Heteronormative consumptive patterns in American wedding media

Claire M. Buchanan

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ABSTRACT

HETERONORMATIVE CONSUMPTIVE PATTERNS IN AMERICAN WEDDING MEDIA

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This research looks at the messages of heteronormativity and consumption in wedding media. After World War II, renewed economic prosperity meant more Americans could invest in consumer goods and housing. At the same time, women were forced out of the jobs they had occupied during the war. Using heteronormative messaging, advertisers sold American families not only consumer goods but also the “traditional” family structure in which women were happy as housewives and mothers while their husbands worked. Heterosexual marriage became the entrance to this “traditional” domestic life and thus the American Dream.

Following a historical review of advertising and wedding traditions, a quantitative content analysis of Brides magazine, Catalyst magazine, and a selection of 40 wedding pins from Pinterest was conducted. Through my analysis, I argue that new, socially progressive wedding media (Catalyst and to some extent Pinterest) have expanded the wedding narrative to include a more diverse array of couples but have not meaningfully challenged the consumptive prescriptions of American wedding culture.
HETERONORMATIVE CONSUMPTIVE PATTERNS
IN AMERICAN WEDDING MEDIA

BY

CLAIRE M BUCHANAN
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis Director:
Dr. Laura Vazquez
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The Path before the Aisle

I’m planning a wedding. I’ll actually be married by the time I graduate with the degree that this thesis is written for, in a small ceremony in our home. Then in a few months we will make our vows again, this time in a church packed with 120 of our loved ones, with all the traditional fanfare of a modern American wedding. My first wedding, necessitated by impending loss of health insurance and an impatience to “make it official” with someone I already share a home, a bank account, and two cats with, feels somehow a bit scandalous, somehow a bit less than a “real wedding.” How is it that, even after months of methodical analysis and critique of wedding industry discourse for my thesis, I am still struggling to liberate myself from the oppressive hold that the wedding industry has on me? The social arrangements signified by weddings are deeply rooted in our culture, and thus so are the norms that enforce them.

We started planning our “real wedding” in February of 2017. In April of 2017 I was gifted a stack of bridal magazines as an engagement gift from a recently married friend. “They’re pretty problematic,” she told me, “but still fun.” I spent a full evening skimming the magazines, expecting to be a little annoyed as a feminist but to find some helpful suggestions for my wedding. I found none. Instead I found a predictable pattern of prescriptions that varied only superficially from one publication to another. Deeper than that, I found that the magazines
shouted expectations at me about roles I needed to occupy as a bride and as a wife, many of which I could not or did not want to occupy. There were no white brides with Hispanic grooms. Most couples pictured are both white, and a few are both black, both Asian, or both Hispanic, but few to none are interracial. None of the brides pictured have men as attendants. Instead, a couple’s siblings and friends must be divided by gender in order to participate. These are just two examples of traditional wedding expectations which I do not or will not fulfill as a straight white woman. LGBTQ+ couples are wholly excluded from the narrative of mainstream wedding publications.

These racial and gendered expectations harken back to a 1950s image of marriage, one that looks like the advertisement in Figure 1. “Successful marriages,” this advertisement says, are built on the heteronormative narrative in which a wife cooks and keeps the home for her husband. This narrative is presented as the fulfilment of “girlhood dreams” for the newlywed wife, pictured in the advertisement bending over in front of a stove cooking “lovely meals for her man,” apparently too excited to begin her new life as a wife to even change out of her wedding gown before preparing dinner. This advertisement was created much closer in time to my grandmother’s wedding than to mine, but the narrative still hasn’t changed much as I move through the planning process myself.

The narrative of the white wedding is the product of advertising in a consumptive and patriarchal culture. It is a dream fabricated by men in power and presented to young girls as if it were their own. Now, faced with the realization of my own “girlhood dreams,” I have chosen to write this thesis as a rejection of that narrative. It has become a tool by which to liberate myself and to define myself as a feminist, instead of by the “girlhood dreams” which are not even my own.
The Study

A note on language use. In order to more clearly make apparent the taken-for-granted power differences in marriage, relationships, and the customs of wedding culture that reflect those arrangements, I have been purposeful in my language choices. This section examines the language choices I have made and reflects on the symbolism of wedding traditions.

First, I have used the word “wedding” in two distinct ways. The first refers to the legal process of contracting a marriage. The second, which I distinguish as the wedding event, refers to the ceremony and reception (as well as any other planned gatherings and activities the day of a wedding). Similarly, I have used the word “marriage” in multiple distinct ways. Marriage is used to refer to the legal arrangement between two people. Heteronormative marriage refers to a domestic partnership between a husband and wife. This is the 1950s image of marriage in which a wife cooks, cleans the house, and stays home to raise the couple’s children while her husband works outside of the home to support his family. Finally, I have used “partnership” to refer to a committed relationship between two people. People in a partnership may be married or unmarried.

The word “couple,” as a common word referring to people in a marriage or partnership, has heteronormative connotations. In the media examined, often couples are not really engaged or married but rather models portraying the heteronormative ideal used to sell products and services to brides and grooms. The word “couple,” then, has been used in reference to a heteronormative couple– a man and a woman both occupying traditional gender roles in a monogamous marriage or partnership. The more general term that I use to refer to two people in a relationship (regardless of gender, sexuality, or roles) is “pair.” In descriptions of people
pictured in wedding media, couples and pairs, are distinct from other participants in a wedding or wedding event, such as officiants or guests.

Finally, I distinguish between traditions and practices. Traditions are behaviors that have been passed through time. These traditions reflect cultural beliefs and values. Practices, on the other hand, which we often think of as traditions, do not have the same lengthy roots as traditions. Practices are much more recent in origin than traditions. Feminist critique of weddings has often focused on wedding customs as they maintain heteronormative, patriarchal gender relations (Broekhuizen & Evans, 2016; Brook, 2002). Wedding customs, whether traditions or practices, often symbolize the patriarchal transfer of property, as the bride’s father walks her down the aisle and “gives her away” to her new husband, for example. The bride then customarily takes on her husband’s last name. This custom originated during a time when women had few legal rights of their own. Instead, they were passed as property from father to husband (Coulombeau, 2014). Further, the expectation for women, not men, to change their names upon marriage places higher value on a man’s identity than a woman’s. It is the men in her life, not herself, who define a woman.

Modern weddings/marriage. A wedding is the beginning of a marriage, yet marriage is relatively absent from the discourse about weddings. Implicit in the heteronormative rituals of weddings and wedding event planning, though, are norms which structure traditional heteronormative marriage. American wedding events are more often than not imbued with customs which enforce patriarchal gender roles and race and class hierarchies.

Wedding media affirm these gender roles and race/class hierarchies by almost exclusively representing straight, white couples with lavish, traditional wedding events. Instead of an inclusive narrative about a pair affirming a commitment to one another in front of loved
ones, mainstream wedding discourse upholds an exclusive, heteronormative narrative about a straight white couple planning an expensive event. The individuals and their unique relationship are not the focus of the discourse, but rather the event they are able to plan. The result is a message of exclusivity: “correct” weddings are available only to a select group of people.

Traditions, which reflect cultural beliefs and are passed on through time, require re-evaluation as culture changes. They often have their roots in practicality, but the roots are unknown or the practical reasons no longer apply. For example, the tradition of groomsmen may stem from “marriage by capture” in which a group of men would kidnap a bride. Fortunately this is not a modern American custom, but a groom’s friends and brothers still traditionally accompany him on his wedding day. In the past, grooms have had groomsmen, so current grooms continue to have groomsmen.

Wedding event planning is rife with customs, many of which have little practical meaning today. The white wedding gown is just one example. Engaged couples (or their parents and other loved ones) consume prolifically, as most of these customs require purchasing goods or hiring professionals for services. A traditional wedding event is fundamentally characterized by the amount and type of products and services consumed, which signify taste and status. Even wedding adjacent events (especially the bridal shower, but also an engagement party, rehearsal, bachelor and bachelorette parties) require consumption or are held explicitly for the purpose of consumption in the form of purchasing gifts, serving food, or renting commercial venues.

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1 Evans–Grubbs (1989) describes bride capture as centuries old. As far back as A.D. 326 Emperor Constantine issued a condemnation of marriage by capture, “the first explicit recognition in Roman law… though it is clear from other literary sources that the phenomenon was not new” (p. 59). Salopek (2017) asserts that the practice still occurs today, detailing stories of kidnapped brides in Kyrgyzstan.
In addition to dictating what is purchased, custom dictates who purchases. In a traditionally heteronormative wedding event, the bride does most of the planning. Grooms are represented as emotionally detached, confused about “feminine” tasks such as choosing flowers, and available simply to write checks for the things that his fiancée has selected. Women are the main audience for wedding industry ads, appealing to desires for beauty, romance, and status, which can all be attained through their ability to purchase.

Within the last several years new feminist, LGBTQ+ friendly wedding media have begun to enter the market. These online and print outlets purport to be disrupting the exclusive discourse about weddings, diversifying representation to include an array of individuals and pairs who are ignored completely or appear infrequently in mainstream wedding media. This thesis proposes that wedding customs be re-evaluated and perhaps renegotiated. Active engagement with norms instead of passive compliance is key to subverting the hegemonic structures in place, but I ask the question: Are these new publications truly disruptive of the heteronormativity and consumption in wedding media?

This thesis examines the structure, dynamics, and cultural practices of twenty-first century heteronormative marriage rituals. This analysis reviews the traditional roles of major participants, consumptive practices, popular culture representations, and the social pressures to sustain traditional behaviors. It is grounded in a historical review of American wedding rituals. My investigation will begin with a quantitative content analysis of the popular bridal magazine Brides, the disruptive wedding magazine Catalyst, and 40 popular wedding-related pins (individual posts) from the social media site Pinterest. Finally, the magazines and pins will be qualitatively analyzed for prescriptive, custom–based messages about heteronormative consumptive practices.
Chapter 2:
WHITE HETERNORMATIVITY AND TRADITIONAL WEDDING EVENTS

The narrative of the white wedding (Ingraham, 1999; Kimport, 2012; Wallace, 2004) is one about a couple consisting of one female bride and one male groom. They embody the ideals of their own gender roles. The way they are represented in mainstream wedding media promotes the hegemonic ideals of the gender/sexuality hierarchy, and their white wedding allows them to assume these roles publicly. This narrative is observable in popular culture, in wedding industry advertisements, and in wedding magazines, where same–sex pairs are few and far between. Heteronormativity prevails in wedding discourse, tied inseparably with consumption.

To begin, the concept of heteronormativity stems from Rich’s idea of compulsory heterosexuality, which she describes in her 1980 article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Compulsory heterosexuality is the assumption or even necessity that romantic and sexual relationships occur between a man and a woman. Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality as it is used to regulate women’s lives through both social and physical means of control, but compulsory heterosexuality does apply to men as well.

Heteronormativity is at the least pernicious, suggested by our endless romanticizing of heterosexual relationships in wedding media and beyond. Whether in popular culture and the media or by those around us, straight relationships are presented as ideal–romantic, comfortable, expected norms. Heteronormativity supposes two “naturally” distinct genders, with separate
“natural” roles for men and for women. In heteronormative marriage, then, a wife will take on feminine responsibilities, likely caring for children and the home, while a husband will take on masculine responsibilities, likely working in order to provide for his wife and children.

Jackson (2006) elaborates on heteronormativity’s regulation of sexuality. Heteronormativity creates a hierarchy of gender and sexuality. It dictates not only that heterosexuality is normal and desirable, but that heterosexuality is most or only acceptable when enacted as a monogamous partnership between a man and a woman, each performing traditional gender roles. While dictating desirable gender performance and sexuality, it also relies on “deviant” gender performances and sexualities that it marginalizes in order to create the hierarchy. As a “principal site for the construction of heteronormativity” (Kimport, 2012), wedding events employ customs which enforce this hierarchy, and wedding media represent couples at the top of the hierarchy.

These gender roles, even for those who dominate the gender/sexuality hierarchy, position men and women unequally. Women are shown in media, from frequently violent pornography to more benign popular television shows, as objects of pleasure intended for the male gaze. As Mulvey argues in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), narrative film structures the viewer’s gaze as male, using women on screen to produce pleasure in viewing. The female role in this system of interpersonal relationships is one of passivity, while the male role is active. These roles structure power dynamics— the active male is in a position of power while the passive female does little other than look good for the benefit of men (Mulvey, 1975).

The wedding industry and related industries which utilize wedding event imagery use this “to–be–looked–at–ness” of brides in advertising wedding narratives which predetermine behaviors and roles. Brides (and to some extent bridesmaids and other women involved in the
advertising) become the object of the male gaze in wedding media in order to sell the consumptive white wedding narrative.

This consumptive white wedding narrative began in earnest after World War II, when soldiers returned home with GI Bill money, ready to invest it into the American economy. Wartime production of planes and bombs changed to postwar production of consumer goods. Refrigerators and ovens, though, are cheaper than the planes and other wartime products that manufacturers were selling to the US government. Thus, advertisers needed to convince the American public that they needed these consumer goods, and they needed a lot of them. Through successful advertising campaigns conflating the purchase of their goods with happiness and harmonious family life, they succeeded in this pursuit. For example, many Hoover advertisements (Figure 2) targeted husbands, promoting Hoover products as gifts for their wives. In the advertisement in Figure 2, a woman lies on the floor, cradling her new Hoover vacuum, staring lovingly at a card that reads “To Susan with Love – Tom.” The text further emphasizes happiness, which a husband can give his wife through consumption and which a wife can achieve through taking care of their home.

Greater economic prosperity meant that many American families could afford more luxury and convenience, available through consumer goods and housing. With this came the narrative of the traditional middle-class American family— a white husband and wife with two children, living comfortably in a suburban home. Advertisers relying on heteronormativity as a selling point made the American Dream accessible through heteronormative marriage and consumption.
Figure 2. Hoover advertisement.
The traditional heteronormative marriage and family structure, the modern American
deronormative ideal, is not as long established as the term “traditional” suggests. Stephanie
Coontz (2016) presents an overview of American family structure which argues that a truly
“traditional American family” is not possible to pin down and that conventional family structures
have changed frequently throughout American history and along race and class lines.

The “traditional” American family is a family that Coontz traces back to the 1950s, often
likening it to the family on the television show *Leave It to Beaver*. This family is made up of a
working husband and a stay–at–home wife who takes care of the house and two children. World
War II and the Great Depression had increased dependence on family, and renewed economic
prosperity after the war drove young families into the suburbs, where they enjoyed more luxury
and more privacy (p. 27), giving rise to the suburban nuclear family we now refer to as
traditional. While this family structure is understood as “traditional” today, those living in the
1950s understood this family structure “to be a new invention” (p. 26).

Coontz explains that the division of labor by gender in this new family structure is a
revival of the Victorian notion of separate spheres for men and women– women belonged in the
private domestic sphere and men belonged in the public working/political sphere (p. 49). Men
were supposed to be independent, free-thinking breadwinners. They participated in public life
and earned money for the family. Women in this gendered system then took up the tasks of
domestic life, seeing to the emotional needs of their families, to the raising of children, and to the
labor of keeping a home.

While this “traditional” family is, in television shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and in more
modern culture, presented as a happy ideal, serving the needs of all family members, Coontz
explains that this was and is in fact not the case. During the 1950s, two million married couples
lived apart, and one–quarter to one–third of marriages entered into in the 1950s ended in divorce (p. 39). Additionally, national polls found 20% of respondents described their marriages as unhappy (p. 40).

After World War II many women did not want to give up the jobs they had taken on during the war but were forced out of the workforce altogether or into lower paying jobs (p. 33). Heteronormative advertising endeavored to convince these women to happily take on their new, more “suitable” roles as housewife and mother. Additionally, women who did not fill the roles of the ideal wife and mother were labeled mentally ill, and even those who did fill these roles were often unhappy in them. Many housewives turned to tranquilizers and alcohol to cope with a life of subordination that they did not necessarily want (p. 41). Some men and women even entered unhappy heterosexual marriages in order to avoid being outing as gay or lesbian (p. 36).

Not only was this new “traditional” family not the source of happiness it was and is thought to be, it was not even the norm during the 1950s, the decade widely assumed to be the height of family values and traditional family structure. Coontz explains that the vision of the ideal family presented on television shows like Leave It to Beaver were staggering inaccurate representations of actual family life in the United States. Not only were minority families excluded from popular culture representation of the “average” American family, they were not afforded opportunities to actually achieve it in the way white families were. Forty percent of black mothers worked outside of the home (p.32). Black families faced threats of and actual physical violence when they tried to move into many suburban neighborhoods (p. 33). Additionally, poverty rates were high. Up to one–third of even white families required more than one income to get by (p. 31), and poverty rates were over 50% for black families (p. 32).
The wedding customs which signify entrance into this new “traditional” family structure and to the American Dream are relatively new as well. Most of the formula for a “traditional” modern wedding event was cemented during or after the 1950s, when the “traditional” family structure came about. As consumption became a fundamental piece of a traditionally heteronormative white American family, wedding events and brides as consumers became the rite of passage for entrance into this ideal family type. During the 1950s, “hint lists,” the early iteration of the wedding registry, gave brides the opportunity to curate their new domestic life (Howard, 2006). A bride could ask for the exact home goods she felt she needed to begin married life as a “good” wife. These new wedding practices not only signify the type of heteronormative marriage and family one is entering into, but enforce it and marginalize those for whom it is not available. In this way, many wedding customs enforce and enact family and gender relations that enforce and enact straight, white, male dominance.

Even with the legalization of same-sex marriage in the twenty-first century, heteronormativity continues to prevail in the narrative of even same-sex weddings. Same-sex wedding events can still be, and often are, built on heterosexual gender norms. Even as lesbian and gay marriage becomes more widely accepted, the expectation remains that one member of a couple is more masculine and one is more feminine. In a 2012 study of same-sex wedding photographs, Kimport found that many of the photographs of lesbian pairs (30 of 43 examined) showed heteronormativity in that one of the women exhibited external markers of femininity while the other exhibited markers of masculinity.

These theories of the hegemonic normativity of gender and sexuality will inform my analysis of wedding media, especially bridal magazines which I assert have played an important role in creating the modern American wedding event as a “principal site for the construction of
heteronormativity” (Kimport, 2012) and which continue to perpetuate these heteronormative ideals. The following chapter will review the history of many modern wedding customs, including the rise of bridal magazines and their role in this process.
Chapter 3:

HISTORIC ORIGINS OF CONSUMPTIVE WEDDING TRADITIONS

History of Traditions

Getting engaged. The diamond ring is the first symbol of an engagement and one that young girls often dream about from childhood. The customary diamond engagement ring, frequently given to a woman by a man when he proposes, dates back only to the late nineteenth century. It has become a major element of the white wedding narrative through the commercial appropriation and misrepresentation of ancient traditions.

According to traditional rhetoric, ancient beliefs held that the second finger on the left hand had a vein running directly to the heart (Mooney, 2017). Ancient cultures such as the Romans and the Greeks were said to have given engagement rings (Howard, 2006), establishing them as a very long–held tradition, distancing them from their commercial origins.

The real history of engagement and wedding rings in the United States is considerably more complex than simply coming from the ancient traditions of the Greeks or Romans. The meaning of the rings, how and when they are given, and the type and style of rings have changed dramatically over the years. Early in American history, engagement rings were not given at all (Howard, 2006). Customs developed independent of ideas about ancient traditions. Instead, the diamond engagement ring was a function of changing production and marketing.
The industrial revolution brought changes to the production and distribution of goods, including in the jewelry industry. Mass production allowed cheaper jewelry to be produced. Increased competition in the jewelry market gave rise to new practices as companies marketed new, mass-produced products to consumers. The engagement ring, a new token of love and commitment for your fiancé, was one of these new products that has endured.

Also contributing to the commercial creation of this practice was the discovery of new caches of diamonds in Africa in the 1870s (Howard, 2006). The abundance of diamonds suddenly available was controlled in large part by DeBeers Consolidated Mines Ltd. (Howard, 2006), who restricted the flow of diamonds onto the market, creating artificial rarity and increasing their prices. In the 1880s, Tiffany & Co. came out with the diamond solitaire (“The World of Tiffany,” 2017), the classic image of the diamond engagement ring. By the end of the nineteenth century, guidelines about appropriate styles of engagement rings and how to wear them began to appear in etiquette books (Howard, 2006). As will be further discussed in detail under “Bridal Magazines,” this established them as a gendered, commercial norm.

By the middle of the twentieth century advertisers began focusing heavily on selling diamond engagement rings to couples, always for the woman, never for the man. In a still-successful effort to create a consistent market for themselves, the jewelry industry pushed engagement rings. Agencies like N.W. Ayer & Son, the agency that created the slogan “a diamond is forever” for DeBeers, emphasized tradition (Howard, 2006). While a tasteful bride at the time shied away from conspicuous consumption at her wedding event, advertisers let her know that that did not apply to her diamond ring. They told brides that it isn’t a consumptive choice; it’s a traditional rite of all brides since ancient times, symbolizing the love and commitment between herself and her fiancé.
**Wedding adjacency.** All but the smallest wedding events involve events outside of the wedding day itself. Bridal showers, bachelor parties, and bachelorette parties, and even more recent twenty-first century practices like the day–after brunch, all wedding adjacent events customarily come in the months or weeks leading up to or immediately after a wedding event. These events are consumptive by nature. A bridal shower’s explicit purpose is gift giving. Bridal shower guests surveyed for theknot.com’s Real Weddings Survey spent an average of $75 on a bridal shower gift in 2016. Bachelor and bachelorette parties, while not explicitly gift–giving occasions, are nonetheless consumer events, with guests paying for travel, accommodations, food and drinks, and party activities.

Like the invented custom of the diamond engagement ring, these parties became typical elements of wedding events relatively recently. Both bridal showers and bachelorette parties (the latter of which were modeled off the older tradition of the bachelor party) are products of the twentieth century. Also, like many of the other consumptive customs regarding wedding events, bridal showers and bachelor and bachelorette parties are highly gendered practices, signifying and enforcing the roles that men and women take upon entering heteronormative marriage.

Bridal showers, which Montemurro (2006) says “implicitly and explicitly [socialize] women into the hyper feminized traditional wife role” (p. 8), are customarily women–only events where the bride–to–be is presented with gifts that will help her fulfill that traditional role. Gifts that will help her cook, clean, and decorate a home are customary. Today, a groom may appear at a bridal shower while opening gifts, signifying that he may use them as well, or at least that he understands he will benefit from them, but the custom of inviting only women is still reminiscent of the origin of bridal showers, when these gifts were intended to help the bride be a better wife.
Bridal showers may have their origins in events like sewing parties of the nineteenth century, when female neighbors and friends came together to help a bride-to-be sew the fabric goods like sheets and towels that she would bring into her marriage (Montemurro, 2006). A woman’s worth was tied heavily to what she could offer a man in heteronormative marriage, and these parties brought women together to help one another in that area.

The late nineteenth century saw the first bridal showers as we know them. Female family members and friends gathered to help the bride assemble her trousseau, the material possessions she contributed to her new household as a wife (Montemurro, 2006). These gatherings were opportunities for conspicuous consumption. Guests could display their wealth by giving expensive gifts in front of one another. The bride also had the opportunity to show off her increased status as a wife with a large trousseau.

By the early twentieth century, lower class brides began having bridal showers as well (Montemurro, 2006). For these brides and their guests, the shower was not as much an opportunity for conspicuous consumption, but rather an opportunity for the bride to receive things for her new household that she and her husband-to-be could not afford on their own. Today, bridal showers are customary for brides of all economic classes.

Even more recent is the addition of the bachelorette party. Bachelor parties, or stag parties, have been around for centuries as men mourned their last days of singlehood and sexual freedom (Haire, 2009). This was unnecessary for women, as marriage is traditionally the beginning of a bride’s sexual life and the fulfillment of her primary purpose in life—to become a wife and begin having children. The bridal shower was her celebration of becoming a wife. Bachelorette parties, on the other hand, have only been around since the end of the twentieth century (Montemurro, 2006). During the 1960s, increasing interest in women’s sexual liberation
made its way into wedding-related celebrations. The bachelorette party took inspiration from the sexually charged bachelor party.

   Women began to introduce events similar to bachelorette parties in the 1960s, but they would not be called bachelorette parties until the 1980s. In initial iterations of the bachelorette party, a bride’s female friends would throw a private shower, where they presented the bride with gifts such as lingerie, which she may have been embarrassed to open in front of family members. By the 1980s and 1990s, bachelorette parties as we know them today were commonplace. Brides and their female friends drank, visited strip clubs, and openly discussed sex (Montemurro, 2006). The virgin bride was no longer the expectation, though bridal showers in which women enact other traditional roles of a wife persisted.

   **Planning the day: The white wedding formula.** The picture of the typical American wedding event as depicted in magazines, on *Pinterest*, and in other wedding media and planned by many real brides and grooms has several basic elements. Magazines and *Pinterest* abound with suggestions for personalizing a wedding event, but typically only through small variations on these elements or additions to them. Most wedding days follow this formula, personalized by individual consumptive choices.

   For assistance in following the formula, most issues of bridal magazines, among their many ads, include a month–by–month or even week–by–week planning guide. Wedding event planning apps, made by media companies like The Knot or Wedding Wire, also offer interactive checklists for couples to keep track of their planning progress. These checklists guide couples through choosing the elements of the wedding event formula, things like picking their flowers, ordering their cake, and booking hotel rooms for guests.
While the elements of the white wedding formula are many, this section reviews the historic origins of four. This review demonstrates the various, intertwined, and often complex roots of the customs we observe today. Many of these customs, as has been demonstrated through the discussion of engagement rings, are relatively recent in origin, while others are much older (even centuries old). Whatever the specific origins of these wedding-day customs, I argue that their place in modern wedding events has been established by consumption. They have found their place in modern wedding events because of advertising by the wedding industry and because of conspicuous consumption by couples looking to show off their taste and wealth (or often simulated wealth, thanks to Pinterest’s do–it–yourself culture).

To begin, though some brides choose not to wear white on their wedding day, it is still the most popular color. The reason is more multifaceted than the common belief that white represents virginity or that Queen Victoria started the trend when she chose white for her wedding gown, though the latter is an important element of the real reason. Brides did not wear white consistently until the twentieth century and instead chose any color gown that they liked or that they could afford. Additionally, wedding gowns were often worn again. Black was a popular color for wedding gowns because it hid stains well and could be re–worn at funerals. Until recently, wedding gowns were not intended for wear on a single occasion.

According to Wallace (2004), pale colors were a popular style, especially for young girls but also for women, at the beginning of the nineteenth century (p. 31). As such, Queen Victoria wore white on her wedding day, projecting a pure, girlish image of herself, and in turn a purer, more credible image of the monarchy after the kings before her (William IV and George IV) had damaged public opinion (p. 34). As Howard says, previous royal brides had worn traditionally regal colors such as purple for their weddings, and Queen Victoria dressed “less like a queen…
and more like any other wealthy young maiden…,” making her wedding event more relatable and admirable in the eyes of everyday citizens (p. 35).

White was still an expensive color choice, though. It was difficult to produce and maintain white fabrics, meaning it was expensive to purchase and difficult to keep clean for future wear. Additionally, white fabric shows sewing errors that are more easily hidden on darker or patterned fabrics. Because of this, more care must be taken when producing white garments, meaning that they take more time to make and are more expensive.

Because of their high price and high-maintenance nature, white gowns were only available to wealthy brides. Conspicuous consumption, then, motivated many of the brides who chose white for their wedding gown. Toward the end of the nineteenth century brides could order ready-to-wear gowns, instead of having to purchase a pattern and fabric and have the gown professionally sewn (Wallace, 2004). As styles became looser and simpler with the turn of the century it became easier and cheaper to produce ready-to-wear gowns. This meant that more middle-class brides could afford to purchase a white wedding gown, and by the middle of the twentieth century the trend had become an established and fundamental piece of the white wedding formula.

Likewise, wedding photography owes its status as an essential element of the white wedding formula to advertising and advances in technology that made it easier for people to access it. In its infancy, photography was an unwieldy profession. It took a long time and required large, bulky equipment and flashes could only be accomplished with chemical explosions. Nonetheless, many couples wanted their wedding day documented. As Wallace (2004) explains, until the 1920s they had to settle for a dozen or so photographs taken during a session at a photographer’s studio (p. 119). Photographers began to advertise their services as an
essential way to immortalize the happy day and as a major regret for those who chose to skip the expense. By the 1920s, photographers frequently took their cameras on location for ceremonies and receptions.

In 1929 David Berns, a New York-based photographer, laid the groundwork for modern conventions of wedding photography. He began taking a smaller, 35–millimeter camera (which was already being used by news photographers at the time) to wedding events in order to shoot candid images in addition to the formal portraits he shot with his larger, bulkier camera. As technology evolved, it became easier to photograph on location at a ceremony or reception (Wallace, 2004). Cameras became smaller, image resolution became higher, and lighting equipment became more efficient. Today professional wedding photography has blossomed into a highly profitable industry. Many photographers specialize solely in capturing wedding events. Wedding photography costs thousands of dollars, and a photographer and assistant will typically spend eight hours capturing a wedding day, from hairstyling appointments in the morning to the reception in the evening. Couples can receive hundreds of retouched high–resolution images, in addition to videos, professional photo albums, framed prints, and canvas prints.

Increasing use of wedding photography in the early twentieth century meant that a bride kept photographs in mind while planning her wedding event. As an important consideration in devising a nice-looking photograph, bridesmaids’ outfits became flashier and their numbers began to increase. This trend signaled a shift in the tradition of including attendants in a ceremony.

While Wallace (2004) asserts that there is not a single traceable origin story for the tradition of bridesmaids (p. 106), it is a long–standing tradition with many roots. For one, the church and the state have, since the middle ages, required at least two witnesses to a wedding
ceremony. Additionally, a sense of safety and superstition dictated that similarly dressed bridesmaids may confuse dangerous spirits or jealous rivals wishing to harm or steal a bride away (p. 106). Finally, a bride can simply benefit from the support of her friends in the transition from single to married life.

Wallace also explains that the Victorian custom for bridesmaids was to dress them in white, as became the practice for brides. At the time, the norm was for bridesmaids to be unmarried, younger than the bride, and often veiled. Eventually trends changed, and bridesmaids’ outfits became more colorful. Wealthier brides dressed their bridesmaids in extravagant gowns with headwear and even decorative props as brides planned for photographs. Larger numbers of bridesmaids became fashionable (from a modest two or three bridesmaids to as many as eight or more) as well, and in the interest of symmetry the numbers of groomsmen increased as well.

Similarly, the origin of the tradition of groomsmen is multifold. For one, a groom can benefit from the support of his friends like a bride can. Additionally, the tradition could be traced back to marriage by capture (Evans–Grubbs, 1989), which was frequently carried out by groups of men who may have stolen several brides at a time or just helped one potential groom capture a single bride (Wallace, p. 106).

In addition to bridesmaids and groomsmen in a wedding party, many couples employ ushers. Modern ushers may hand guests ceremony programs as they arrive and escort grandparents and other important or elderly guests to their seats. In nineteenth-century high-society wedding events, ushers’ roles were often comparable to bouncers. With several hundred guests in attendance, ushers would check invitations as guests arrived and assist police officers in keeping crowds under control (Wallace, 2004, p. 75). Additionally, ushers sometimes helped to
shield a wealthy or famous bride and groom from unwanted newspaper photographers as they exited the ceremony (Wallace, 2004, p. 78).

Finally, the wedding cake is another integral element of the white wedding formula. While many couples in recent years (fueled, perhaps, by trends on Pinterest) have chosen dessert alternatives such as donuts or cupcakes, the cake remains a mainstay of wedding culture. Wedding cakes, like bridesmaids and groomsmen, have earned, in earnest, the term “traditional” as a centuries old custom, though they have changed in form and purpose over time. In his book exploring this tradition’s European origins, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (1992), Simon Charsley stresses the difficulty of pinning down a single wedding cake origin story, asserting that there are instead multiple origin stories.

To begin, the term “cake” itself has changed in meaning over time. The Oxford English Dictionary traces it as far back as 1230 (“Cake”), originally referring to a small, hard type of bread. At wedding celebrations, a groom would often break a “bride cake” above his bride’s head (Charlsey, 1992). The term “bride cake” was used until the nineteenth century when “wedding cake” replaced it as the common term. Cakes including candied fruits, called plum cakes, were common at medieval feasts. These celebratory, decorative cakes may bear the closest resemblance to modern wedding cakes, though none were as sweet as modern cakes, and medieval cakes were not iced or covered in sugary decorations.

In what Charsley refers to as an “increasingly literate culture” (p. 32), written recipes began to appear during the late Middle Ages. The advent of printing technology increased the proliferation of instructional recipes, with increasingly precise measurements and ingredients, and encouraged greater varieties of recipes to flourish. This, along with advancements in baking
techniques and an increase of sugar in the average diet, paved the way for cakes to evolve into the sweet and decorative desserts we know today.

The late nineteenth century saw the final significant advancements in wedding cakes, when tiered cakes became popular and piping became a widespread decorative technique. Until this point, wedding cakes typically only had a single tier and were decorated very simply, even as baking techniques and ingredients evolved. The piped, tiered wedding cake, which took longer to make and required a trained pastry chef, was expensive and showy. It was available at first only to brides and grooms from wealthy families. Today, simple tiered, piped cakes are available to those outside of the upper class, but large cakes with extravagant decorations are still signifiers of taste and wealth, as they can cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

Today, a bride and groom often include a cake cutting ceremony as part of their reception. This tradition may have its roots in the medieval custom of breaking a cake over the bride’s head in celebration. Additionally, it was a Victorian custom for a bride to cut a slice of cake to share with guests. Sometimes, pieces of cake were distributed among the bride’s friends, who took it home and slept with some of it under their pillows, in order to dream about their future spouses (Charsley, p. 109). Of course, the cake also traditionally functioned simply as a centerpiece and as a dessert for guests to enjoy, just like it does today.

**Bridal magazines.** Etiquette guides such as Emily Post’s *Etiquette* (1922) were precursors to bridal magazines. They offered advice on proper conduct in everyday social situations and in special events from wedding events to funerals. Women’s general magazines, such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, also discussed wedding events among other topics of interest to women. By the end of the nineteenth century, magazines began to rely
heavily on revenue from advertising, as cost of subscriptions was not enough to keep up with a growing market of readers (Howard, 2006).

As advertising products to brides and their families proved lucrative, specialty bridal magazines came on the scene. In 1934, an advertising manager from the magazine House and Garden founded Brides magazine. Brides was the first bridal magazine in publication, followed by Wedding Belle in 1948, Modern Bride in 1949 and many others in the subsequent years (Howard, 2006). These magazines, born from and sustained by revenue from advertising, associated the social, emotional, and religious significance of weddings to the related consumptive practices. They advised brides on fashion and beauty, on gifts and the trousseau, and on other consumer decisions available to them for their wedding day and future marriage.

The bridal magazines partnered with stores, sponsoring events and creating advertising tie–ins in the content of their magazines. They also held bridal business events for store executives, emphasizing the market available to them in wedding events (Howard, 2004), and in turn drumming up more advertising revenue for themselves. In this way, Brides and its contemporaries played a key role in the increased commercialization of the American. Arguably, bridal magazines created today’s wedding industry. Driven by their search for advertisers, the bridal magazine pushed the industry to new heights while creating a reliable customer base for the industry.

**Consumptive Trends**

According to Wallace (2004) and Howard (2006), American weddings have changed drastically over time. Through the early twentieth century, most wedding events were small affairs held most often in a home, perhaps with a breakfast following a morning ceremony. The bride and groom often left for a honeymoon or to move into their new home together.
immediately following the ceremony. By the middle of the twentieth century, wedding ceremonies were commonly held in churches with a cake–and–punch reception following. By the latter quarter of the twentieth century, wedding events as we know them currently were commonplace. Especially as mass production and other technological advancements made consumer goods cheaper and widely available, even those not in upper economic classes were able and expected to plan wedding events in churches with large, dinner–and–dancing receptions afterwards.

This change came about due in large part to the rise of the wedding industry, as businesses saw the opportunity to sell goods and services to brides (Howard, 2006; Wallace, 2004). Wedding dresses, which at one point were of any color and meant to be worn again, slowly became white gowns that wouldn’t likely be worn again. Specialty venues began to emerge as people took their wedding events outside of their homes. Wedding caterers came about as wedding events commonly became sit–down dinner events.

Even products and services unrelated to wedding events have been able to take advantage of wedding imagery in advertising (Ingraham, 1999). Cosmetics, for example, have found their way into the wedding market, reminding brides–to–be that they want to look their best on their wedding day. Many of the advertisements found in bridal magazines, and those that utilize bridal imagery outside of bridal magazines, focus on beauty products or services that will help a bride beautify herself for her wedding day. As subjects of the male gaze, beauty is a priority for women in general, and especially so for brides as they become the most significant figure for visual display in photography, videography, and attention on their wedding day.

This commercialization by the industry has created a culture of consumption around wedding events. As this trend began to develop, though, it did receive some pushback (Wallace,
The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw sharp critiques of showiness and lavishness that was characteristic of wedding events thrown by some wealthy families. During this time, Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” (1899). Wealthier families could afford to hire bakers, seamstresses, and other professionals, and they could purchase more expensive gifts for engaged sons and daughters. These goods and services functioned as status symbols. While a simple wedding ceremony served the same practical purpose as a lavish one, a lavish wedding event served the additional purpose of communicating the families’ wealth by putting it on display. Even guests could show off their own wealth by giving expensive gifts that were often displayed for other guests to marvel at.

Many in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries viewed this conspicuous consumption as crass or immoral (Howard, 2006; Wallace, 2004). Now, though, expensive wedding events are the ideal. According to the most recent statistics from theknot.com’s survey of brides and grooms who got married in 2016, the average American wedding event cost $35,329 (XOXO Group, 2017, February 2). The 141 guests on average at each of these wedding events spend an average of $118 on a gift. Guests also consume prolifically at wedding–adjacent events. For example, attendees at bachelor parties in 2016 spent an average of $738 on the party, excluding travel to and from (XOXO Group, 2017, July 11).

Of course, these statistics were gathered from brides and grooms who used theknot.com’s services for their wedding events. It excludes those who eloped or had small weddings in 2016. According to recent statistics published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States saw 2,221,579 marriages in 2015. The wedding industry is estimated to have a revenue of $76 billion this year (IBIS, 2017), up from $55 billion in 2015 (Bourque, 2016). Dividing evenly between the two million plus weddings that year, that means the real average
may be closer to $24,757. That number includes all aspects of the industry, from caterers to accommodations to gift registries, so some of those expenses are incurred by the guests instead of the couple and by their parents.
For this analysis, I examined samples of three types of wedding-related media. I used two different magazines and wedding-related Pinterest “pins.” In the following sections, I describe my methods, my data, and my positionality as it relates to this research process.

**Critical Analysis**

To begin analyzing my data, I conducted an exploratory content analysis of the magazines and pins. I coded the pins and articles in the magazines for topic and prescriptiveness in order to begin revealing patterns among the three types of media. For my first round of coding, I recorded a topic for each distinct advertisement and article in the magazines and for each individual pin. Advertisements in *Brides* outnumber articles by nearly three pages to one. Additionally, most articles in *Brides* feature tie-in advertisements for products and services, making the content of the two difficult to differentiate in any meaningful way. For this reason, I have included advertisements in the content analysis for both *Brides* and *Catalyst*. Some pins and articles had more than one main topic and were coded as such. For example, a pin with the caption “Bridal Beauty Timeline” fit into the categories *Bridal fashion/beauty* and *Timelines and checklists* equally, so it was coded for both.

For the second round of coding, I looked for the prescriptive use of language in each publication and on *Pinterest*. I recorded instances of the use of words and phrases which imply
necessity, such as have to and rules; prohibition, such as not allowed and cannot; and social obligation, such as counting on (as in “your friends and family members are counting on you”) and please do so; and future regret or satisfaction, such as you’ll wish, and you’ll be glad you did. Coding for these types of words and phrases allowed me to look closely at the agency the media grants (or denies) its consumers. Words and phrases of necessity and prohibition presume no choice for the reader, and words and phrases of social obligation presume that choice exists but that the reader has an obligation to make a certain choice. Implying future regret or satisfaction also presumes that the reader has a choice but that one is clearly better than the alternatives.

Data Sources

For this study, I used two major data sources: wedding magazines and Pinterest pins. These sources were selected because they are the benchmarks for wedding media. Though wedding events are largely formulaic, trends are fleeting and in order to keep up and maintain profits the industry must produce “new” information and imagery on a regular basis. In addition, wedding events are a business that lends itself well to magazines and pins, which can be cut apart, scrapbooked, pinned, and posted in personalized configurations for individuals piecing together their own version of the white wedding formula. The data set consists of one issue of Brides magazine (December 2015/January 2016), one 2017 issue of Catalyst magazine (Vol 4), and 40 wedding-related pins from Pinterest. I describe each source here.

Wedding magazines

Magazine issues were chosen based on availability. I chose to use one issue of a mainstream publication and one issue of a newer, feminist, LBGTTQ+ friendly publication. I had
access to 10 bridal magazines and chose the December 2015/January 2016 issue of *Brides* randomly from the 10. Volume 4 of *Catalyst* was the only volume that I had access to.

*Brides*, the oldest American bridal magazine, is a publication of the mainstream, overtly heteronormative, consumptive, exclusive wedding industry. *Brides* and similar publications (such as *Bridal Guide*, *The Knot*, and other feminized wedding publications) are aimed exclusively at brides. From the names (e.g., *Brides*) to the proliferation of advertisements for gowns and feminine beauty products and services, these bridal magazines situate women (always with a male partner) as the dominant decision maker for the wedding event. *Brides* costs $5.99 per issue.

As has been discussed in Chapter 3, *Brides* and its contemporaries played a large role in the rise of the white wedding, creating a reliable customer base for the industry by presenting a traditional white wedding as a proper, even necessary, and highly desirable experience for their readers. Magazines also showed retailers how to take advantage of the sizeable wedding market, selling ads and hosting events for store executives about attracting brides as customers.

A new type of magazine, one of which (*Catalyst* magazine) I will be examining alongside *Brides*, has recently emerged. *Catalyst* magazine has been published by Catalyst Wedding Co. since 2015. *Catalyst* is “for wedding space disrupters” (Catalyst Wedding Co., 2017) or those who are underrepresented or outright excluded by mainstream wedding media and who are not the target demographic of the industry. A discussion of whether or not this type of publication is truly disruptive of the heteronormative consumptive culture of American wedding events is a major contribution of this thesis.

*Catalyst*, a non–traditional wedding magazine whose website asserts that “there are too few wedding magazines out there that elevate love and personality over spending and
aesthetics,” includes LGBTQ+ pairs, people of color and interracial pairs, individuals with disabilities, and other non–traditional pairs and vendors. Costs and budgets are downplayed compared to magazines like *Brides*. Additionally, *Catalyst* features articles specifically addressing the problematic exclusivity of the wedding industry. *Catalyst* costs $15.00 per issue.

The vast majority of individuals/pairs represented in mainstream publications such as *Brides* are white and straight. *Catalyst* features LGBTQ+ pairs and people of color, in addition to interracial pairs, individuals with disabilities, individuals/pairs who have had children before marriage, among other typically excluded people, all of whom are also significantly underrepresented in mainstream wedding publications. Because *Catalyst* features and addresses a wider variety of participants in a wedding event (I am mainly referring to grooms, whereas *Brides* addresses only brides), I call mainstream publications bridal magazines while I refer to *Catalyst* and similar publications more generally as wedding magazines.

Despite these significant differences, this analysis examines the heteronormative, consumptive patterns that persist even in more inclusive wedding media such as *Catalyst*. In the same vein, I argue that these patterns of consumption and heteronormativity persist on *Pinterest*, a highly feminized social media site where many users search for and save ideas for their own wedding event among other traditionally feminine areas of interest.

*Pinterest*

*Pinterest* “pins” were chosen randomly from a pool of 150 popular wedding-related pins. In order to select a random sample of pins, I curated a board of 150 popular pins using the search terms “wedding,” “wedding ideas,” “wedding planning,” “queer wedding,” “gay wedding,” “lesbian wedding,” and “same–sex wedding.” I excluded promoted pins (paid ads that come up in related searches) and buyable pins (products you can purchase through *Pinterest*) from my
pool. Additionally, I included only pins that have captions, so that even pictures without text will have deeper context for analysis. After collecting 150 pins that matched my criteria, I printed the captions, cut them apart, and chose 40 at random from a bowl.

*Pinterest,* founded by Ben Silbermann, Evan Sharp and Paul Sciarra in 2010 (“Press” 2017), is a social media site where users collect and curate images that they find inspirational, interesting, or useful. The language on the website frames it as a virtual bulletin board on which to collect images relating to one’s interests. The images, called “pins,” are collected on pages called “boards” that organize the pins thematically. For example, a board may be called “My Future wedding,” or even something as general as “Things I Like.” Boards and pins can be about any topic that a user wishes but commonly relate to topics like cooking, housekeeping and decorating, fashion, or wedding events. Pins link to outside articles, blogs, and other websites, though as Friz and Gehl (2016) assert, *Pinterest* encourages users to stay within *Pinterest* and to engage with images more than with text. Users engage with one another by saving others’ pins to their own boards, or “repinning.” Though users can create their own original pins, repinning is more common (Friz & Gehl, 2016). Figure 3 shows *Pinterest’s* search interface and several pins. The individual pins and their captions were analyzed, not the outside websites.

There are over 200 million users on *Pinterest,* with over 100 billion pins across the website (“Celebrating,” 2017). According to recent Pew Research data, 31% of internet users use *Pinterest* (Greenwood et al., 2016). Most *Pinterest* users are women, around 71% (Beese, 2015). Popular topics tend to be traditionally feminine in nature (cooking, decorating, and wedding events, for example.) Friz and Gehl (2016) argue that this is because of inherent gender scripts beginning at the website’s signup interface and continuing throughout a user’s experience on *Pinterest.*
Figure 3. *Pinterest’s search interface.*

To begin, the tutorial that new users are taken through after signing up emphasizes cooperation, a more feminine behavior, over competition, a more masculine behavior. The tutorial doesn’t teach users about gaining followers or even how to check their number of followers. Instead, it focuses on creating boards, finding pins, and repinning. The “*Pinterest Etiquette*” page also emphasizes feminine traits of politeness and avoidance of competition. Additionally, “*Pinterest Etiquette*” specifically mentions pornography as prohibited. In order to create a comfortable space for women, it makes sense that a medium often violent or degrading toward women would be prohibited.

According to Lui (2015), *Pinterest* is a site of “social curation,” collecting and organizing digital content, mainly from others. This differs from other social media sites, whose purposes
include sharing one’s thoughts and feelings and put more focus on users’ original content. In this way, Pinterest functions as a socially created (as opposed to professionally created) online magazine, made for users by users. A bride, for example, can collect personalized content relevant to her own taste and wedding needs.

**Positionality**

Standpoint theorists like Dorothy Smith (1987) and Sandra Harding (1993) have asserted that no researcher comes to one’s work as a blank slate. Even the most objective scientific inquiry is a product of a socially situated researcher (Smith, 1987), whose position and experiences form the lens through which they understand and interpret their data and relate to their subject of investigation. In order to provide transparency and context for my analysis of wedding media, this section will expand upon the discussion of my own relationship with the white wedding narrative, which I began in the introduction of this thesis.

As a straight, white, middle-class woman, not only is the narrative of the white wedding available to me, but it was created for my demographic specifically. At the same time, I am the product of a family with progressive, feminist values and of an education emphasizing social consciousness. These facets of my identity have produced a struggle in which I have one foot inside wedding discourse as a bride-to-be and one foot outside as a feminist feeling the need to interrogate that discourse. This thesis reflects the collision of my feminist awareness and my somewhat problematic relationship with the white heteronormative patriarchy, which I both benefit from and have chosen to challenge through methodical analysis and criticism.

Additionally, my level of education puts me squarely in a privileged position, able to choose which subjects are worthy of research (Harding, 1993). At the same time, it gives me a platform to discuss that privilege and to challenge the current narrative that continues to
marginalize and exclude those who do not share the privileges of class, economic status, and whiteness. I have chosen this topic because of my relationship with the white wedding narrative and as a simultaneous personal rejection of the narrative. While I have a personal relationship with the topic, though, I have also taken steps to reduce partiality in the results of my research. Through random sampling I have attempted to reduce bias in data selection. It is my intention that this discussion of my position in relation to the topic at hand provides a context for my investigation and analysis.
Chapter 5:

RESULTS

Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of article topics per medium. All three mediums emphasize aesthetics. This is clear upon looking at them, and clearer still upon looking at the data. *Bridal fashion/beauty* is the most common topic in *Brides*, outnumbering all other topics combined. Most articles and advertisements feature wedding gowns, all in white, the most important signifier of a woman’s status as a bride. Advertisements and articles also place emphasis on a bride’s personal appearance, suggesting hair and makeup ideas and advising diet and exercise plans. The next two most frequent topics are *Aesthetic choices* and *Proposal/ring*. These articles focus on the choices that a bride has when designing her ceremony and reception, from the floral arrangements to the venue, and of course the options she (or more likely her fiancé) has for the most symbolically significant piece of jewelry she will ever wear. *Pinterest* also emphasizes aesthetics and, with its “do–it–yourself” culture, offers inspiration and help in making it a reality even for brides with low budgets. *Ideas/inspiration* is the most frequent topic on *Pinterest*, followed by *Bridal fashion/beauty* and *wedding adjacent events*.

The same emphasis on aesthetics is true for *Catalyst*, though in a more subtle manner than for *Brides* and *Pinterest*. *Ideas/inspiration* is the most frequent topic in *Catalyst*, with a large focus on showcasing photographs of real wedding events and vendor offerings. While *Catalyst* laments that “there are too few wedding magazines out there that elevate love and
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Topic</th>
<th>BRIDES</th>
<th>CATALYST</th>
<th>PINTEREST</th>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ATTENDANTS</strong></td>
<td>bridesmaid’s dresses, flower girls, ring bearers</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BRIDAL FASHION/BEAUTY</strong></td>
<td>clothing, shoes, jewelry, makeup, hairstyles, diet, exercise</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET</strong></td>
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<td><strong>DIVORCE</strong></td>
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<td><strong>ENTERTAINMENT</strong></td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td><strong>PROPOSAL/RING</strong></td>
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<td><strong>RECEPTION</strong></td>
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<td><strong>REGISTRY/GIFT IDEAS</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VOWS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WEDDING ADJACENT EVENTS</strong></td>
<td>engagement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>party/photos, shower</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
personality over spending and aesthetics,” the aesthetic appeal of these articles and accompanying photographs is nonetheless compelling. Professionally decorated tables, colorful professionally decorated cakes, beautiful venues, and customary wedding attire are highlighted in the photographs, and brides and grooms interviewed comment on the myriad aesthetic choices they’ve made for their wedding event.

While all wedding media emphasizes aesthetics and beauty, each medium differs from the others as well. For one, the data reveals that Catalyst does in fact disrupt the typical practices of wedding media through self–reflection and self–awareness. Identity and Politics/social issues are second and third most frequent topics in Catalyst. Brides, on the other hand, does not mention these topics at all. Self–professed “for wedding space disruptors” (Catalyst, cover page), Catalyst proclaims to be purposely different than its contemporaries. It succeeds in holding a mirror to its own industry by featuring commentary about race, religion, ability, gender, and sexuality in relation to weddings.

Continuing to differ significantly from both Brides and Pinterest, Catalyst is the only medium to include the topics Budget, Vows, and Divorce. It is worth mentioning that it is not hard to find pins relating to budgeting. While my random sample does not include pins related to budgeting, it is a common topic on Pinterest. A larger sample likely would include one or more pins about budgeting. Articles in Brides discuss money mainly when reporting the spending of their featured brides and grooms or suggesting specific products, not in the context of explicitly prescribing a budget for readers. Instead, Brides implies that high spending is ideal, showcasing costly wedding events and expensive products. For example, one bride boasted that she and her husband spent only $49,929, under their budget of $50,000 (p. 237). An exception to this trend comes in an article on buying engagement rings, when the President and CEO of the
International Gemological Institute is quoted saying, “traditionally, the groom spent two to three months’ salary on the ring, but an increasing number of couples are divvying up the cost” (p. 250), implying that two to three months’ salary might still be an appropriate budget, but that couples may split that cost.

*Catalyst* is also the only medium to address the topic of *Vows*. While most of *Brides*’ pages are filled with advice and advertisements for the physical plans for the wedding event, *Catalyst* addresses some emotional plans that must also be made. Additionally, while it seems ironic to discuss divorce in a wedding magazine, there are a couple of articles in *Catalyst* that burst the wedding bubble and remind readers and the industry that not all marriages last. Though more wedding events means more money, *Brides*’ strategy is built on a romantic, happily–ever–after white wedding narrative. In the *Brides* narrative, your wedding day is the most important day of your life, so you deserve to do it as big as possible. Of course, many readers will get divorced. When they do, they can become engrossed in the romance again, wanting a “correct” wedding once more to begin a new happily–ever–after.

*Pinterest* was the sole medium which featured *Gifts/favors* and *wedding adjacent events*. True to the do–it–yourself spirit, pins feature advice on throwing showers and on making favors to give to guests. Additionally, pins suggest gifts for the couple to give wedding party members and to their parents. Some of the gifts are do–it–yourself and inexpensive, but some are suggestions to purchase gifts such as jewelry. Pins also offer decorating and activity suggestions for engagement parties and showers. One pin suggests planning a “bro–dal shower,” or a bridal shower for a groom.
Finally, Table 2 shows the specific prescriptive words and phrases found in the data, and the frequency with which they occur. Pinterest and Catalyst use more prescriptive language than Brides does. While it is difficult to compare mediums with such different formats, for the sake of discussion I have included a measure of concentration of prescriptive language. For every 3.75 pages of content, Catalyst includes one instance of prescriptive language. While pages and pins are not directly comparable units of measurement, Pinterest includes prescriptive language with similar frequency, at one instance of prescriptive language for every 3.63 pins.

Despite the similar levels of concentration, the context for the usage in both mediums varies greatly. Most instances of prescriptive language in Catalyst (24 out of 32) occur in descriptions of industry problems which the magazine seeks to amend. For example, the introductory letter to the reader states, “Breaking Boundaries means shattering the false narrative put on us by the mainstream media that tells us how we should look and how we should love” (p. 3). Prescriptive language on Pinterest, on the other hand, lacks the self–reflectiveness of Catalyst. Each instance of prescriptive language on Pinterest occurs as an instruction, informing users of a specific action they should take (e.g., “42 Must Take Pre–Wedding Photos”).

Brides uses the least prescriptive language of the three. The mainstream publication generally avoids explicitly prescriptive words and phrases like should and must. Instead, prescriptions are implicit in the instructional messages about planning and in the descriptions of real wedding events introduced as “ideas to make your own” (p. 331). Brides doesn’t need to use as many explicit prescriptions because readers have already bought the magazine. Additionally, prescriptions in Brides are the prescriptions inherent in American wedding culture. As a non–traditional publication, though, Catalyst has more work to do in convincing readers to follow
their prescriptions. In this way, *Catalyst* makes the invisible, taken-for-granted norms of American wedding culture more visible.

Words and phrases of necessity are the most prominent category of prescriptive messages in all three mediums by a wide margin. While most instances of prescriptive language in *Catalyst* are self-aware reflections on the problems of the wedding industry and larger American culture that enables and enforces those problems, *Brides* and *Pinterest* do not practice self-reflection. The instances of prescriptive language in these mediums are limited to instructive messages about planning a “correct” wedding event.

Table 2. Prescriptive Language Use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BRIDES (352 PAGES)</th>
<th>CATALYST (120 PAGES)</th>
<th>PINTEREST (40 PINS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NECESSITY</strong></td>
<td>38 (82.7%)</td>
<td>25 (78.2%)</td>
<td>8 (72.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should, had to/have to, must, supposed to, you'd better, it's imperative, need/needed/needs, need to, a must/must haves, to–do/to–dos, rules, essential, is wedding goals, make sure to–do/to–dos, rules, essential, is wedding goals, make sure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROHIBITION</strong></td>
<td>3 (6.5%)</td>
<td>7 (21.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cannot/can’t, couldn’t/could not, should not/shouldn’t, no one is allowed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL OBLIGATION</strong></td>
<td>5 (10.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please do so, counting on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FUTURE REGRET/ SATISFACTION</strong></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (27.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you’ll wish, you’ll be glad, you will be thrilled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>46 (1 instance for every 7.6 pages)</td>
<td>32 (1 instance for every 3.75 pages)</td>
<td>11 (1 instance for every 3.63 pins)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6:

DISCUSSION

An Evolution of Discourse

The discourse in wedding media can easily be categorized into two main subjects. The first subject is the pair. Both images and text in the magazines and pins communicate messages about who gets married (or who should get married). The second subject is the wedding event. The magazines and pins show brides (and others involved in the planning process) what their wedding event should look like and what they should spend money on. A third subject, the partnership, comes up infrequently, especially in bridal magazines. Partnership is conspicuously missing from most pages of magazines and pins about weddings, a fact which in and of itself says much about the weight that the industry puts on the event of the wedding over the longevity of the marriage and quality of the partnership.

The white wedding is a relatively new practice, originating so recently as the mid–to–late nineteenth century. The wedding industry, a product of the rise of this new, invented practice, I argue, is experiencing an evolution with the advent of wedding magazines like Catalyst. The first stage of the evolution is represented by Brides (and by mainstream Pinterest as well). In this stage, the subject of the pair is restricted to an exclusive picture of a straight white couple, and the subject of the wedding event is equally exclusive, focused on spending and consumption and unavailable to those without massive discretionary income.
Pairs in the first stage of the evolution are white and straight. The name of the publication, *Brides*, situates the reader as a bride. Automatically, gay men are excluded from the white wedding narrative in this stage of the evolution. Articles with assertions such as, “53% [of brides surveyed] dropped him a hint...about the ring they wanted” (p. 102), and advice such as, “The most important words in a marriage: ‘when you__, I feel __’ Learn them. Teach them to your husband” (p. 328), assume that each reader has a groom, excluding lesbian brides. Further, white individuals pictured in *Brides* outnumber individuals of any other race by just over five to one. The ratio is skewed even further for brides, with white brides outnumbering brides of any other race by just over ten to one. Most people of color who appear are guests or attendants.

With the emphasis on aesthetics, gaze is an important feature in *Brides*. Even though the magazine is intended for women, brides are by far the most commonly pictured individuals, always dressed and made up beautifully. The reader, then, picturing herself at her own wedding event, must work to make herself an ideal subject of the gaze. Articles like “Slim Down Like a Celeb” (p. 178) offer guidance on beautifying before the wedding day. Upholding traditional, restrictive, standards of feminine beauty, *Brides* goes further in its exclusion. Not only must a bride be white and straight, but she must also be thin, with unblemished skin and long (preferably blonde) hair.

While *Brides* uses the least explicit prescriptive language of the three, prescriptions are still implicit in the language and imagery used to discuss wedding event planning. For example, none of the brides pictured wear a color other than white, and only four of the almost 200 wear a dress other than a floor length gown with beading or lace embellishments (more lavish and expensive than shorter, simpler dresses). *Brides* and mainstream *Pinterest* push more purchases on readers, and words of necessity accomplish this agenda better than prohibitions. An exception
to this pattern is found on page 220, in an article in which a winemaker explains that “no, you can’t call California bubbly ‘champagne.’” In this context, “can’t” actually contributes to conspicuous consumption, telling brides that real champagne (specifically the expensive recommendations given by the winemaker employed by champagne producer Moet & Chandon) is a more luxurious or better option.

**Entering a Dialogue**

*Catalyst* represents the second stage in the evolution, where the subject of the pair is inclusive (though, sometimes, still heteronormative), but the subject of the wedding event remains exclusive and unavailable to those without ample discretionary income. The subject of the partnership comes up more commonly in the second stage than the first. Aesthetics are still very important in this stage, at least indirectly promoting conspicuous consumption. For example, without using explicitly prescriptive words, “Eric & James” (pp. 54–57) is a four–page spread of photographs of a professionally styled wedding event. The photographs are accompanied by a list of 14 individual vendors, including three different photographers, two different bakers, a graphic designer, and others (p. 56). The issue of the magazine itself costs $15.99 to *Brides*’ $5.99.

While *Catalyst* does not break away from the consumptive patterns of *Brides*, it does break away in a few other, important ways. For one, the language and imagery in the magazine have much greater diversity than that of *Brides*. Of all pairs pictured, only 9 of 23 were straight pairs, and only 5 of 23 were white pairs. *Catalyst* also featured articles which discussed gender, sexuality, and race, mentions of which are virtually absent from *Brides* (one article in *Brides* about destination wedding events lists countries where same–sex weddings are legal, and warns same–sex readers to “steer clear of places where same–sex relationships are illegal” [p. 288]).
For example, *Catalyst*’s “Want to Be Gender Fabulous on Your Wedding Day?” features a reference to Judith Butler and a brief explanation of her theory of gender performativity, adding that “weddings often heighten the traditional performance of gender, but it doesn’t have to be that way” (p. 63). The main text of the article details suggestions for resisting gender roles and promoting equality during wedding event planning and on the wedding day.

Additionally, *Catalyst*, aware of itself as a participant in the wedding industry, practices reflection, as illustrated by the quote from “Want to be Gender Fabulous on Your Wedding Day?” This self–reflection sets *Catalyst* apart from *Brides* and other mainstream publications and enters a dialogue with them. While the first stage in the evolution of the wedding industry is unconcerned with or unaware of problems with the industry, the second stage establishes a dialogue about them. Instead of automatically promoting the same heteronormative values that the wedding industry has promoted since it began, *Catalyst* engages with feminism, gender theory, and other progressive or complex topics that the wedding industry has until now largely ignored.

*Brides*, the first step in the evolution of the wedding industry, includes an article entitled “Grooms Tell All” (2015, pp. 232–236), which gives the results of a survey of 310 recently married men who were asked about their opinions and experiences with wedding event planning and the wedding day. “Grooms Tell All” tells us a lot about both the subject of the pair and the subject of the wedding event, as they are depicted by mainstream wedding media. Mainstream wedding media is very heteronormative. Heteronormativity regulates sexuality, marginalizing homosexuality as well as dictating monogamous heterosexual relationships between individuals enacting traditional gender roles as the ideal form of heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). Heteronormativity abounds in *Brides*. What is said, and about and to whom it is said, in “Grooms
Tell All” paints a picture of men’s and women’s assumed relationship to one another and to wedding events.

The article is introduced with a paragraph that says, “We grilled 310 newlywed men about everything from the bachelor party to the first dance and discovered that—surprise!—77% were excited to plan the big day…” (p. 232). This sets up the article from the outset with the assertion that wedding events are not traditionally male interests. Readers are assumed to be surprised upon learning that a little more than three quarters of men are interested in planning their wedding event. Diving into the body of the article, this trend continues. Men themselves (75% of grooms surveyed) were surprised at their own level of interest in wedding event planning (p. 234), a traditionally feminine interest. One groom advises, “It’s your wedding too. Participate!” (p. 236). Dwayne Wade is quoted as saying, “You know how they say the wedding’s about the woman? No, no, it is about both of us… I came out to my own song, had my own moment…” (p. 234). Further, “Grooms Tell All” gives some information about grooms’ preferences in wedding event planning decisions, perhaps to further “surprise!” readers about men’s interest in the feminine task of wedding event planning. The survey cited asked the men to “pick their fave” china patterns (p. 236) and bridal gowns (p. 234).

Grooms’ temporary interest in traditionally feminine topics like flowers and china patterns (and attention/gaze, see Dwayne Wade quote) reframes “feminine” discourses as more important in this context. One respondent explains that he thought a lot about “the flowers. I had never cared about centerpieces in my entire life” (p. 234). These traditionally feminine topics may be too trivial to enter the everyday lives of readers and their fiancés, but reframing these feminine discourses as appropriate for men in the context of wedding event planning makes them more consequential and thus worth spending more money on.
Catalyst features an article entitled “Love & Politics,” written by Bri Richards about her experience being in an interracial relationship in a time when race and racism are divisive topics in the United States. She hired a photographer to do a boudoir photography session to capture images of their love and “reconnect emotionally and physically” as a pair (2017, p. 35). In the article, Richards reflects on being an interracial pair and the difficulty of having productive conversations about race. Conversations about police violence and cultural differences had driven Richards and her partner to a place of hurt and poor communication, and the experience of doing the photography session, she explains, reminded them of their love and connection because of their differences.

Another topic in the survey reported in “Grooms Tell All” was sex. Respondents to the survey were asked whether they had sex on their wedding night, among other related questions. This article was one of two times in this issue of Brides that sex came up. The other is an advice article, which advises brides that “love notes work. So does sex… after the slow cooker is set and before Empire starts” (p. 325). Marital sex is discussed differently in the context of men’s and women’s participation and interest in it. The advice article assumes that physical intimacy is not necessarily a priority for women and advises that wives should find time between domestic tasks to have sex with their husbands in order to strengthen their relationship, while “Grooms Tell All” assumes that sex is a natural interest for men.

“Love & Politics,” on the other hand, deals with sex in the context of love and connection. This thematic connection between articles, however seemingly anecdotal, is illustrative of a significant shift in the evolution of wedding media when it comes to gender differences. Richards and her partner are heterosexual like the couples in Brides (though Catalyst features many pairs who are not), and the article addresses sex/intimacy both in text and in
pictures. Sex in “Love & Politics” does not play a vastly different role in the lives of men and women. Richards describes the boudoir photography session and physical contact (sexual and nonsexual) as a moment to connect with her partner. The interest in intimacy is mutual between Richards and her partner, not a chore on a list next to cooking dinner. “Love & Politics” assumes fewer differences between men and women when it comes to not only sex but also relationship maintenance than “Grooms Tell All” and Brides’ advice article do.

Brides’ and Catalyst’s articles represent pairs very differently. Catalyst assumes fewer differences between men and women and shows them as more equal partners in the affective labor of wedding event planning and relationship maintenance. Representations of the wedding event, though, are not as different. In both publications, consumption is key. The products and services that couples purchase define their wedding. While “Love & Politics” is the one article in Vol 4 of Catalyst that doesn’t directly mention weddings, consumption still plays a central role in that the message of the article hinges on the writer’s ability (and suggestion for readers) to hire a professional for a photography session.

Brides’ pages are full of advertisements for products and services that brides can use to achieve an “unforgettable party” (cover). Most articles recommend products as well. “Grooms Tell All” sneaks in a few specific product suggestions (p. 236) and promotes a few bridal gown designers (p. 234). Even articles that don’t mention specific products still focus on things that can be purchased and imply that they should be purchased. For example, “Grooms Tell All” doesn’t recommend any specific flowers but still treats flowers as a vital element of a wedding event, and one worthy of male attention (p. 234).

Catalyst promotes consumptive ideals about weddings as much as Brides and other mainstream publications, though they do it much more subtly. Photographs of flowers, cakes,
and venues abound in the articles on real pairs’ wedding events. Wedding vendors such as photographers are vital “wedding space disruptors” in their pages. For example, “How to Be a Woke Bridal Consultant” (p. 74) advises industry professionals on how to bring inclusivity into their work in the industry. While diversity in representation of race, gender, ability, and the like is a significant step that Catalyst has taken, inclusivity as far as economic class is still missing. Catalyst is still representative of a pervasive problem with American ideas about weddings as necessarily extravagant events.

In addition to representing a diverse vision of pairs, Catalyst represents an equally diverse vision of wedding vendors. Women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ wedding vendors are especially featured in the magazine. While women, minority, and LGBTQ+ business owners certainly deserve to make a living and be recognized for their work as much as straight white male business owners, this is a larger issue of economic inequality not unique to the wedding industry. Instead, solving the inclusivity issue in wedding discourse may mean using “vendors” as a wedding vocabulary word less frequently. Inclusive wedding event planning discourse would focus less on what a couple can purchase and more on what they can do themselves and on the emotional, not material, preparations for the day.

The suggestion in “How to Be a Woke Bridal Consultant” that “a consultant who values inclusivity…will respect their clients by treating them equally, no matter their income” (p. 74) is a kind sentiment, but a person without the necessary level of discretionary income (or whose parents or in–laws do not have the necessary level of discretionary income) will not likely be a client to begin with. Even while attempting to be inclusive on the topic of income, Catalyst misses the mark. Ability to consume is still an important factor in planning a wedding and is still an indicator of the quality of a wedding event and the value of the people getting married.
“Love & Politics” is no exception to this focus on consumption. The central idea of Richards’s article is that hiring a professional brought her and her partner closer together during a time when it is difficult to be an interracial pair. Richards wraps up her article saying, “The session was exactly what we needed to reconnect emotionally and physically. I would recommend all couples try one!” (p. 39).

The experience of doing this photography session together has strengthened Richards and her partner’s relationship in a time when race is a divisive issue in the United States, by reconnecting them emotionally and by capturing intimate images of their partnership. It has also given an extra level of affirmation to their partnership by earning them an appearance in Catalyst. As well–meaning as Richards’s recommendation that “all couples try one” (p. 39) may be, it is simply not a possibility for many pairs who cannot afford this type of luxury. A pair without the income of Richards and her partner cannot similarly prove the value of their partnership on the pages of a national publication, or even follow the advice in the magazine in order to privately enjoy the same affirming experience together.

While “Love & Politics” features some inclusive and moving discussion of racism and police killing of black men in the United States, the story it tells about the experience of being an interracial pair does not come to an inclusive conclusion. Economically disadvantaged interracial pairs may relate to Richards’s discussion of race and the difficulty of being in an interracial partnership but are left out as she describes her solution. Catalyst has no solution for them.

While Catalyst is a step in the right direction, it is only inclusive as far as who the pair can be. A wedding in the pages of Catalyst is available to any type of person who can afford it. These magazines represent a significant evolution of the wedding industry that hasn’t made it to the mainstream. Inclusion finally has a presence in wedding media, but only as far as it pertains
to the type of people that the industry can sell to. Wedding media can and should go further than that and open the conversation to people of all economic classes.

**Digital Wedding Media: The Potential of Pinterest**

The wedding industry has not yet entered the third stage in the evolution, in which both the subject of the pair and the subject of the wedding event are presented inclusively and in which the subject of the partnership is more than a side note. I argue that digital wedding media may already have the potential to usher in that third stage. *Pinterest*, an equally or sometimes even more popular wedding event planning resource for brides than traditional print media, has the potential to be a part of the third stage in the evolution but has not realized that potential yet.

Digital wedding media, specifically *Pinterest*, have the potential to be the next step in the evolution– inclusive as far as the pair and also inclusive as far as the event. At this point, though, content on *Pinterest* usually fits into the same exclusive narrative of mainstream wedding media. If you look for it you can even find LGBTQ+ wedding space on *Pinterest*, though it ventures here without breaking new boundaries as far as consumptive practices.

For example, Figure 4 shows a lesbian wedding pin. The brides shown in this pin are dressed in customary wedding outfits for the couple. Not only do these outfits represent part of the expensive consumptive practices of wedding events, but this photo illustrates how these inclusive wedding spaces often remain heteronormative. One of the women is dressed in a customary white wedding gown with a veil while her partner is dressed in a customary tuxedo. While this wedding photo celebrates a same–sex wedding event, it upholds the heteronormative expectation that one member of the couple is more feminine and will take the last name of the member of the couple who is more masculine.
As Kimport (2012) discusses, this visual theme is especially prevalent in lesbian wedding photographs. Kimport examined 351 same-sex wedding photographs and found that 70% of lesbian wedding photographs showed the pair dressed in a normative way similar to the pair in Figure 4. That grooms do not generally follow this heteronormative pattern even in LGBTQ+ wedding spaces is likely attributable to the fact that women wearing suits is much more socially accepted than men wearing dresses. Figure 5 shows a gay wedding pin in which two grooms are dressed in suits, the norm for gay wedding photographs on Pinterest. Catalyst begins challenging these norms with articles such as, “Want to Be Gender Fabulous on Your Wedding Day?” (p. 62), which features an illustration of diverse people wearing a variety of white wedding attire (Figure 6) but does not take that challenge very far in any real wedding event photos. All of the grooms pictured in Vol 4 of Catalyst are wearing suits.
In Figure 5 we see a pair of grooms seated on chairs decorated with florals. This professional, perfectly staged photo is characteristic of the culture on Pinterest, where users go to envision a fantasy life (or fantasy future life) for themselves. Perfect-looking pins offer users the chance to imagine themselves in their dream reality, which often looks expensive and just like the dream reality that the wedding industry promotes. Pins often show immaculately staged and professionally put together scenes, which would not be possible without money to purchase decorations and to hire professionals. In fact, many popular pins are actually created by
Figure 6. Catalyst illustration.
businesses and industry professionals who are advertising their products and services to Pinterest users planning wedding events (mainly brides).

While both of these pins represent part of a changing landscape in wedding media, they still uphold heteronormative and consumptive ideals about what a wedding event should be. Do–it–yourself is a popular category on Pinterest, offering users suggestions and tutorials on how to achieve an expensive or professional looking result inexpensively. Even with Pinterest’s do–it–yourself culture, the ability to consume (or at least creating the appearance of the ability to consume) is still key to achieving the best wedding event.

Mainstream wedding space on Pinterest is clearly separate from this LGBTQ+ wedding space. One example pin, found in Figure 7, suggests throwing a “Bro–dal shower,” or a bridal shower for grooms. The accompanying image shows a group of men surrounding a table on which sits a cake in the shape of a log with an axe decoration. The conspicuous masculinity of this image, in contrast with the typical image of a feminine bridal shower with light-colored, floral decorations and only women in attendance, exemplifies mainstream Pinterest’s preoccupation with traditional gender norms while also innovating new consumptive opportunities. This and other new consumptive opportunities popularized since the early 2010s are attributable to the fast circulation of new ideas and focus on conspicuous consumption on Pinterest. Another example of these new consumptive opportunities is the “bridesmaid proposal” in which a bride purchases a gift and sometimes even throws a party in order to “propose” or ask her friends and relatives to be her bridesmaids. “Welcome baskets” with gifts for out–of–town family and friends are another example. Many pins suggest leaving these gifts with the front desk of the hotel guests are staying in so that staff members can place them in guests’ rooms. In this way, mainstream Pinterest embodies both heteronormativity and consumption.
Despite the current exclusive state of Pinterest and its content, it has the potential to usher in an ideal for weddings which is more inclusive than even Catalyst. For one, its do-it-yourself culture has already helped many users with projects to plan their wedding events in a way that is affordable to them. Promoting do-it-yourself projects is inclusive of those without the money to hire professionals for their wedding event. While do-it-yourself culture can be problematic when it continues promoting the notion that it is important to achieve the appearance of an expensive event, it may be a step toward including pairs without the economic resources to plan a customarily grand wedding. Do-it-yourself decorations may also be an opportunity for an engaged pair and their loved ones to spend quality time together, enhancing the emotionally meaningful experience of weddings and wedding planning in addition to being a more affordable option than professional decorations. In this way, this part of Pinterest culture promotes relationships over consumption when it comes to wedding planning.
Finally, *Pinterest* users’ ability to create original pins may be another vital tool in changing the ideal promoted by wedding media. While *Pinterest* users are not shown how to during the sign–up process (Friz & Gehl, 2016), they do have the ability to create their own original pins. Everyday users, though, do not utilize this particular tool as frequently as do businesses and bloggers promoting their products, services, and (often money–making) blogs. *Pinterest* is already highly personalized– a user can choose pins based on one’s own needs and taste. In this way, *Pinterest* breaks away from typical wedding media in that it is socially created, as opposed to professionally curated. The ability to create original content, along with *Pinterest*’s social and individualized nature, have the potential to make *Pinterest* a more inclusive wedding space than even magazines like *Catalyst*. Real engaged people could use this feature to share and collaborate with one another, instead of simply consuming media from the industry.

Further separating *Pinterest* in this way from professionally created magazines could also separate it from the heteronormative, consumptive values that those magazine promote. Those heteronormative, consumptive values produced/promoted by mainstream bridal magazines exclude many pairs from the narrative of the American white wedding. *Catalyst* and similar publications have begun breaking through the boundaries of who is represented in wedding media but have done so without meaningfully challenging the consumptive culture of wedding magazines. In the next stage of the evolution of wedding media, engaged people could use *Pinterest* to share and find ideas about planning an affordable, emotionally significant wedding that emphasizes their partnership and commitment to one another over spending and spectacle.
Chapter 7:

CONCLUSION

While steps have been made by publications like *Catalyst* and in LGBTQ+ wedding space on *Pinterest*, these new spaces have a long way to go in fundamentally challenging the values of heteronormativity and consumption which predominate American white weddings. Publications like *Catalyst* have begun engaging in a dialogue about race, gender, sexuality, and representation in wedding spaces but have not made meaningful change yet to the value of consumption. In more diverse wedding spaces, advertisers no longer rely on heteronormativity to sell the white wedding narrative as an entry point to the American Dream. Nonetheless, the advertisers still have a wedding narrative to sell and instead rely on romance, progressive values, and aesthetics to do so.

To put it cynically, this is the next logical step for an industry which may be missing out on revenue from potential customers who are neglected by traditional advertising. Why market to only straight, white couples when others have money to spend on a wedding event as well? In a more idealistic interpretation, though, new businesses with a genuine interest in diversity and equality are entering the wedding industry and changing the conversation. Next, everyday people (as opposed to industry professionals) can enter the conversation in wedding media through already-popular *Pinterest*. Not only can they continue the push for diversity and equality, but they can push the conversation further to include people of all classes.
Limitations and Future Inquiry

While this study has revealed many patterns of heteronormative consumption in American white weddings, it is not without its limitations. A larger data sample (more than one issue of each magazine and more than 40 pins) would have been ideal given more time for close analysis. A larger sample would have provided a more detailed quantitative analysis, likely with more topics and more prescriptive patterns. For example, in my sample of 40 pins, none included the subject of budgeting. Budgeting is a common topic on Pinterest, but my small sample size did not allow for a truly representative array of subjects.

In the future when studying heteronormativity and consumption, coding for agency can be expanded beyond the words and phrases I used for this investigation. For example, I did not include words like “can” or “would,” which imply more neutral agency. Additionally, I did not include command sentences, which prescribe without using explicit words or phrases denoting necessity. For example, an article about two-piece bridal outfits says, “For your wedding look for a high-waisted skirt that nearly meets your top” (instead of exposing your stomach) (p. 140). Expanding the range of prescriptions and proscriptions examined would add more nuance to the analysis.

Several areas exist for further studying the link between heteronormativity and consumption in American family life which may warrant projects of their own. For one, while searching Pinterest to gather my data sample, I found that using the search terms “wedding” and “wedding ideas” turns up not only wedding-related pins but baby-related pins as well (for example, pins about popular baby names or about pregnancy announcements). Searching “gay wedding” did not turn up any baby-related pins, but searching “lesbian wedding” turned up slightly more baby-related pins than the general search of “wedding” and “wedding ideas.”
Because general search terms tend to lead to pins of straight wedding events, the heteronormativity and consumptive opportunity of accompanying baby pins is clear. Babies are the next step in the heteronormative advertising cycle. Considering the differences between the search terms “gay wedding,” and “lesbian wedding,” though, brings up an interesting new consideration about the discourse surrounding parenthood—how do we understand parenthood in relation to gender, in relation to sexuality, and how is this understanding tied to heteronormativity?

Heteronormative consumptive customs abound not only in the wedding industry but in American culture in general. Once a couple has finished planning their wedding event (or even while they are planning their wedding event), the heteronormative advertising cycle begins laying the foundation for the next stage of spending in their lives. Continued engagement with these norms and consumptive customs is vital in the pursuit of equality and agency.
REFERENCES


XOXO Group (2017, February 2). *Cost of US Weddings reaches new high as couples spend more per guest to create an unforgettable experience, according to The Knot 2016 real weddings survey*. Retrieved from http://xogroupinc.com/press-releases/theknot2016realweddings_costofweddingssus/?__hstc=131446032.5a7dea42e975f5e8ab733bbd5a92fb81.1505765967543.1508003084667.1508011422411.3&__hssc=131446032.1.1508011422411&__hsfp=3042036422