A Feminist Content Analysis of Bridal Magazines

Katrina Leonard, Student Researcher
Women's Studies
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Kathleen Nybroten, Faculty Mentor
Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Introduction

Weddings are a social institution that reinforce inequality not only for women, but for those of different races, classes, and sexual orientation. Weddings are a rich subject for feminist as well as sociological analysis. This study examines how concepts of gender, race, class, language, and heteronormativity are presented in modern wedding culture. We critically analyze the use of language and visual representations that form a normative culture and valued practices related to weddings. The results provide insights as to how heterosexuality is institutionalized and gender roles are reinforced as well as how the wedding culture reinforces whiteness, middle class consumption. Weddings are a $50-70 billion dollar annual industry. A “white” wedding (one where a bride wears a white wedding dress) is the norm in American society. White weddings are thus constructed in patriarchal institutions that privilege heterosexual norms. The magazines also suggest that women are the planners of the wedding. Bridal magazines not only reinforce normative gender roles, but they construct a reality that does not exist. Representations of race in bridal magazines do not reflect those getting married or the general population. Bridal magazines construct a fantasy intended for white, middle class, heterosexual women.

Methods

This is a content analysis of 5 bridal magazines published in 2013.
A coding system was used to identify gender, race, and class.
The following magazines were analyzed:

Gender

Analysis of the magazines showed:
• All were portrayed as heterosexual couples.
• Most women wore white wedding dresses.
• The majority of the women represented in the magazines were thin and light-skinned. However, there were advertisements for plus-sized women, but they were uncommon.
• All magazines feature fashion and beauty tips for women.
• 3/5 of the magazines examined had articles about diet and/or exercising prior to the wedding day.
  • Many of the magazine articles emphasize that brides are and should be (article title left)”Classic Beauty: Brilliantly beaded accents add a glamorous twist to a timeless silhouette.”
  • “You’ll be the picture of perfection in this ultra-feminine tulle ball gown with a luxurious crystal-beaded and ruched bodice.”

With every couple depicted in the magazines assumed to be heterosexual, bridal magazines display heteronormativity. While many researchers have commented upon the “white wedding dress” as symbolizing purity and innocence, none of the ads or articles mention this, but instead emphasize femininity and elegance.

Articles

Inside the magazines, the articles focused on similar topics. The topics include:
• Fashion, Beauty, Wedding Planning, Honeymoons, Wedding Stories, Budgets, Relationships, Dieting/Fitness, and Advice.

Article Titles Include:
• “Don’t Panic... Your No Stress Checklist”
• “Time To Get Gorgeous: A Month-by-Month Beauty Guide”
• “Just Engaged! 10 Fun Things To Do 1st”
• “30 Ways To Save From Real Brides”
• “It’s His Wedding Too. 10 Best Ways To Get Involved”
The articles suggest that planning a wedding is stressful and that men are not typically involved in planning the wedding. Additionally, it is implied that women need to spend a great amount of time focusing on their beauty and body for their wedding day.

Language

All of the magazines used similar words to describe weddings or brides. These were the top 5 words used in articles and advertisements.
1. Elegant/Elegance
2. Perfect/Perfection
3. Classic
4. Sophisticated/Sophistication
5. Traditional

Other common words to describe weddings or brides were: unique, exceptional, romantic, exquisite, unforgettable, extraordinary, flawless, charming, enchanting, breathtaking, timeless

The use of words such as elegance or perfection imply a script for how both brides and weddings should be described. Elegance and sophistication imply class as well as gender expectations.

Class

$28,427: Cost of Average Wedding

4 out of the 5 magazines had articles about budgeting, yet the advertisements do not show a “budget-friendly” wedding. Several articles emphasize that the bridal gown is not an item that brides should be cutting their costs. A few popular bridal gown designers and prices include:
• Allure Bridals: $1,000-2,200
• A-line: $3,000+
• Maggie Sottero: $1,300-1,800
• Monique Lhuillier: up to $4,000
• Sottero & Midgley: up to $2,000

These bridal gown prices do not allow for a “budget-friendly” wedding. Bridal magazines only want to have the illusion that they are trying to help brides save money, but in reality the wedding industry would not benefit from brides saving money.

Discussion

It is concerning that bridal magazines are perpetuating gender expectations for brides. Not only are they perpetuating these expectations, but women are following them. According to the wedding industry and bridal magazines, women are the ones who should be planning a wedding. A wedding is one single day of an entire marriage, yet it is costly and is time consuming to plan. Weddings are a “big-day” for women. Wedding culture is a social construction that is patriarchal as well as for those that are privileged. Weddings appear to be restricted for white, middle to upper class, heterosexual women. Bridal magazines emphasize femininity, perfection, and elegance as well as tradition.

Sources


We thank the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for supporting this research, and Learning & Technology Services for printing this poster.