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Thesis Prospectus

**Influence of TLC’s *Four Weddings***

**Introduction**

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue…” this is a phrase we have all heard in reference to a wedding; something old being the bride remembering her past, something new referring to a hopeful future, something borrowed is from someone wishing good fortune, and something blue the symbol of love in ancient Roman culture. All of which are still in some way incorporated in weddings in today’s society, but there is much more emphasis put on the glamour of the wedding, the bride, and the awesome after party, than the tradition and covenant of marriage. There are many ways weddings are portrayed in the media and on reality television and there has been research on reality weddings in the past, but the show *Four Weddings*,a TLC show airing season three this year, brings an entire new aspect to the field of reality TV weddings. With a unique ranking system and a honeymoon vacation up for grabs, this wedding reality show gives viewers inspiration with a twist.

The purpose of this research project is to better understand the way the show *Four Weddings* influences college-aged (18-23 year old) females about the way weddings are portrayed in society. Also the ways wedding media influences these female’s ideas of their own weddings. In this research study I will be looking into the influence the show *Four Weddings* have on female college students’ perceptions of weddings in general, as well as what they hope for their weddings. Due to the fact that *Four Weddings* is a little bit different from traditional wedding shows because of the prize and ranking system, it gives consumers more options and variables to consider when considering their own weddings. There are many influential factors about *Four Weddings* but the most crucial are the venue, the dress, and the food. Although these would be crucial at any wedding, they are given more emphasis, especially the dress, when discussing designers, design, price, quality, etc. More and more wedding reality TV shows are giving emphasis to the material wedding and not the promise being made between two individuals.

***Four Weddings* and Influence on viewers**

*Four Weddings* originally began airing in the United Kingdom in its first season in 2009. *Four Weddings* is a recently new show release in the U.S. debuting in early 2010 on TLC. There has only been two seasons of *Four Weddings* released on TLC in the United States so far. The way the show works is, four brides all plan and throw their own weddings, at every wedding the three other brides attend and rate the wedding based on four factors each factor is worth up to 25 points each.

The four sections that are rated are, the venue in which the wedding takes place, the dress the bride wears, the food presented to guests at the reception, and then the overall experience of the wedding as an entire event. The other brides rate the venue on how much they like the location, the decoration, and the theme, the dress is rated on looks as well as how it looks on the bride. The food is rated on whether or not there is a good selection, a variety, as well as how good the food is, whether it is a sit down dinner or a buffet style, etc. Then in a combinations score is the scoring the wedding overall and that is the score brides give based on how successful and fun the wedding was a whole (*Four Weddings*). As quoted on the TLC website, “brides score each other's big day for a fabulous honeymoon vacation prize” ("Four Weddings: TLC.") the bride who scores the most points from the other brides win a honeymoon to a fabulous vacation destination.

This research study will discuss how reality TV shows, for example *Four Weddings*, influences how women plan their weddings and internalize the encoded messages sent by wedding reality television shows. This is an important phenomenon to study because hopefully this research will provide evidence of how reality TV wedding shows influence women about what is important when having a wedding. It is possible that these shows have engrained a message about how weddings are supposed to be glamorous and expensive, instead of focusing on the covenant of marriage. As stated by Engstrom and Semic (2003) discussing another TLC wedding reality show *A Wedding Story*, “…emphasizes the glamour surrounding the ceremony rather than the ceremony itself, those activities and accoutrements that accompany the wedding as a social event and party but have little to do with the actual legal or religious act of being joined in marriage.” (p. 158).

**Theoretical Grounding**

Theory is the basis for any research being done and I believe the theoretical grounding of this case comes from the ideas of Stuart Hall’s Encoding and Decoding as well as the ideas of Hegemony discussed in various Engstrom articles. Hall (2000), defines three decoding options available for views to decode messages sent by mass media and advertisers. These three decoding options are as follows, first operating inside the dominant code, meaning, the media produces a messages that is consumed by viewers. Once the masses have consumed this message the way they read other messages “coincides” with the messages that the media produced. Second, applying negotiable code, meaning, the viewer assimilates with the popular ideology or belief in general but there are specific cases in which the viewer opposes the belief. And third, substituting an oppositional code, meaning, the audience sees through the message that the media is sending, and the viewer(s) make an effort to “demythologize” the messages (p. 342).

To put encoding and decoding in layman’s terms Hall (1973) states that the encoder is the producer of the message and the decoder is the receiver (p.509). Again according to Hall (1973), “certain codes are so widely distributed that they appear to be ‘natural’”(p.511). Viewers may not even know a code is there due to how engrained it is within society. For example, the diamond being a symbol of forever, people in today’s society believe that a diamond is forever but that idea was not adopted until about 100 years ago when N.W. Ayer created a campaign for De Beers implying the idea that a “Diamond is Forever” (Otnes & Scott, 1996). Hall’s theory of Encoding and Decoding better informs my understanding of way reality TV wedding shows such as, *Four Weddings,* encodes their messages for viewers to interpret in whatever way they wish. This theory frames the thinking about this issue by helping to see the message sent to the viewers by the media.

Another theory that frames the ideas in this research study is the idea of Hegemony. Engstrom (2003) defines hegemony as the dominant ideology within a society, “the creation of a continual, repetitive message by those who adhere to common worldview” (as cited in Dow, 1990). Engstrom (2003) also found that mass media disseminates hegemonic values within a society through its tendency, “to reproduce the ideological field of a society in such a way as to reproduce, also, its structure of domination.” (as cited in Hall, 1977, p.346). According to Engstrom and Semic (2003), researchers have use hegemony to examine this study’s topic of reality-based programming of weddings, especially photographs of poses of brides, as well as grooms. The sample researched demonstrated a hegemony reflection of societal expectations of femininity for women and the acquiescence and acknowledge of male-based power (p.148). Hegemony better informs my understanding of way reality TV wedding shows such as, *Four Weddings,* demonstrate and promote the already dominant norm; this theory frames the thinking about reality TV weddings by producing what the viewer expects to see, something within the ideal ideology.

**Reality Television and Marriage**

In today’s culture there are various shows on cable television that portray weddings or an aspect of a marriage in some way. Off the top of my head I can think of TLC’s *Say Yes to the Dress, Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta, Beverly Hills Brides,* and *Four Weddings.* These are all shows that could potentially have influence over viewers and are supposedly showing the “ideal wedding.”

**Media Portrayal of Marriage**

Many communication scholars have researched the way weddings are portrayed in the media. Sgori (2006) found that reality TV shows included marriageable relationships, often where couples propose at the end of the season or series. For example the shows, *Mr. Personality*, *Temptation Island*, *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*, are all about the making of and breaking up of potentially marriageable couples, with proposals happening on the show at some point in the season (p.114-115). Referencing the more wedding reality television shows that have influence over viewers and portray the perfect courtship and white wedding ceremony. In Engstrom’s (2003) research 100 episodes of *A Wedding Story* are analyzed and an overwhelming amount of them are depictions of white people and white weddings. Engstrom again stated in her research with Semic (2003), they also found that the typical wedding portrayed in *A Wedding Story* reaffirmed the traditional white wedding (p.149). In another Engstrom (2008) article, she analyzed the wedding magazine *The Knot*, she again established that wedding media, “continually sends women the same message: they need a big, white, wedding, and *The Knot* can help them create it” (p.62).

Moving on the idea that media portrays wedding as much more of a social event than a celebration of two being united in marriage. Again according to Engstrom and Semic (2003), “most of the story in A Wedding Story emphasizes the glamour surrounding the ceremony rather than the ceremony itself, those activities and accoutrements that accompany the wedding as a social event and party but have little to do with the actual legal or religious act of being joined in marriage” (p.158). According to Daws (2009) “the success of the institution of marriage is not keeping up with the success of the wedding industry. The divorce rate in America is approaching 50%, an all American high. However, according to media representations weddings are the problems to solve, not marriage problems that arise and remain long after ceremony ends. Media message encourage spending and perpetuate consumer culture through taken for granted of the wedding ceremony (p.34). Although in many of these shows there are many religions, ethnicities, and sexual orientations portrayed, the overwhelming number of people or couples on these shows represent the traditional big white wedding, with white heterosexual couples getting married.

**Parts of the wedding readily portrayed**

There are many aspects of a wedding, there is the pre-planning all the hard work that has gone into the event prior to the big day. There is shopping for everything, there is the getting ready before the ceremony, the ceremony itself, and the reception, as well as all the other little appointments and to-do lists in between. The only parts viewers normally see on the show Four Weddings are the ceremony and the reception, these are the aspect that are so glamorized, leaving out all the hard work and the expense. Tresniowski (2003) reports that in The Bachelorette wedding between Trista Rehn and Ryan Sutter was very extravagant, a $4 million wedding, designer Tacori wedding rings, two Badgley Miscka wedding dresses, and the bride wore a loaned $1 million Tacori necklace. The most important aspects of these media portrayals are the glamorous wedding and reception leaving off the price tag of something ritzier than the average viewer can afford. Again referencing the show *A Wedding Story*, Engstrom and Semic (2003) studied six different aspects of the reality show. These aspects were: where the ceremony is located, the way the bridal escort was organized, who performed the ceremony, the use of religious wording of wedding vows, the rituals that were part of the wedding, and the overall religiousness of the ceremony. Researchers found that these categories of study were important due to how these aspects of the show influenced the viewer.

Wedding shows more often than not portray the woman as the main event planner and one responsible of the event, making the day mostly about her and her feminine role of wedding planner. Engstrom (2008) stated that, “The wedding is a venue in which women still, and are expected to show and display to others their femininity” (p.68). And again touching on how although many races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations are features on these various wedding reality shows, the norm is the big white wedding; sagain in reference to Engstrom and Semic’s (2003) research, it was found that, “religious elements though evident in A Wedding Story, might not accurately convey the diversity of choices made by couples choosing to include religion in their wedding ceremonies” (p.157).

**How Advertising Influences Wedding Choices**

Not only do reality TV wedding shows influence how a bride may want to plan her wedding but it can also be used by advertisers for any number of products pertaining to the perfect wedding day. Researchers have found that advertisements are everywhere within the wedding industry, especially the one represented in reality television. Sgori (2006) stated, “wedding make good business sense because they “serve capitalism” by helping to create an industry based on women’s fantasies of status and security build around marriage; symbolized in weddings as a consumption practice” (p.114). Reality TV shows can easily parade the trendiest and probably the most expensive wedding products in the shows that brides and brides-to-be are gathering their inspiration. According to Otnes and Scott (1996) ads attempt to shape reader’s ritual experience by portraying combinations of artifacts as belonging together. Advertising often communicates that certain ritualized products and services are now appropriate in new ritual context. Again the perfect example of hegemony and the concept of reality television serving capitalism, is the N.W. Ayer campaign for DeBeer diamond’s that caused the masses to believe that “diamonds are forever” making that the essential stone for engagement.

Consumerism, consuming the wedding industry

The final idea that has been circulating in my research is the consumption of wedding media and how viewers are influenced by the wedding industry and the way it is portrayed in reality TV. As stated by Sgroi (2006) reality TV is linked to consumption because by inviting viewers to become comfortable with forms of surveillance it encourage them to occupy position of consumer or producer (p.116). The idea that if this person on “reality” television can afford it, the everyday viewer can afford it as well, it makes it seem as though it is the cultural norm. The media encourages the following according to Daws (2009), excessive spending for the wedding, romanticizing of the wedding itself, and the entire event is distracting from commitment (p.1). Daws states that the media influences viewers to hold other aspects of the wedding as an event as more important than the commitment two people are making. Research she found that women have three main reasons for justifying their spending, those were: belief that a lot would be reimbursed through gifts, the “only do it once” rationale, and comparing their wedding to others. Daws (2009) also discussed the reasons why they felt guilt about their spending, these reasons included: needed financial assistance from their family, the money being sent could have gone towards better things, and it is a lot of money for one day. Many of these things could be avoided or at least less money could be spent if certain things about the wedding as an event weren’t so essential according the societal norms that the media sets about weddings. Another outlet for mass amounts of wedding advertisement and consumption is the world of wedding magazines; many consumers of wedding media also take magazine into account for inspiration. Engstrom (2008) stated about wedding magazines, “These publications concentrate on bridal accouterments such as gowns, accessories, party favors, jewelry, and cosmetics, rather than on the meaning and subsequent relationship created by the wedding ceremony” (p. 60). Most wedding magazines also have an internet counterpart that wedding media consumers can access for other information about what is new in weddings. These websites are a huge portal for advertising; they are capable of sending brides to links all over to web to their partners in the industry. Engstrom (2008) finds when analyzing *The Knot*, is that it appears to web site visitors as a one-stop for everything bridal advertising comprises the bulk of *The Knot’s* income. According to its annual report of earnings in 2004 *The Knot’s* net revenues totaled at $41.4 million (p.64). Needless to say the industry is making more and more revenue but brides are also spending more and more for their perfect day.

**Research Gap**

My research will use what scholars before me have researched but also expand on the ideas of reality TV wedding programs influencing women about how they want their weddings and what about marriage is most important. I decided to study the way messages are encoded and decoded in the show *Four Weddings* because I decided from the beginning that I wanted to do research surrounding weddings due to my internships this summer and what I plan on doing in the future. Present research has focused on the influence of many other wedding reality shows but never *Four Weddings*, I believe this gap in research is important to study because every show has the potential to influence viewers differently.

**Methodology**

I believe the method of having focus groups/ interview with viewers of *Four Weddings* is the best method because getting first hand answers as college-aged females watch the show is a great way to get information I may not have covered on a survey. Using a qualitative approach to this research project will help be obtain the data I need by getting information first hand from various types of viewers. My research questions that will guide my focus group interviews are:

*RQ1: How does the show Four Weddings influence young women’s ideas about what is*

*important in marriage and a wedding?*

*RQ2: How does the show Four Weddings influence different aspects of the wedding?*

*RQ3: How does the show Four Weddings depict the cultural norm for weddings in*

*today’s society?*

**Participants**

I am planning on examining college-aged (18-23 years old) females who are viewers of

TLC’s *Four Weddings*. I am going to ask them in the focus group whether or not there are,

heavy viewers of *Four Weddings*, moderate viewers of *Four Weddings*, light viewers of *Four Weddings*. Where or not they watch other wedding reality television shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* also, *Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta*, *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss*, *Say Yes to the Dress: Bridesmaids*, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, *Beverley Hills Brides*, *My Big Fat Redneck Wedding*, *Bridezillas*, *Who’s Wedding is it Anyways?* I am also interested in seeing if, If religion influences their choices If their parents are married? Separated? Divorced? Remarried? Following these initial question/ questionnaire, I am going to use clips from *Four Weddings* and ask participants whether or not these depictions of weddings influence them, if so why? What part of the wedding was this showcasing?Did you like (*that aspect*)?Would you think of adding that or having something similar to that in your wedding? Why?

I have chosen this group of people because they are the most avid viewers of such reality television shows. Having a focus group is appropriate for the research questions I am investigating because it gives real life answers and may answer more questions and research gaps that I did not even think of in the beginning. Being able to have participants directly watch clips from the show and give you their feedback will be the best way for me to gather information about how *Four Weddings* could influence them.

**Conclusion**

Influence on brides by reality wedding television and other sources of media about weddings is constant; especially for a bride hooked on TLC and *The Knot*.com. The wedding industry today is huge and has an even larger influence on the media due to the amount of advertising available and the amount it is publicized in reality television. In a society where a lavish wedding and expensive after party are far more valued than the commitment being made between two people, shows such as Four Weddings should incorporate themes or ideas that also could reinforce the importance of the covenant of marriage; remind viewers that it is not just about the party.

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**Appendix A:**

Preliminary Focus Group Questions:

* I am going to ask them in the focus group whether or not there are:

Heavy viewers of *Four Weddings*

Moderate viewers of *Four Weddings*

Light viewers of *Four Weddings*

* Watch other wedding reality television shows such as
* *Say Yes to the Dress*
  + *Say Yes to the Dress: Atlanta*
  + *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss*
  + *Say Yes to the Dress: Bridesmaids*
* *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*
* *Beverley Hills Brides*
* *My Big Fat Redneck Wedding*
* *Bridezillas*
* *Who’s Wedding is it Anyways?*
* If religion influences their choices
* If their parents are married? Separated? Divorced? Remarried?
* **I am going to use clips from *Four Weddings* and ask participants whether or not these depictions**

of weddings influence them, if so why?