anthrop-sociology development and advertising. According to Vanessa bridal salon manager Su-Ching Chiou both staffs and consumers’ sense of beauty could be informed from outside resources such as Western magazines or contemporary artworks. For example, she suggested that a bride could hold a silver tray or a designed basket with candies in it instead of the traditional wooden tea tray which was not quite in harmony with the stunning bridal style, to thank their guests at the end of the wedding. She insisted on providing a different wedding to her customers by adding small changes that created a new aesthetics.

Moreover, Bazaar bridal salon manager, Che-Ming Lin intimated that most customers would hand him newspaper or magazine clippings that they wanted to imitate. He would further communicate with his customers to shape a neat style which matched the current fashions and revealed their personalities as well. The most important thing was for the customer to not blindly chase the fashion; a good style also had to give a sense of the customer’s individuality.

The new feminism. Most brides-to-be would gather many information before they took shots, and also they would positively participate to discuss their make-up, decorations, poses, and angles with the bridal salon staff. It was totally different from the tradition that women could not have any opinions for her marriage. Taipei Fashion bridal salon manager Mon-Yang Lu shared his experience that grooms-to-be would express an attitude of indifference toward bridal photography. Nevertheless, brides-to-be show a determined attitude to announce their authority to direct the production of bridal photographs. Vanessa bridal salon manager Su-Ching Chiou expressed that the new women possessed a better ability to earn money; they could afford ideal bridal photographs. Modern women would ignore their future parents-in-law suggestions because they did not want to pretend they were satisfied with their arrangements.

With regards to make-up and dress, Mei-Lin bridal salon manager Xuan-Min Huang pointed out the modern bride did not like the bridal fashion of the past because it was a ridiculous custom where by the bride was packaged into a different person with heavy make-up, exaggerative decorations and gown. She indicated that light make-up and simplified gowns were the current trend. Brides especially like to show their backs in backless gowns which was not allowed in the past. And Tia bridal salon manager Fang-Yu Lin said that modern bridal photography reflected the new feminism in that brides were willing to show their attractive figures with décolleté gowns and that they were eager to show their beauty, character, and thought. They disagreed that “a woman without talent was the highest virtue” but they wanted to pursue self-esteem, self-actualization, and self autonomy.

The Visiting Survey of the Consumers

The motivation to have bridal photography done. Most people agreed that taking bridal photography was a ritual to record a romance of two persons. “I want to capture a record of my beautiful appearance when I am still young. Bridal photography can help me to reach an ideal state where I will wear a gorgeous gown and delicate make-up. I feel very happy and proud when I see that I can be as beautiful as a superstars” (visitor #10). However, some people were concerned that bridal photography was a necessity although it would cost them a hefty expense. They thought “If I did not have to worry too much about the expense, I think I would feel more positively about bridal
photography. But it usually takes at least twenty-five thousands dollars or more for a package service; it is a great amount for me” (visitor#9 & 13).

The male consumers saw the bridal photography as something for only women. However, they were willing to give it a chance if they were physically fit. One visitor said “I am willing to have wedding photography taken to keep my handsome appearance as a memorial gift if I lose my weight” (visitor#4). However, some visitors did not like bridal photography because they thought the pictures were not very natural. For example, “I saw a totally different person modified by Photoshop. I think those pictures were only a fiction” (visitor#11).

Marketing of aesthetics. Price usually was the main concern for consumers before they decided to sign a contract with a certain salon. However, besides pricing factors, brand image, the photographer’s sense of beauty, and the skill of photographers were influential factors for the prospective customers. One visitor said that “I feel insecure choosing a salon with an unknown brand name. Besides this, I will check the styles they created because I worry they do not possess enough sense of beauty” (visitor # 17). They also concerned that “the photographer is able to communicate with me, he must figure out and sense what kinds of style will match me because I do not want to get pictures that show no feeling of me” (visitor#12).

Nevertheless, some consumers were hardly able to sense or to judge what image those salons wanted to transmit “My friend introduced ‘France Paris’ to me because that name sounds in very classy, but I did not see any difference compared to the others” (visitor #19). Or, “I do not have strong feelings about bridal photography, but I only know ‘Hidden Love’ is a very romantic name” (visitor#10).

The new feminism. Sex appeal and self-expression were two important subjects of concern for the modern bride-to-be. They did not like the conservatively composed bridal photographs that bride and groom standing up straight without any smiles. They thought “I want to wear the different styles because I usually only wear one style in my daily life” (visitor#20). Or, “I do not care how others will judge me, because I want to have a different style to express myself from others” (visitor#12). To express sex appeal could be a one way to obtain self-esteem and self-actualization for modern women. “I especially prefer décolleté gowns because they make me look very sexy and modern” (visitor#14). However, some visitors asserted that they would not choose gowns for their shot because “when I put on wedding gowns I look much older than my real age; I would rather put on casual dress for bridal photography. Besides, if we can wear comfy clothes such as jeans with T’s in bridal photographs, we can have a free and relaxed attitude for our marriage” (visitor#11 & 23).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results

According to the statistical testing for the 455 returned questionnaires, the following research results were noted:

The majority of the respondents were female (69.5%), 30.5% of respondents were male. The largest group of respondents were from Taipei city (66.6%) and the age grouping of respondents were between 19-25 years of age (55.4%), 26-30 years of age (15.6%), and 31-40 years of age (18.0%). In addition, regarding the respondents’ educational background, 46.6% respondents held bachelor’s degrees, college degrees 26.4%, and high school degrees 18.2%.

The marital status of most respondents was single (73.2%) and the motivation of need was the main reason to consult with bridal photography salon (59.3%). Professional expertise of a photographer was the major reason to choose a bridal salon (42.4%), recommendations from friends and relatives were the second (29.0%), and price was the least concern for the prospective consumers (4.8%). Most respondents passively collected information (23.3%) because it was not a necessity in daily life. The reliable resources were bridal magazines (47.9%), friends and relatives’ recommendations (43.1%), bridal shows (31.6%), and consultation with sale clerks (30.3%).

The main reason to have bridal photography done was commemoration (89.2%). The consumers asked for photo albums (47.7%), designed greeting cards and wedding invitations (43.5%), and photo discs (43.7%). With regards to the Western brand image, the respondents thought it was romantic (53.2%), fashionable (45.7%), and elegant (46.6%).

Both males and females agreed that modern women were independent (M=3.81, SD=0.77), keen-witted and capable (M=3.59, SD=0.75), and major decision makers (M=3.49, SD=0.80); nevertheless, they disagreed that women were commander (M=2.92, SD=0.85). The men slightly disagreed and reached significant difference that women could be powerful people (t=-3.08, p=0.002), were independent (t=-2.99, p=0.003), and decision makers (t=-4.03, p=0.000). In the other hand, the women respondents disagreed that women enjoyed wearing less (t=3.44, p=0.001), had only a beautiful and gorgeous appearance (t=2.80, p=0.005), and attracted men by appearance (t=2.56, p=0.11).

Most respondents associated bridal photography with beauty and self-confidence (M=4.11, SD=0.77), marriage (M=4.02, SD=0.72), and romance (M=3.89, SD=0.71). The youthful respondents translated bridal photography into romance (t=2.34, p=0.02), and showed difference concerning price (t=1.96, p=0.05), service (t=2.41, p=0.016), and quality (t=3.38, p=0.01).

With regards to the pattern of bridal photography, most respondents preferred backgrounds featuring Western attractions (M=3.93, SD=0.83), Western-style gowns (M=3.59, SD=0.83), and realistic photo styles (M=3.60, SD=0.77). In the contrast, the respondents were least interested to nude bridal photography (M=2.65, SD=0.89). The single respondents had significantly different feelings toward backgrounds featuring Western attractions (t=2.82, p=0.005), the Western-style gowns (t=3.11, p=0.002), and Japanese Kimonos (t=2.97, p=0.003).

Most respondents strongly agreed that bridal photography was beautiful (M=4.07, SD=0.69), delightful (M=3.97, SD=0.72), and attractive (M=3.76, SD=0.70). Moreover, they agreed that bridal photography was commemorative (M=4.21, SD=0.70) and self-expressive (M=3.70, SD=0.81), but they least agreed that it was ambiguous and alluring (M=2.88, SD=0.91). The youthful respondents revealed strong agreement and significant difference that bridal photography represented self-expression (t=4.48, p=0.000), commemoration (t=4.05, p=0.000), and association with location (t=2.35, p=0.019).

Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from the findings and results of the data analysis.