



### Exploring Role Power within Bridal Gown Selection Process

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**Introduction:** IBISWorld (Lerman, 2014) projects continuous growth in the wedding services' industry over the next five years. For brides, the most important, and sometimes costly, expenditure is the wedding gown. Notably, the average cost of a wedding dress in the US was \$1,299 in 2013 (Lerman, 2014). While the bride is ultimately the individual who wears the gown, the decision making process during the selection of the dress may be influenced by other actors due to the social importance of the event. Each of these actors has a different level of power within the social setting and this often becomes a major source of stresses for a bride (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). While researchers have analyzed power in different settings, limited studies have focused on explaining how power shapes the selection process of a wedding dress despite its relevance to the purchase situation. To address this dearth of research, the current study explores the decision making process of brides when selecting their wedding gowns by examining the power of the significant people involved in the selection process.

**Literature Review:** Symbolic interactionism is a conceptual framework that proposes that individual behavior is mainly a result of social interaction (Blumer, 1969). For a bride, the action of choosing a wedding gown becomes a *social action*, as this action takes into account others' beliefs (Charon, 1992). Raven (1993) defines power as the possibility to influence others and change their behavior or thought. For the case of the bride, this power can be mainly subscribed to members of the bride and groom's family systems during the wedding preparations, including the wedding dress selection process. The bride then, may be simultaneously affected by the power of several persons in various roles, placing the bride under conflicting pressures (Raven, 1993). For understanding the influences, power is conceptualized by the *bases of power*, which can be defined as the dimensions that determine the form of influence an individual in a certain role plays for the bride (Raven, 1993). Our study will consider the following bases of power: (a) *coercive*, which implies a threat of punishment; (b) *reward*, which implies some sort of reward; (c) *legitimacy*, which is the power due to the position; (d) *expert*, based on expertise; or (e) *reference*, that means that there is a sense of identification with the influencing agent that serves as a model.

**Method:** To achieve the research purpose, the researchers addressed two research questions: (1) Who is most influential to participants in the dress selection process? (2) Which power relations influence brides during the dress selection process? Upon receipt of approval for use of human subjects, data collection took place via Mechanical Turk, a crowd sourcing Internet marketplace ([www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)). Sample size was determined based on the existing literature. Valid responses were collected from 71 females who had worn a wedding dress in a ceremony. Participants in the US responded to the online questionnaire in about 15-45 minutes. The survey questions consisted of 13 demographic questions, eight open-ended questions, and six 7-point Likert-scale survey questions regarding their wedding dress selection process, factors affecting the process, and possible negotiations that participants experienced. For the open-ended questions, participants

needed to answer with at least 100 words in order to move on the next question. The sample had a considerable amount of participants between 26 to 35 years old (58.3%), and the majority of the brides (73.6%) were Caucasian. More than half of respondents were earning a yearly income between \$40,000 and \$84,999 (52.8%) and had at least a bachelor degree (54.2%). The researchers conducted analytical coding and thematic interpretation for data analysis.

**Results and Discussion:** The findings are as follow with numbering indicating the research questions being addressed. (1) Participants indicated individuals in multiple social roles as influencing their dress selection. Although 14% of brides stated making the decision by themselves, most participants indicated that others were influential. The most influential roles were: the mother of the bride (36.1%), groom (9.7%), friends (9.7%), and sister (6.9%). The majority of the influential roles were family members. Interestingly, most of the brides relied on others to make their decision, even though almost half of participants (48.6%) paid for their own dress. (2) The thematic analysis of power relations influencing brides in the dress selection process revealed five themes. The first theme was *coercive power*, which implies roles influencing brides by the usage of fear. For example, one participant clarified that she only considered her groom's opinion because otherwise he would bully her during the wedding. The second theme was *reward power*; this type of power implies a role that provides positive reinforcement to the bride. The third theme was *legitimacy power*, which is the power due to the position empowered by the role. One participant said, "A mom who has been married knows what's best," while recognizing the position of power of her mom due to the mom's previous experience as a bride. The fourth theme was *expert power*, in which the role with more expertise is the role with the greatest influence. The fifth and last theme was *reference power*. For example, a participant recognized her mother as the reference or influencing agent because she wanted to have a dress that was just like her mother's dress.

**Conclusion:** This study explores the brides' selection of the wedding gown by focusing on the power that other individuals have in different social roles during the dress decision-making process. There were five main identified themes, which describe the bases of power used by the roles involved in the wedding dress selection. Findings provide managerial implications for wedding retailers as they are personal-intensive service providers (e.g. sales persons should let the shopping companions help the bride with the wedding dress decision and focus on providing guidance and support during the selling process).

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*Additional references available upon request*