ABSTRACT - Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1989) observe that the consumption occurring within the context of ritualized occasions is often viewed as "sacred" by consumers. This paper argues that even within these contexts, some artifacts may be viewed as sacred, while still others retain a profane quality. Specifically, this paper compares the "sacred" items that brides include in planning their weddings and receptions with those they regard as profane.

INTRODUCTION
Since Rook's (1985) study of the ritual dimension of consumer behavior, many researchers have examined ritualized elements of consumption. Often, these examinations have focused upon occasions that are pervasive in American culture, such as Christmas and Thanksgiving (c.f.; Belk 1989; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Such occasions are notable because of their periodicity, and because they often feature a wide variety of ritualized events - such as feasting - within each occasion.

While most consumers do not participate in weddings on an annual basis, there is little doubt that these occasions are significant consumption rituals within American culture. Indeed, in industrialized societies, weddings remain one of the few ceremonial rites of passage, where an individual moves from "one age to another and from one occupation to another" (van Gennep, 1960 translation, p. 2). And Cheal (1988) notes that while rites of passage are generally thought to be of little importance in industrialized societies, "the major exception here is the complex of rites associated with marriage, which shows few signs of decline" (p. 87).

The above statements are supported by the fact that the average cost of the American wedding is now $16,000, and wedding-related goods and services account for $30 billion in annual retail sales (Abbott, 1991). Few studies have actually examined facets of the modern wedding ceremony. Ironically, more studies have examined a relatively small wedding-related event - the bridal shower - than have examined the wedding ceremony itself (Casparis 1979; Cheal 1988).

However, Barker (1978) did interview more than fifty couples and attended nearly one hundred weddings over a four-year period. She observed that the continuing popularity of the "proper wedding" - which features the church setting and the white dress - is due to the fact that it "is thought more thorough because people believe that God can help in achieving the ideal - a bonding, life-long pervasive holy union" (p. 74).

Our study attempts to provide further understanding of the wedding as a consumption-oriented rite of passage in American culture. We began by exploring which artifacts brides regard as "sacred" when planning their ceremonies and receptions. We employed Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry's definition of sacred consumption as "that which is regarded as more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self" (1989, p. 37).
Given that weddings are highly ritualized, significant and expensive occasions, we found our brides’ distinction between sacred and secular items worth pursuing. Thus, we explored the following research questions:

1. Which artifacts used in the wedding and reception do brides regard as sacred?
2. How and why do these items acquire sacred status?
3. Which items used during these events do brides regard as profane?
4. How and why do these items acquire profane status?

METHOD

During the summer of 1991, focus groups were conducted in a Midwestern city (population approximately 100,000). Nineteen brides participated. Part of these focus groups was devoted to examining the ritual artifacts that brides deemed most important when planning their weddings.

In addition, nine brides were recruited from these groups for participation in a more in-depth study of the wedding as a consumption ritual. These brides ranged in age from 21-35. Appendix A describes these informants.

Brides were paid $40 for participating in two in-depth interviews and allowing the researcher to accompany them on two wedding-related shopping trips. This research design had been used successfully in the study of other rituals, notably Christmas shopping (Otnes, Kim and Lowrey 1992; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim 1992).

The data were collected by three female undergraduate students, who were trained participants in a summer research program at a large university in the Midwest. Interviews were structured to examine the four aspects of the wedding ritual: artifacts, ritual scripts, performance roles and the ritual audience (Rook, 1985). Interviews included scripted questions and carefully scheduled prompts (McCracken, 1988), and typically lasted from 30-45 minutes.

Informants chose the sites for all shopping trips. These included: bridal shops, florists, caterers, fabric stores and other specialty shops. Researchers typically spent 1-1 1/2 hours with informants on each trip. Researchers created detailed field notes immediately after each shopping trip. Using interviews and shopping trips allowed us to create a “thick description” of our informants’ experiences (Geertz 1973).

Transcriptions of the focus groups and in-depth interactions yielded over 500 pages of text. We addressed the trustworthiness of data (Wallendorf and Belk 1989) by triangulating methods, establishing rapport with informants, assuring anonymity when reporting results and using techniques recommended by skilled interviewers (c.f.; Bogdan and Taylor 1984; Lincoln and Guba 1985). We created our final interpretation by a process of negotiation, arriving at an agreed-upon understanding of our individual interpretations.

APPENDIX A

INFORMANT CHARACTERISTICS

Sacred Wedding Artifacts

Interestingly, artifacts perceived as sacred by our informants were all related to the wedding and not to the reception (see Table 1). Given the symbolic nature and import of the ceremony, this finding is not surprising. In addition, our informants characterized their receptions as parties designed mainly to “reward” the guests for attending the wedding. In fact, the vows exchanged and the presence of loved ones, although not artifacts per se, were two of the most universally mentioned sacred aspects of our brides’ weddings. However, this paper focuses on why artifacts do or do not acquire sacred status.

Reasons for Sacred Status

The wedding dress was the most often mentioned sacred artifact, but music, decorations, wedding rings, photographs, the church, and the minister were also perceived as sacred. These artifacts acquired sacred status for different reasons - and often for more than one reason- as articulated below.

1. Sacred Items Are Hierophanous. According to Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1989), hierophany involves both the revelation of a sacred item to an individual and the removal of such an item from common, everyday use. By far the most prevalent items granted sacred status by our informants, the bridal gown and related accessories, acquired sacredness for these reasons. For most of our brides, the selection of the wedding dress was an intense, hierophanous experience, during which the perfect selection seemed to be magically revealed to them. Jenny described her experience:

   When I found that dress, I mean I put it on...I started crying, ’cause I was like, “Lisa, this is my dress!”...and the whole thing seemed so much more real; that we were really getting married, and that this was going to happen, and it just, it just was a really overwhelming, I guess, type of feeling.

   Likewise, Becky remarked:

   So I spent a little bit of time looking, but knew I wasn’t going to buy anything. And I just, it just happened I went into the right store, looked at this dress, it was the first one I saw. I tried it on, with a couple of others, but that was my dress. I knew it.

   Other bridal accessories elicited similar responses. Lynn described shopping for her veil:

   My maid of honor went with me when we went to look for it, and she still hasn’t even seen the dress or anything, but when I tried veils and things on, you know, she cried, and I knew that was the one I needed to get.

   In addition to these revelatory experiences, these artifacts are neither ordinary nor mundane. Rather, they are created solely for use in one of the most significant rituals in modern society.
I always imagined myself, every since I was little, in, you know, the perfect huge white gown. And I just, you know, it's not something that I could settle for, it had to be the one you know...but you just kind of wait until you put that one on, and everyone stops and says, "This is the dress." You know, you shop until you find it.

This aspect of one's wedding fulfilling a fantasy was summarized eloquently by Jody, who said, "This is a once in a lifetime moment...it's your one day where you feel like a princess."

Other artifacts that helped fulfill the bride's fantasy were the decorations. Lynn stated, "I think that is going to be the most important part, as far as building the atmosphere, of the whole ceremony."

Similarly, Elaine explained:

I want the flowers, you know, with the candlelight. I want that to be really nice, because I think my church is pretty small and it's not a real elaborate, you know, it's just a small town church. And I want it to look, you know, as Christmas-y and as festive as it can.

**TABLE 1**

**SACRED AND SECULAR ITEMS MENTIONED BY BRIDES**

Thus, this concern with the ambiance of the ritual- and the subsequent emphasis upon the decorations- lies in to the creation of each bride's fantasy wedding.

3. Sacred Items Are Imbued With Tradition. Several informants were incorporating clothing or other accessories into their weddings, that had been used either by their mothers or other relatives in their own ceremonies. For example, Kate was going to wear her aunt's veil and carry a handkerchief made for her by her late great-grandmother. In addition, she was considering using the flower girl's basket that she had carried in her aunt's wedding. Similarly, Jody explained:

I'm carrying my grandmother's prayer book that she carried when she was married. That was, you know, no question of whether I wouldn't or would...that she carried in 1908 and all of her sisters, my mom's sisters have carried, and that all of their kids have carried.

These items held particular significance for these informants because of the family bonds these items represented on one of the most important days of their lives.

4. Sacred Items Have Communicative Power. Several artifacts acquired sacred status due to their ability to communicate the meanings inherent in the wedding ritual. Music seemed to be of particular importance, especially to Lynn:

We're having a lot of slow songs, and we want, I would like to have people really pay close attention to the wording of the songs, and you know, the timing of them...like when we're lighting the Unity candle, we're having "You Light Up My Life" you know, that type of relation to what we're doing...I want people to remember...the song that was sung when we lit the candles.

Interestingly, music not only communicated powerfully to the audience, but also to the bride herself, as Kate explained:

I want someone singing before and during the wedding. And then, I want music to be sung when we're lighting the candle. And then, I want the Lord's Prayer to be sung...so, I, the music really means a lot to me...because I love music and I think that it probably mean a lot to me when I'm standing there. I hope I don't start crying.

Our interpretation of why music was so significant is that it is one part of a scripted ritual that can be personalized to communicate the values of the bride and groom. In addition, as Lynn explained, carefully chosen songs can emphasize and enhance the specific activities being performed.

Two other artifacts, wedding rings and photographs, were considered sacred for their power to communicate long after the wedding was over. Jody commented, "The rings are important to me...that's something I'm going to have on my finger for the rest of my life." And Lynn felt that her wedding photographs were, as she explained:

...the thing that we'll have the longest. I mean that's the thing that we'll always be looking at. The dress will go in a box and I'll forget what the church looked like, but I'll have the pictures.

5. Sacred Items Are "Contaminated," and Thus "Contaminate" the Wedding. As Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1989) explain, particular places and individuals are contaminated with positive sacredness. In particular, places of worship and religious authorities were viewed by many of our brides as important elements of their wedding rituals. Several informants expressed a desire for a church wedding. Although they felt such a wedding was not necessary for everyone, most who expressed this desire felt that having their wedding in a church legitimized the marriage. Sue articulated this feeling:

To me it's important to have it in church because it feels more like it's blessed...It just doesn't seem married unless it's in the church...if I was just up at the courthouse, you know, it would be like, like, I don't know...like it wasn't really happening, like it was practice or pretend...Yeah, just like when you're little kids, that kind of thing.

Our interpretation of this finding is that the church has the power to positively contaminate the marriage with sacredness. For others, having the wedding in a church was not an essential element, but having a religious ceremony was seen as necessary.

Most of our informants viewed a wedding as a religious event. For a few, this belief meant that it was important to have a particular minister preside over the ceremony. Kelly wished to include her hometown Lutheran pastor in her wedding, even though she was converting to Catholicism and would be having a Catholic wedding. And Jody had to compromise on where to have her wedding so she could ensure that her childhood priest could perform the ceremony:

I wanted this priest who I had known from childhood to do it ...you decide what's negotiable and what's not. And the place was negotiable at that point. He wasn't negotiable. I wanted him, so that's the way that worked out.

Even those informants who had no particular individual in mind still wanted a minister to preside over the ceremony, rather than a justice of
In summary, most of the sacred artifacts mentioned by our brides were connected to the wedding ceremony itself. Furthermore, our data lends credence to Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf's (1989) discussion of the ways in which sacredness is expressed via consumption artifacts.

Profane Wedding Artifacts

We classified artifacts as profane either because brides stated that they simply did not care about these items, or because they made other remarks that indicated these items were relatively unimportant to them. For example, Elaine remarked: “You know, the ring bearer's pillow...I'll pick up the pillow, I'll throw it in the [shopping] cart, and we're gone.” Likewise, one focus group participant noted:

Somehow my mom and my mother-in-law got it in their heads that we had to give away party favors...I just don't see why people needed something else to take home with them, but my mom went out and bought 150 little sachets that were supposed to go to everybody. And they are sitting in my room at home...and I just don't care, I just don't.

Our interpretation yielded 21 different artifacts that one or more brides regarded as profane (Table 1). One-half of these items were used for the reception, only six were used during the actual wedding ceremony and the remainder could be described as facilitating either event (e.g., wedding invitations).

In comparing the sacred and profane artifacts identified, we noticed three interesting tendencies. First, the variety of secular artifacts is much greater than the variety of sacred ones. This finding suggests that most, if not all brides may regard only an "evoked set" of artifacts as capable of embodying sacredness. It is highly possible that the items in these sets are the result of socialization. Furthermore, brides' classification of other items as sacred appears to be more of an individual choice. Second, only one profane item was actually part of the bridal costume - namely, the shoes worn during the wedding. Moreover, brides only classified their shoes as such if they had decided to use them after the wedding. Thus, it appears that items comprising the bride's ritual garb are consistently considered to be imbued with sacredness more than other types of items.

Third, we were intrigued to discover that some items were considered sacred by some brides and profane by others. We could not fully explore why this was the case; however, this topic is certainly worthy of future research.

Reasons for Profane Status

Our interpretation of the text yielded six distinct reasons why brides regarded some artifacts as profane.

1. Profane Items Are Common in Everyday Life. Brides characterized some items as profane simply because they were ordinary, everyday items. For example, Jenny said of the utensils for her reception, "they're just plates and forks." Likewise, Val noted, "the chairs are pretty cut and dried. It wasn't like, well I want them to be colonial designed. Just give me some chairs."

2. Secular Items Are Consumed or Discarded. Our emic and etic interpretation revealed that a large number of artifacts were described as secular because they simply had no permanence beyond the actual wedding or reception. A variety of artifacts was described in this manner. For example, one focus group participant noted: "This little party favor [is] just going to ride around in people's cars for a couple of weeks and then they throw them out." Kate remarked that she hated invitations, then explained: "I've received so many that I look at and think 'Oh, this is pretty.' And then ten minutes after I write it on my calendar it's in the garbage." Elaine noted:

I worked at a flower shop last summer...so I knew how much people spent, and how much each [flower] arrangement costs for a table...it's like 'Why are they doing this?' They're just going to go in the garbage.

Thus, some brides appeared to share Becky's aversion to what she called "throwaways" - or items that would literally be discarded after the wedding.

3. Profane Items Can "De-Sacralize" the Wedding Ritual. Sherry (1983) and Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1989) discuss how gifts can serve as conduits of sacred meaning. Yet one artifact of the wedding ritual that was deliberately excluded by three brides - the list of gifts created via the bridal registry - was viewed as interfering with the sacred nature of the wedding. June said "I just don't like the idea of telling people, 'I want this. Buy me this or don't buy me anything.'" Jody echoed this sentiment, noting:

I think it's stupid. To go with lists of things that you want to have. I think it's really dumb. Yuck. It's so cold...To go write down that you want this clock at $34.99 and this at $62.99, that takes a lot of the spontaneity out of giving a gift.

We interpret this finding to mean that for some brides, investing an item with "giftness" (Sherry and McGrath 1989) occurs when givers themselves select something they believe the bride and groom would like, rather than when an item is selected from a preconceived list.

4. Profane Items Do Not Impinge Upon the Bride's Identity. Our interpretation revealed that some items described as unimportant were used by other members of the wedding party. Jenny noted:

[Her fiance] didn't want to wear a tux at first. And I said, that was fine, I didn't really care if he wanted to wear jeans and a T-shirt...whatever he was comfortable in.

Likewise, when discussing her bridesmaid's dresses, Jody noted: "I don't really care what they wear."

Interestingly, both of these brides were among our older informants. Thus, older brides may not feel that artifacts used by other wedding participants add to the sacralization of the ritual. Rather, they appear more concerned that these participants are comfortable in their roles. Indeed, Jenny's opinion about her fiance's tuxedo can be contrasted to that of June, one of our younger brides:
June said that she wanted a smoky grey tux for everyone on the groom's end...However, Elaine reminded June at that moment, that she allowed Mike [June's fiance] to pick out his own color. Reluctantly, June agreed.

5. Profane Items are "Parity Products." Brides regarded some artifacts as profane because few variations of these items existed. One artifact described most commonly in this manner was the Unity Candle. Kate noted, "there was only two [in the store], and we picked it together...that didn’t take five minutes." Likewise, June noted that she "just walked into the candle store and bought a candle."

Some brides also viewed cakes as parity products. One focus group participant commented: "I really couldn't care less what the cake looks like...I look through the magazine and they all start looking the same."

Our interpretation of this finding is that because brides perceive little difference between some items, they cannot imbue an item with aspects of their own identity.

6. Profane Items Viewed as Unimportant to the Audience. Our text was rich with brides' descriptions of how they sought to meet the expectations of their "ritual audience" (Rook, 1985), or the guests attending the wedding festivities. Thus, it was not surprising that one reason brides downplayed the importance of some items was because they perceived these items to be meaningless to their wedding guests. With respect to the candles for her reception tables, Kate remarked: "People aren't going to remember, ten years from now, 'Oh gosh, the candles on the tables.'" Likewise, Jenny noted that having a traditional cake made "just seemed silly...people don't care for wedding cake."

Thus, our brides appeared cognizant of the fact that not only did they regard some items as more or less sacred, but their guests did as well.

SUMMARY

This paper contributes to our understanding of consumers' distinction between sacred and secular artifacts in that it: 1) illustrates that even within a "sacred" occasion such as a wedding, orchestrators of the event themselves distinguish between sacred and secular items; 2) reveals that more items were profane than sacred, indicating that consumers planning ritualized occasions may only view an "evoked set" of artifacts as sacred; 3) reveals that sacred items are those that the bride can contaminate with meaning from either the ritualized occasion itself or from her own identity and 4) interprets secular items to be those that are ordinary or disposable, and which cannot or will not be imbued with sacred meaning by brides.

In conclusion, this paper applies the sacred and secular distinction to a highly pervasive and visible consumer ritual, the American wedding. We believe that applying this distinction to other types of rituals in American culture would likewise prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

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Their wedding theme, "Til Death Do Us Part" is partially ironic, but the couple also drew on their jobs as funeral directors for inspiration. Tay, in particular, has grown up surrounded by death, although perhaps not in the way you're imagining. Her father, Singaporean undertaker Roland Tay, is famous for his pro-bono funeral services for the needy. "We wanted to feature something meaningful to us," Tay told Bustle over email. "Our trade instantly came to mind We decided to be daring and [go] ahead and do a photoshoot with what we love." Although some may