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Role power dynamics within the bridal gown selection process

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers explore the decision-making process of brides when selecting their wedding dresses by examining the power of the significant people involved in the selection process. Within a framework of role theory and symbolic inter-actionism, qualitative data from an open-ended survey with 71 brides were collected online and analyzed. The interpretations revealed two main themes that explain how social power is determined and how different actors use bases of power to influence the selection of the wedding dress, when considered as a group decision. The six main categories further explained the bases of power used by the actors involved in the wedding dress selection process. This research extends the understanding of the bases of power and social roles in the specific context of the ritual of matrimony. Managerial implications are included for wedding retailers seeking to further understand the dynamics among family members during wedding preparations, so they can provide more effective guidance and support to the bride-to-be during the selling process.

Keywords: Role power, Wedding dress, Selection process, Social interactionism

Introduction

Carter and McGoldrick (2005) stress the importance of seeing family as a moving system that goes through cycles. From the perspective of a traditional wedding, the family life cycle stage that a bride experiences corresponds with joining two families in marriage, realigning of relationships with extended family and friends, and sometimes, leaving the parents' home (Carter and McGoldrick 2005). This stage may vary depending on the cultural background of the bride, as well as of the groom. In particular, a bride in Western cultures faces stress related to the transformations taking place in her family system and her personal and social life, along with the possible conflicts she might be experiencing due to these transitions. The bride also is generally under a lot of pressure to plan the perfect wedding and select the dream wedding dress. Therefore, the changes in the family life cycle and the possible conflicts generated during this transition to married life explain the context in which the bride is immersed during the wedding preparations and the selection of the wedding dress.

The wedding dress is a high involvement purchase (Choy and Loker 2004) and an object that holds deep symbolic meaning. It is regarded as one of the main symbols of the wedding. Whereas the bride is ultimately the individual who wears the dress, the decision-making process during the selection of the dress may be influenced by other

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actors due to the social importance of the event. Raven (1993) indicates in his theory of social power that each of these actors can exert different levels of power or influence within the social setting. Within an interactionist perspective, Raven (1993) model of social power has been examined in terms of its applicability to various settings, especially in the field of family science, education, and overall conflict resolution and negotiation. However, limited studies have focused on explaining how power shapes the selection process of a wedding dress despite the importance of the wedding dress purchase to women and their families (Otnes and Lowery 1993).

To address this dearth of research, the purpose of the current study was to explore the decision-making process of brides in the United States (US) when selecting their wedding dress by examining the power of the significant people involved in the selection process. The research was guided by two research questions: (1) *Who is the most influential person in the dress selection process?* (2) *Which power relations influence brides during the dress selection process?* This research extends the understanding of the bases of power and social roles in the specific context of wedding preparations and wedding dress selection. Managerial implications are offered to wedding retailers seeking to further understand the dynamics between family members during wedding preparations, so they can provide more effective guidance and support to the bride-to-be during the selling process.

Literature review

Role theory

As *roles* are considered units of social structures (Goode 1960), an individual's everyday life is composed of multiple roles (Lynch 2007). Role theory addresses the organization of social behavior on an individual and collective level (Stryker 2001), as well as with humans' characteristic behavior patterns (Biddle 1986). The theory explains roles by interpreting humans as "members of social positions … [and as holding] expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons" (p. 67). Lynch (2007) indicates that roles in the interactionist perspective are not fixed or prescribed but are constantly negotiated by social actors, and that is why social interaction includes *role taking*, which involves "a process of anticipating the responses of others with whom one interacts" (p. 358). That is, role players enact their roles by taking a social perspective as actors, by understanding other actors' perspectives based on previous experience, and by anticipating possible consequences of certain behaviors in order to adjust their own performances. The "difficulty of fulfilling role demands" during role taking is additionally conceptualized as *role strain* (Goode 1960, p. 483). Moreover, individuals seek to reduce their role strain and this tendency leads to role negotiation among the individuals (Goode 1960). Concessions, deals, agreements, or any form of negotiations among actors, or *role bargains,* are a consequence of role relations (Goode 1960).

The study of roles has been useful for academic research in multiples fields. Consumer behavior scholars have examined the influence of roles on group (e.g., family) decision making and social interactions within the buying context. For example, Menasco and Curry (1989) experimented with different determinants of decision making, including role dominance, when exploring wife/husband decision making in their household. Broderick (1998) applied role theory along with dramaturgy to explain how role scripts

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for the service encounter can be developed for consumers and service providers. Other studies have emphasized specific aspects of roles, including sex orientation. For example, Qualls (1987) found that there was a strong relationship between sex role orientation and the outcome of a family home purchase decision.

The present study utilizes role theory in order to understand role taking and the perspectives of the different actors involved in the wedding dress selection. According to Solomon, "product symbolism is consumed by the social actor for the purpose of defining and clarifying behavior patterns associated with social roles" (1983, p. 320). The social information of a product is often used by consumers to shape their self-image and to maximize the quality of their role performance in a society (Solomon 1983). In accordance with Stryker's (2001) role types, a bride occupies a *position* or takes a *status role* because she is placed within the family role of the daughter. This woman is also placed in a *functional group role* as a bride, in which she acquires a situational identity through interaction in a group setting. During the wedding preparations, the bride additionally experiences two types of role transitions due to the imminent change in her social status during the wedding ritual (Turner 1982). The first transition is connected to her role change from unwed daughter to married wife. The second transition relates to her movement from one family to another. Based on Turner (1982) phases of rituals, the wedding implies a "separation" from the traditional family of the bride and an "incorporation" into a new family with the future husband. Finally, Stryker (2001) further clarified that interactionist theory assumes that social roles exist in pairs. This means that for this research, for example, the participant takes the role of a bride alongside of the bridegroom. Furthermore, this woman simultaneously assumes both roles of daughter and bride. The role of daughter is a stable role, in the sense that she will always be her parents' daughter. Her role as bride can be seen as a temporary one because she will be a bride only in the context of the wedding itself. After she is married, she will assume the role of wife in her new family.

Symbolic interactionism, power, and family relations

Symbolic interactionism proposes that an individual's behavior is mainly a result of social interaction (Blumer 1969). Within this perspective, the action of choosing a wedding dress for a bride is a *social action* because this action takes others into account (Charon 1992). Consequently, the selection of a wedding dress can be considered more of a joint or a group decision rather than an example of individual decision-making (Park 1982). Nevertheless, when recognizing a social act, the life of the group precedes the individual conduct in that "individual conduct arises and takes its form inside of human association" (Blumer and Morrione 2004, p. 95). The individual act must then be seen in accordance with what others do in a situation (e.g., how others exercise their power) because interaction is contextual and not pre-established. Interactionists also state that objects can be *social objects* for the individual because the objects are selected, classified, and interpreted through interaction with others (Charon 1992). Charon (1992) also defines *symbols* as one class of social objects where the object is significantly used for the representation and communication of whatever people agree it should represent. Because the wedding dress can be perceived as a social object and a symbol, with a strong relation with identity (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Stone 1962), the wedding

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dress contributes to the acquisition of identities (e.g., wife-to-be, daughter-in-law) and the development of a sense of self.

Interactionist research also considers the phenomenon of power because all social relationships can be described in terms of their power dimensions (Dennis and Martin 2005). Raven (1993) defines *power* as the possibility of influencing others and changing their behaviors or thoughts. Yet, "the exercise of power is an act of changing a person that may or may not be deliberate" (Corfman and Lehmann 1987, p. 2). Even Goffman (1959) implies the importance of power in the actors' performances when he addresses possible issues involved in the interactions among various roles in a team. For instance, Goffman describes how certain information can threaten a privileged position of an actor, enact information control, and/or disrupt the team's performance. In fact, Giddens (2009) acknowledges that power and domination are not absent in Goffman's work; yet, they are not explicitly discussed. Giddens (2009) then urges for a systematic discussion of power within group interactions, which is the goal of the present study. In the case of the bride, the protagonist in this study, power can be seen as mainly arising from the family systems of the bride and groom during the wedding preparations, more specifically, during the wedding dress selection process. The bride may be simultaneously affected by the power of several persons in various roles, which means that she may have to deal with conflicting pressures and resistance to change (Raven 1993), as well as role strains.

Bases of power

To understand the influence of power, the *bases of power* must be identified. The bases of power are the dimensions that determine the form of influence a role plays in terms of a target (Raven 1993), such as a bride. Based on Raven (1993), our study will consider the following six bases of power: (1) *coercive*, which implies a threat of punishment; (2) *reward,* which implies some sort of reward or increase in privileges in exchange for compliance; (3) *legitimacy,* which is power arising from the formal position or social norms that are usually related to responsibility or dependence; (4) *expert,* which is power based in expertise or superior knowledge; (5) *referent,* which relates to a sense of identification with the influencing agent who serves as a model for the target; and (6) *informational*, which is defined as persuasion grounded in information or a logical argument that is directly or indirectly given through hints and suggestions.

Whereas any combination of the six bases of power may be imposed by actors in a social situation, the desired impact of the power on others' behavior may not be achieved. Corfman and Lehmann (1987) differentiated the *influence attempt* from the *power use effectiveness.* The influence attempt relates to the usage of different sources of power at a person's disposal (i.e., power bases), whereas power use effectiveness relates to the amount of influence these sources have upon the target. For instance, based on Raven (1993), a sister may want to directly influence a bride through the power bases of informational and expert power. Corfman and Lehmann (1987) added that the higher the sister's expertise and the higher the amount of valuable information she has, the higher the degree of influence the sister can have on the bride. With respect to coercive and reward power, Corfman and Lehmann (1987) indicated that the expected value of compliance also has an influence on the effectiveness of the power. In other words, the

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effectiveness of coercive power depends on the "penalties" that result from the noncompliance, whereas the effectiveness of reward power depends on the "benefits" of compliance (1987, p. 4). The degree to which the sister's advice is adhered therefore varies with her ability to administer meaningful penalties (e.g., withholding affection) and benefits (e.g., helping the bride get dressed on her wedding day).

Allocation of role power

Research on household decision-making behavior also has provided clues about the allocation of role power. Research by Blood and Wolfe (1960) indicated that the power to make household decisions is related to the "resources" brought into the household (as cited by Qualls 1987, p. 265). In terms of the wedding dress decision-making process, the amount of money that each role player can allocate to the purchase affects his/her degree of influence on the decision. Furthermore, Qualls (1987) suggested that the influence on family decision making is connected to the importance of the decision that needs to be made, and that the degree of importance also varies between the family members. Clothing and fashion have often been linked to women in modern times (Kawamura 2005). Therefore, in the context of wedding dress selection, the importance placed on the decision is probably greater for the females in the family, including the bride and the mother of the bride, than for the males in the family. For instance, the mother of the bride is more often expected and/or willing than the father to engage in the decision-making process of the daughter when choosing a wedding dress. This makes sense, as Kenkel (1961) suggested that for certain family decisions, it is the mother who "would be more concerned with the aesthetic aspect of product decisions" (as cited by Qualls 1987, p. 266).

Research on the perceived obligations of relationships could additionally help us to understand this allocation of power with respect to responsibility and dependence. A study by Finch and Mason explored how the "proper thing to do" for relatives can be identified as a pattern that relates more to the circumstances than to the social characteristics of the persons involved (1991, p. 346). These authors also suggested that there are assumptions about responsibilities or a sense of "obligatedness" associated with family relations (1991, p. 345). Some of the assumptions included the notion that: receiving family support is natural and expected by relatives; family obligations are easily recognized; obligations should be stronger for closer relatives than distant relatives; obligations are the strongest between parents and children; and women's obligations "are stronger than men's, especially in relation to the kind of assistance which entails practical, personal and domestic tasks" (Finch and Mason 1991, p. 347). However, concerning financial support, men are marginally favored as providers (Finch and Mason 1991). This sense of responsibility and obligation, which parents are assumed to experience, implies that they will be usually involved during wedding preparations, including the wedding dress purchase. Their sense of responsibility and obligation will also be expected to correspond to the social situation itself. Thus, in terms of the task of finding a wedding dress for the bride, the bride's mother is expected to feel more responsibility and obligation than the bride's father, distant relatives, or the relatives of the groom, such as parents-in-law. However, fathers might feel the obligation to financially support the purchase.

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Methods

The interpretive tradition focuses on understanding the meaning of the processes and experience that are context bound (Merriam 1998). As the purpose of the current study was to explore the power relations experienced by a bride during the wedding dress selection process, an interpretive approach was appropriate. To address the research purpose, open-ended questions were used as a means to produce rich answers that would elucidate the phenomenon (Reja et al. 2003). Data collection was conducted via a survey created in Qualtrics, which is a web-based survey tool. The survey was then distributed online via Mechanical Turk, which is a crowd sourcing Internet marketplace (http://www.mturk.com). The specific reasons to adopt this method were as follows. First, the researchers decided to utilize this method due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. In a pilot study, one of the researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with three participants regarding their wedding preparation process. During the interviews, they hesitated to answer several questions regarding the details of their wedding dresses as well as conflicts that they had with their family members in the process. Cowles (1988) confirms that the face-to-face interview technique can negatively impact participants both emotionally and physically when discussing sensitive topics. After careful discussion of the results from the pilot study, the researchers decided to utilize the open-ended survey method to allow participants to answer the questions more freely. In addition, the decision to use open-ended survey was associated with the time that lapsed between the event and the data collection. Participants were asked to recall their experiences in the process of wedding preparations. As this activity required retrieving long-term memories, the open-ended survey offered participants sufficient time to reflect upon their wedding experiences and to develop responses, accordingly (Opdenakker 2006). Such a data collection technique allowed participants to answer questions at her own convenience and pace with fewer distractions, and in the time and place of their choosing (Opdenakker 2006). Lastly, by utilizing open-ended survey, the researchers collected data simultaneously from multiple locations in the US.

For the sake of clarity, the use of the online opened-ended survey can be "viewed as [involving], to some degree, departures from, or additions to, existing methods" (Wiles et al. 2011, p. 597). Based on Wiles et al. (2011), this study incorporates an *adaptation* of a current method (i.e., the interview), which involves a change in the method in order to meet specific needs within the research context, and was mainly driven by practical reasons, as discussed above. Based on the classification provided by Heath (1992), this study is also a variation of humanism called *conservative humanism*, in that the methodology focuses on a qualitative method that incorporates some elements of the positivist approach; for instance, the data collection as well as part of the data analysis considers quantifying to a certain extent for the purposes of supporting interpretations (i.e., determining magnitude).

Upon receipt of IRB approval from the researchers' university, females in the US who had worn a wedding dress in a ceremony were purposively recruited through Mechanical Turk to answer the Qualtrics survey. Thus, the study was restricted to individuals residing in the US. Females who had not been married before were screened out. An incentive of US$1.00 was paid to participants for completing the survey. After consent to participate, the survey consisted of demographic questions and open-ended questions

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that related to the brides' wedding dress selection process, as well as the possible negotiations experienced during the process (see Table 1). Participants were required to answer each open-ended question with at least 100 words. The researchers pre-tested the open-ended survey with 15 participants, and the limit of 100 words was determined to be an appropriate length to address questions. A total of 99 responses were collected. After careful examination of the quality of the responses, 28 responses were excluded from the data analysis because they contained incomplete and/or insincere responses. Insincere responses included responses that were the same to all questions or responses that were not related to the questions. Participants responded to the online questionnaire in about 15–45 min (average = 38 min) and provided an average of 80 words per response in the open-ended questions. As seen in Table 2, the final sample (n = 71) was composed primarily of Caucasian women (73.6%) aged between 26 and 35 years old

Table 1 Open-ended survey questions

Filtering questions

 Gender

 Have you ever being married before?

 Demographic questions about the bride

 Age

 Annual household yearly income

 Education level

 Ethnicity

 Number of siblings

 What was your nationality when the wedding took place?

 Where did you get married?

 When did you get married (if married more than once please mention the last wedding)? Please write the year (YYYY)

Demographic questions about the groom

 Age

 Ethnicity

 How many siblings does the groom have?

 What was the groom's nationality when the wedding took place?

Questions about the wedding dress

 How would you describe your wedding dress? Please explain.

 Where you satisfied with your wedding dress? Please explain.

 Did your wedding dress reflect your fashion style? Please explain.

Questions about wedding preparation process

 How did you select your wedding dress? Please describe the process.

 Please explain your experience purchasing your wedding dress

 Who paid for your wedding dress?

Questions about power negotiation within the process

 Who was the most influential person when selecting your wedding dress? Please state the type of relationship with that person (was it your sister? Mother? etc.)

 Explain why this person was so influential when selecting your wedding dress

 Where your parents involved in the selection of your wedding dress? If so, please describe the experience

 Where your parents-in-law involved in the selection of your wedding dress? If so, please describe the experience

 Was the groom involved in the selection of your wedding dress? If so, please describe the experience

 Did you have to do any type of negotiation for selecting your wedding dress? With whom? Please explain this experience

End of survey that provided participant with completion code

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Table 2 Participants' demographics (n = 71)

Bride's demographics	N	%	Mode
Age			31–35 years old
18–25 years old	10	14.1	
26–30 years old	19	26.8	
31–35 years old	22	31.0	
36–40 years old	8	11.3	
41–45 years old	6	8.5	
More than 46 years old	6	8.5	
Annual household yearly income			$40,000–$59,999
Under $25,000	14	19.7	
$25,000–$39,999	12	16.9	
$40,000–$59,999	20	28.2	
$60,000–$84,999	17	23.9	
Over $85,000	8	11.3	
Education level			Bachelor's degree
High school	12	16.9	
Some college	21	29.6	
Bachelor's degree	30	42.3	
Master's degree	6	8.5	
Professional degree	1	1.4	
Doctoral degree	1	1.4	
Ethnicity			Euro American/Caucasian
Euro American/Caucasian	53	74.6	
Hispanic or Latino	6	8.5	
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	4.2	
African American	8	11.3	
Native American	1	1.4	
Number of siblings			Two
None, I am an only daughter	10	13.9	
One	23	31.9	
Two	25	34.7	
Three	6	8.3	
More than three	8	11.1	

(58.3%). More than half of the participants earned a yearly income of between $40,000 and $84,999 (52.8%) and had at least a bachelor's degree (54.2%).

The collected data were analyzed using analytical coding and thematic interpretation. It is important to note that brides provided rich data that allowed researchers to achieve saturation, which is one of the primary aims of qualitative research (Hodges 2011). The analysis process was composed of a systematic procedure of data analysis suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012). First, the researchers carefully reviewed the data to identify an overall sense of the 'big idea' of the collected data. Next, after carefully reviewing the responses of each participant, the data were classified in accordance to the type of power identified as being the most influential in the experience of that bride (i.e., main power base). If various sources of power were recognized, a second and third base of power were added to the classification of that data. The main influencing agent, the person exerting the main power base to the bride, and the person who paid for the dress

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were also identified for each participant. To analyze the data accurately, researchers created a data summary table in Microsoft Excel. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested, the participants were listed down the vertical axis of the table with the different aspects of each category being listed along the horizontal axis. During the data analysis, the data summary table served as a consistent record of findings regarding participants' responses across categories. Lastly, the current work was situated with respect to prior research to explore a broader sense of theoretical implications.

The inter-rater reliability of main power bases was determined for the purposes of checking internal consistency of the coding process among researchers. The two coders independently analyzed the data as described above by using a coding sheet developed for the study. The reliability was calculated by dividing agreements by total items. The inter-rater reliability achieved was an acceptable agreement of 87.3%. For the sake of clarity, this calculation only included the main power base, as it is the focus of this study. That is, whereas only the most influential power bases identified in the experiences of the brides were considered for the inter-rater reliability calculation, the data analysis included all power bases assigned to the participants by the researchers during the analysis.

Results and discussion

The thematic interpretation resulted in two main themes. The first theme related to how role power was determined within the wedding dress selection process. The second theme related to how the brides experienced power during the process. The later theme was further analyzed by describing how the brides experienced the six bases of power as described by Raven (1993): coercive, reward, legitimacy, expert, referent, and informational.

Determining role power: who is the most influential person in the dress selection process?

Participants made constant references in relation to the symbolic meaning assigned to the dress. This can be seen in the response of Participant 1, who felt like Cinderella when wearing her wedding dress. She stated: *"My dress made me feel like a princess… It reminded me of the dress Cinderella wore but it was real life… I could dance in it and also sit and look beautiful. It was perfect"*. Feeling like a "princess" or "queen" was a common desire when choosing the perfect dress. Participant 9 said: *"When I saw this dress I just knew it was 'The Dress.' I tried it on and it took my breath away how perfect it was. I felt like a princess when I had it on"*. Due to the high symbolic value of the dress, which represents the bride's as well as her family's status during the ceremony, the wedding outfit selection involves consideration of multiple social roles.

Participants identified multiple social roles as influencing agents in their dress selection. Interestingly, the individuals with the most influential roles were: the mother of the bride (35.2%), the bride herself (19.7%), the groom (9.9%), friends (9.9%), and a sister (7.0%). Despite the involvement of the grooms and the parents-in-law in the wedding dress decision process, it was mostly the parents, more specifically the mother of the bride, who were involved and influential in the selection of the dress. Of the 21 participants who answered that either both her parents or one of her parents had paid for the dress, 14 participants (66.6%) said that their mother was the most influential person

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when it came to choosing the dress. When parents paid for the dress, the opinion of the parents became more influential in the decision. For those parents then, money became an important source of power. These results are consistent with the traditional breakdown of wedding costs in the US, which indicate that the bride and her family are usually expected to pay for the bride's dress, veil, accessories, and lingerie (The Knot 2015).

Findings suggest that the closeness of the relationship with the influential person was also a determinant of power during the selection of the wedding dress. Participant 19 helped us understand this point when she explained that she was closer to her mother than her in-laws, so she was expected to rely on her mother for help making her decision. She said, *"My mother was with me when we shopped for the dress. I highly value her opinions. To me she exemplifies style and grace. Everything she wears she does so perfectly… We have a close relationship (my mother and I), which is why I valued her input. Because I was not that close with my in-laws, I did not want them there for that".* By contrast, it was more challenging for other brides to disregard additional influences experienced. As Participant 17 pointed out, *"I had to consider lots of things when selecting a wedding dress, such as my mother's taste and my mother-in-law's taste".* However, after acknowledging other pressures, this bride decides to relinquish her power to a role that closer to her, the mother. She reflected,

> I should have negotiated with my mother. She had a certain taste for her daughter's wedding dress and it was very difficult to change it. I tried to wear something I wanted, but it did not work out. Thus, I just followed her decision. I don't know why she was so stubborn at that time. She said she did not know as well. I had to prepare my wedding for 3 weeks because of the situation that I was in, so she was very stressed out at that time.

(Participant 17)

Some participants expressed that they made a major decision, such as this, on their own (19.7%). This was the case for Participant 16, who was very proud that she had decided on her wedding dress on her own. She said, *"I was the most influential person. I appreciated the advice of others, but at the end of the day, I had to be the one that felt like a princess in my wedding dress".* Another bride who chose her dress on her own was Participant 3, who said, *"No one helped me! I was the one who knew what I wanted to wear to my wedding and I thought about it in my own head. I picked up a bridal catalog, and then, I ordered the dress by mail".* Interestingly, in the case of personal influence, money did not seem to be a factor. Whereas almost half of participants (49.3%) paid for their own dress, less than 20% indicated that they made their own purchase decision. This means that many of these brides relied on others to help make their decision even though they were paying for their own dress.

For some participants, the groom was the most influential person when it came to deciding on the dress. For example, for Participant 5, the groom had the most impact on her decision, as she wanted to please him. Participant 5 wrote, *"[The groom's] opinion is what mattered most. I was not getting married to other people… His eyes would matter more than others when I would be walking down the aisle".* Participant 1 allowed the groom to choose the dress because he paid for a $10,000 dress. Participant 1 explained,

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"Nobody pressured me into buying a dress of their choice... I put my choice in the hands of the groom".

Bases of power: how is the bride influenced?

The bride was simultaneously affected by the power of several individuals (Raven 1993). Participant 55 described how she experienced these conflicting pressures: *"Negotiation was really more a discussion with Mom and with my sister-in-law who was the seamstress. It was like making a dress by committee".* Another bride, Participant 57, described the overwhelming pressure she experienced when picking the perfect dress when she wrote that, *"you're feeling so much pressure to find the wedding dress of your dreams that you think you may be going nuts".* Participants in general appeared to experience role strain, conflicts, and role bargains in the process of selecting their wedding dresses because of the pressure of finding a perfect dress for their wedding day.

When classifying the bases of power of the influential roles, the brides' comments corresponded with the six categories of influence: (1) coercive (2.6%), (2) reward (7.8%), (3) legitimacy (32.9%), (4) expert (9.2%), (5) referent (11.8%), and (6) informational (26.31%). For 9 participants (12.67%), it was not possible to clearly identify the bases of power because of insufficient information, so those participants were not included in the data analysis. Most of the participants showed a marked influence of one single power base that was present in their decision. There were various sources of power that had an influence in several cases, however the most influential power (i.e., main power base) was the focus in the study. The following descriptions in this subsection will present findings related to each of the power bases.

The first base of power is *coercive power,* which includes individuals using their roles to influence the brides through fear. Coercion is a threat of punishment to induce change in the influencing agent and generates social dependency upon the agent (Raven 1993). A good example of this type of exertion of power is Participant 17. She stated, *"Mr. Control Freak had to pick it out himself. Otherwise, he would make fun of me the rest of the night".* In her choice, she only considered the groom's opinion so that she could avoid receiving his harassment. Similarly, Participant 11 only considered her mother's suggestions, so her mother would not miss the wedding. According to her, *"... my mother did state she wanted it to be white or she would not go, so I made it white. I wanted her to be there, so I could at least do that for her".* Thus, the bride incorporated the mother's suggestion of choosing the color white for the dress solely because there would have been negative consequences for the bride if the bride had not followed the request. In general, when coercive power was present, role dominance was evident for the influence agent, role strain for the bride was stressed, and role bargains rarely happened. Nevertheless, not all coercive influences were effective. Participant 50 recognized how her mother-in-law had tried to exert power over her, but she found a way to avoid the influence despite the mother-in-law's disapproval. She explained, *"My mother in law wanted it to be a big fluffy, puffy, long train traditional dress. I didn't want that... Once I told her I bought the dress while I was out with grandma, she was pissed".* So, despite the rage-filled response, Participant 50's mother-in-law was not able to use her control to influence the behavior of the bride. It appears that individuals who are not as close to the bride are less effective at employing coercive power.

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The second base of power is *reward power*, in which the influencing agent promises a reward or privileges to the target of influence in exchange for compliance (Raven 1993). Whereas coercive power focuses on punishment, reward power aligns with benefits or compensation. This type of power is mostly associated with an actor that provides positive reinforcement to the bride. In other words, positive feedback (explicit and implicit) was perceived as the best type of reward a bride could get. Some participants explained how they received non-verbal positive reinforcement from their mothers, who were their most important influence:

> *My mother was the most influential when selecting my wedding dress because when I put on my dress, the look on her face was priceless. I had never seen her look at me like that, with such joy, excitement, and emotion, all at once. She did not have to say anything because it was written all over her face.*

(Participant 9)

> *When she asked me to try on the princess cut dress, at first, I did it just because she asked me to and she was taking care of this wedding for me. But then I fell in love with the dress and it made her tear up, so it was completely worth it.*

(Participant 70)

In addition, two participants indicated that their grooms were the ones most involved in the wedding dress selection process. They hoped that their grooms would be pleasantly surprised–with the dress and how they looked–when they first saw them at the wedding ceremony, so their husbands could look back on the experience fondly in the future. Thus, the promise of such a memory also became a reward for the brides. One of those brides, Participant 36, described this as follows:

> *I wanted him to think, the dress really is appropriate for our wedding because we don't always think inside the box. I wanted him to have fond memories of seeing me in the dress, and to look back and think how much he enjoyed it.*

The third base of power is *legitimacy power*, which arises from the status associated with the role. That is, participants granted power to a role because of the position and status of that role in the bride's life in conforming to rules or norms, such as those involved in family dynamics. Giddens (2009) illustrates this type of power in traditional China where sons treat fathers as "chiefs" whom they await orders from. Legitimacy power for the American brides was commonly granted to the closest roles, such as the mother and the groom. For instance, Participant 5 described the influence her mother had over her. She asserted, *"As a mom who has been married knows what's best. She's also my mom so she knows what looks best on me"*. The phrase "*She's also my mom*" reinforces the mother's position of power, as it expresses the fact that the mother has this power solely because of her role as a mother who has been married before. Another example of legitimacy power is Participant 3, she recognized the influence of the groom when selecting her dress, as she affirmed the legitimate role of her partner by writing, *"... who was I dressing up like this for? MY MAN! My future king, love of my life, rock of our family and provider, father, friend, and soul mate"*. In this case, the bride entrusted the future

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husband with power over the dress decision because of his role as a groom and the closeness of their relationship.

Money was also a source of power legitimation. That was the case for Participant 18, who explained that the boundaries of her negotiations with her mother were related to money. She wrote, *"If my mother had thought the dress I selected was too pricey, I would never have tried to negotiate that with her"*. Consequently, the actor that paid for Participant 18's dress enacted role taking, first as a mother, and second, as the benefactor of the dress. In this case, role strain for the bride was minimized. Participant 36 also agreed that money set boundaries to her advantage. In her case, the fact that she was paying for her own dress gave her more freedom to choose what she wanted. She stated, *"... since I was paying for the dress myself, I felt like it was my choice on the selection of the dress"*. Participant 24 indicated that because her mother controlled the budget for her wedding dress, the mother influenced her to buy a wedding dress within the budget.

> *My mom was the most influential person when I was selecting my wedding dress because she was in charge of keeping up the budget. She refused to let me get the one wedding dress I really wanted because it was out of the budget and cost too much money. ... She forced me to buy it. ... I had to wear it at the wedding, but it wasn't the dream wedding dress I'd always wanted. I always feel a twinge of embarrassment and disappointment when I look at the wedding photos because I didn't quite like the lace on the front of the dress.*

(Participant 24)

The fourth base of power is *expert power*. It relates to the fact that a person that involves more expertise and superior knowledge is the person that provides the biggest influence. The person who has this type of power over the bride appears to have sound knowledge in garment construction as well as fashion trends. For example, Participant 46 decided to allow her best friend's expertise to influence her decision. She said, *"She's a very good seamstress and has made bridesmaids dresses in the past. She has experience in clothes making of all kinds and knows how patterns and fabrics will work together and how it would look on me"*. Similarly, for Participant 30, her best friend's knowledge of fashion had an influence when she chose a dress for her wedding. She explained, *"My best friend is more of a fashion diva than I am, so she really helped a lot. She suggested great looking dresses and basically directed me to try on dresses"*. Another example is the importance given to the expertise and superior knowledge of Participant 33's grandmother, which had an unquestionable impact in the bride's decisions, as she pointed out, *"I trusted in her opinion because she used to make wedding gowns"*.

In addition to the knowledge on wedding dresses, agents who were selected as the most influential actors also had superior knowledge about the bride. Participant 34 said, *"both my mother and sister were influential in choosing the dress. My mother and sister were both very fashionable ladies and knew what the fashions were and what would be appropriate and what style would look best on me. I knew what I wanted but I wanted their approval of my style"*. Participant 26 also indicated that her mother *"was good at knowing what I would like and what would fit me well,"* so her advice played a significant role in the process. Data interpretation also suggests that this type of power becomes even more influential if the participant trusts the person who has previous experience

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with a wedding dress. Several participants designated their mother as the most influential person in the selection process because of their proven knowledge and good taste regarding wedding dresses. They also mentioned that they trust their opinion because they have their best interests in mind regarding the wedding dress selection. Participant 27 described this as follows:

> *My mother was the most influential person in making the decision of what my wedding dress should be because I trust her opinion more than anyone I know. …She told me exactly what I needed to hear, the truth. She told me when she did not like a certain dress and she told me when she loved a certain dress. She was the most honest person. I knew that, of everyone, she would be the one person to give me the best and most honest advice. I knew she would ultimately have my best interests at heart.*

The fifth base of power is *referent power* that relates to the influences of someone perceived as a model to be followed. The target of influence would comply "because of a sense of identification with the influencing agent, or a desire for such an identification" (Raven 1993, p. 233). One example of this can be seen in the recollection of Participant 12, who recognized her mother as the influencing agent because she always wanted to resemble her mother (i.e., model). As she stated, *"I've been seeing her dress in pictures my whole life and I've always said that I wanted a dress that looked just like it… My dress was a replica of her dress"*. Participant 39 also felt a sense of identification with her great-great grandmother, as she recalled thinking that she wanted her wedding dress to be similar to hers: *"I think the most beautiful wedding dress I [have] seen was the one my great-great grandmother wore (Cherokee) when she married my grandfather (Englishman)… Like I said, I saw that picture of my great-great grandmother and wanted to try and duplicate it"*. Participant 53 also strongly identified with the women in her family and chose the dress accordingly. She wrote, *"I have such strong, smart amazing women in my family and when I saw that dress, I thought it fit in perfectly with the wedding gowns the women in my family had worn"*. For Participant 70 and her mother, the mother was not able to afford a wedding for herself when she got married, so the bride wanted her mother to plan her wedding. Participant 70, acting as the bride, as well as the daughter, related to the mother because of that situation, and decided to allocate power to the role of the mother. She stated, *"So my mom really wanted this to happen for me. She wanted me to have a wedding because she couldn't and neither did her sons, and since I wanted a wedding, she wanted to make it happen…"*(Participant 70)

The sixth and last base of power is *informational power*, which focuses on persuasion by information received in various forms, such as opinions, recommendations, and advice. Raven (1993) explains that a person with informational power is the one who can convince another to change a certain behavior with clear logic, argument, or information. Whereas informational power focuses on information provided to the bride, expert power and referent power concentrates on the qualities of the roles providing the information. Expert power then prioritizes an agent perceived as an expert and referent power concedes power to the role designated as a model of reference to the bride. Anybody could provide information and try to influence the bride via informational power; yet, the bride values all information differently. Most brides allocated power to the information received in relation to the source, or role providing the information, as

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well as the content of the message. For instance, Participant 6 commented, *"My mom and both of my sisters were there and gave me advice and their input about my dress and what it should look like. I value their opinion and it was interesting what they had to say"*. She acknowledged the informational role her closest relatives played during the purchase decision. Participant 7 even relied on a wider range of suggestions made by her family and friends, by stating, *"I had a lot of recommendations from family members and friends"*.

Some brides, such as Participant 8, did not always look for positive comments and gave priority to the content of the information rather than the role providing the information. She wrote, *"My cousin was most influential because while I picked out what I liked, she was brutally honest [about] how dresses looked on me"*. However, when surrendering to the informational power of the cousin exercised in the form of honest criticism, the bride (Participant 8) disregarded information provided by people in other roles, such as the mother-in-law. She explains, *"I did not care to hear what my mother or mother in law thought of my dress… It was my day, so it was not her decision what type of dress I got"*. Participant 27 was also selective when receiving information because she decided to allocate power to the role of the groom instead of the rest of the family, regardless of their opinions. She explains, *"When my parents and my in-laws saw what I was wearing, they questioned the choice, but I did not want to make waves with my soon-to-be-husband, so I pretended that I did not care what I wore on my wedding day"*. Regardless of the quality of the content of the opinions of the in-laws, Participant 27 disregarded that information because she valued more the role of the groom than that of the in-laws. This finding supports Stone's idea that people do not value reviews equivalently (Stone 1962). According to him, reviews refer to responses made by others of the wearer's appearance/clothing. Especially, when a person receives differing reviews toward their clothing, one attempts to reconcile them, redefine oneself, and seeks a review that most validates (Stone 1962). Confirming this idea, the participants also chose reviews that they viewed as most valid in the wedding dress selection process.

Conclusion

This study explored the bride's selection of a wedding dress by focusing on the power that individuals exert during their performance of different social roles. The interpretations revealed two main themes that explain how social power is determined and how different actors use bases of power to influence the selection of the wedding dress, when considered as a group decision. The participants described how multiple social roles influenced their dress selection and that mainly the closeness of a relationship determined the strength of the influence. Despite the involvement of parents-in-law and friends in the wedding dress decision process, the most influential roles revealed were the mother of the bride, the bride herself, and the groom. The bride not only considered the types of power exerted, but also the social positions (i.e., roles) of individuals enacting those powers during the decision-making process. In general, many brides claimed to have been aware of different types of power exerted by different individuals within the complex dynamics of the families involved. For many participants, this conflicting experience was associated with feelings of overwhelming pressure, mainly when role strain and/or role bargains were present.

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With regard to the bases of power of these diverse roles, the six main categories explained the bases of power used by the actors involved in the wedding dress selection process. The majority of brides mentioned that legitimacy was the type of power that influenced their decision-making process. Despite the changing roles of men and women in society, the influence of legitimacy power in the context of weddings supports Haines et al. (2016) findings that ideas about traditional gender roles still exist. Mothers who, as females, know more about clothing and fashion (Kawamura 2005) and possess experience from buying their own wedding dresses, as well as grooms who, as males, are viewed as financial "providers", were seen by the brides as having legitimacy. Legitimacy power, and, consequently, traditional gender roles, guided the brides' decisions. On the other hand, the brides mentioned the influence of coercive power the least. Its effectiveness seemed to be related to the degree of closeness the bride felt to the person attempting to apply coercive power. As the importance of the role to the bride weakened, so did the influence of coercive power on the bride's decision. Researchers (e.g., Yukl and Falbe 1991) in other contexts have similarly found that legitimacy as a base of power is more important and influential than coercive power to actors' behavior. In addition to legitimacy power, informational power was also influential to the brides. It is not surprising, given the importance of the wedding dress to the brides (Otnes and Lowery 1993; Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Stone 1962). When consumers are highly involved with an apparel product, they are likely to seek out a great deal of information about the product before they make their purchase decision (Solomon and Rabolt 2009). Hence, permitting those individuals whom the bride believes possess informational power to affect their dress decisions is consistent with previous research.

Prior to the present study, Raven (1993) theory had not been applied to wedding preparations, or more specifically the wedding dress selection process. The results of this study extend the understanding of bases of power, as well as roles, in this specific context. Following Giddens (2009) suggestion, this study provides a systematic discussion of power within group interactions, such as those experienced by the bride during the selection of the dress. The findings also provide explanations regarding how the symbolic and social nature of the meaning of the wedding dress impacts its selection process. Understandably, the joint decision of selecting an ideal wedding dress (i.e., social object) additionally supports the role performance of a bride during the wedding ceremony. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism was appropriate in guiding this research because it frames the brides' behavior as a result of complex social interaction among various and dynamic roles.

This information can be used by wedding retailers seeking to further understand the complexity of the family dynamics that take place during wedding preparations. As legitimacy was the role power with the greatest influence on participants, retailers may train selling specialists to identify the person(s) to whom the bride feels the most responsibility and/or dependence. Brides may also be encouraged to provide contact details for these individuals so that they can be invited to visit the bridal store with the bride and dress pre-selections can be shared with them. Social media may be a useful tool to ease this exchange of information. An attempt to further understand the bride's needs and desires may also be pursued. In addition, the findings may help brides to understand the role of power relations in the wedding dress selection process. This understanding may

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generate more awareness of the possible forces influencing a bride so she can have more control over the possible conflicts generated during this process.

The study's limitations and suggested future research are as follows: First, the research focused on brides who live in the US. The power relations that influence brides during the dress selection process might be different depending on the geographical and cultural background of the bride. Thus, the research cannot be generalized. Second, the survey did not enquire about the participants' sexual orientation and this should be addressed for future study. Participants' sexual orientation and gender of their partner could affect their experience with wedding dress. Thus, it may be beneficial to conduct further studies to explore the effect of sexual orientation in the wedding dress selection process. Third, brides may experience multiple powers during the wedding dress selection process; however, examining overlapped powers was not the focus of the study. Nevertheless, the topic of overlapped powers and how brides negotiate influences is definitely worth exploring and will deepen the understanding of the subject. Lastly, the open-ended survey method implies additional limitations to the study. In fact, Reja et al. (2003) suggested that several limitations are associated with surveys that include open-ended questions, such as missing data. The main reason being that open-ended survey does not allow the researchers to pose follow-up questions. However, the findings do provide a meaningful understanding of the phenomenon and will serve as a good starting point for future studies. In order to address this limitation and deepen the understanding of the phenomenon, it would be desirable for future research to include in-depth interviews with participants. A quantitative approach may also be advisable for establishing differences in power bases among various demographic backgrounds of the brides.

Authors' contributions
SM planned the study, conducted the data collection, supported the data analysis, and revised the article for publication. LMC participated in planning the research design, doing the data analysis, and writing the article. JY contributed to revising the article for publication. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The research was approved by IRB from the researchers' university. Written informed consent was obtained from our participants for the publication of this report and any accompanying images.

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