The Commodification of Marriage: “Mail-Order Brides” in the Electronic Age

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This paper explores one of the most controversial developments in today’s world: electronic marketing of “mail-order brides.” We seek to provide a systematic explanation of this global consumer behavior phenomenon by conducting a content analysis of currently active websites offering mail-order bride services. We also develop a model explaining the transaction process of finding foreign brides in light of the discussion in sociology and marketing literature on morality of market exchange. We propose a theoretical framework for explaining why individuals participate in this process of “commodification of marriage.”

[to cite]:

[url]:
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was a 3 (alcohol condition: alcohol; no alcohol; placebo) x 2 (ad condition: anti-sexual aggression ad; control -Pepsi ad) between subjects design. In the alcohol condition, participants were given drinks with high alcohol concentration (.80 g/kg ethanol), in the no alcohol condition, participants were to taste and spit out the alcohol and in the placebo condition, participants were made to believe that they were actually consuming alcohol by using a drink that tasted and smelled like alcohol (.04 g/kg ethanol). The blood alcohol levels of all participants were measured throughout the experimental session using a breathalyzer device.

Our results suggest that the alcohol manipulation worked. While individuals in both alcohol (M= 2.8 SD=4.4) and placebo (M= -2.0 SD=3.3) conditions reported higher levels of perceived intoxication (p>.05), the no alcohol group (M= -6.8 SD=2.8) indicated significantly lower perceived intoxication levels (p<.05). The results of a Sobel test (p<.05) indicated that perceived intoxication is a mediator between alcohol consumption and sexual aggression intentions, suggesting that individuals’ perceived extent of impairment is a key factor in explaining deviant behaviors. Moreover, RMA had a significant main effect on sexually aggressive intentions (p<.05) indicating that one’s tendency to support adversarial sexual beliefs has a strong impact on behavioral tendencies. However, we were not able to show a moderation effect between RMA and perceived intoxication. We also failed to show an interaction effect between AE and alcohol consumption. We were not able to demonstrate a significant interaction between ad condition and perceived intoxication. However, the signs of these variables were in the expected direction. We believe these non-significant findings may be primarily a power issue. A follow-up study with more participants is planned.

With this study, we hope to fill a gap in the social marketing and transformative consumer research literatures by providing a more inclusive conceptual framework on the relationship between the influence of alcohol and deviant behaviors. Our expectation is that alcohol has differing consequences on individuals that cannot be solely explained by pharmacological effects. The proposed framework may help explain the effect of warning ads on individuals’ proclivity to engage in socially undesirable behaviors.

References available upon request

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The film opens with kaleidoscopic shots of beautiful women posing for the camera. A man flips through the pages of a catalog resembling a catalog shopping for clothing. Looking at the booklet closely, one realizes that he is looking at the pictures of attractive women. Carefully examining these images, he is searching for a wife to take home. This is the opening scene of the 2003 documentary, *In the name of love*, directed by Shannon O’Rourke. The documentary tracks a number of women who are signed up with marriage agencies in Russia and rich American men searching for brides. O’Rourke examines commercialization of modern love and romance by looking at the lives of these women and the processes involved in this modern matchmaking business.

There are approximately 200 mail-order bride agencies in the United States, with an estimate by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to be 4,000 to 6,000 American men finding wives through those agencies each year (www.uscis.gov). This multi-million-dollar mail-order bride industry continues to thrive rapidly at a global scale and scope, with mixed reports on whether marriages via this international match making arrangement result in positive outcomes or in domestic violence. This international marketing practice has long been unregulated until recently when the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act was signed into law in 2006. Although this Act aims at protecting women from potential abuses, it in effect legitimizes the industry, and the volume of transactions continues to rise. A closer look at the law also indicates a sexist language in such a statement as, “The seller must obtain the man’s record from the National Sex Offenders Public Registry database.” (www.govtrack.us) We believe that it is worthwhile investigating this phenomenon from the perspective of morality of market exchange (Prasad 1999).

Advances in electronic commerce and internet technology accelerate speed, scope and scale of the mail order bride transactions on a global scale. Although these services represent a truly global consumption phenomenon, the mail order bride issue has not received sufficient attention from consumer researchers. This study aims at providing a better understanding of the nature of the mail-order bride service, causes of “commodification of love” and its consequences on gender relations, family and marriage formations. In an era where foreign brides are being marketed on the internet resulting in growing commodification of marriage, there is a high potential for violating personal identity of women in this process (Hughes 2000).

There are two dominant perspectives in studying consumption patterns as symbolic expressions in consumer research: Personality/values lifestyle analysis suggests that lifestyles are behavioral expressions of personality traits, and object signification research that posits that consumption objects (goods, services and events) represent social categories. Holt (1997) proposes the third, post-structuralist approach. He argues that this method is more appropriate for explaining consumption patterns in advanced capitalist societies. Meanings are realized in relation to peoples, times, places and objects. Moreover, meanings accumulate. They are not disconnected from history. They are “symbolic chains” that are constantly constructed. These meanings are multiple resources from which social actors select and combine. Hence, meaning of any object is dependent on which linkages are made. Consumption of marriage, for example, however individual, always works with the existing societal frameworks. Our research relies on Holt’s perspective to offer a more comprehensive explanation of this complex phenomenon of commodification of marriage in the free market world.

The content analysis of currently active mail order bride websites includes virtual images, electronic presentations of brides, and other information on product and service offerings. Our initial review shows that most of the marketing activities concentrate on attracting American men to their one-stop shopping electronic bridal search service. Subservient and traditional women are typically portrayed as “products” offered as choices for men. They are described with such adjectives or phrases as, untainted by Western feminism, family-oriented, innocent, pure, and loyal to the husband.