Exploring cross-cultural ambivalence: a netnography of intercultural wedding message boards

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Abstract

This paper identifies the construct of cross-cultural ambivalence and examines how it influences brides-to-be while they plan cross-cultural weddings. Through ethnographic analysis of postings across electronic message boards ("netnography"), we discuss the roles of the virtual community in wedding planning. We also identify the coping strategies brides employ in managing the cross-cultural ambivalence that emerges as they reconcile two or more sets of cultural norms and traditions. We discuss the relevance and application of cross-cultural ambivalence to other areas of consumer behavior and marketing.

Keywords: Netnography; Weddings; Cross-cultural; Ambivalence; Web community

One doesn’t realise how different cultures can be until you start planning a wedding 😊 (Swedish bride-to-be, March 15, 2001)

1. Introduction

Marriage occurs in the majority of world cultures, and the wedding itself is a special ritual—a rite of passage that culturally marks a person’s transition from one life stage to another and redefines social and personal identity. Such rituals, long dictated by cultural values and processes (Rook, 1985), appear as “relatively immutable sets of practices intent on preserving and promoting the unchanging structures of the sociocultural system” (Bell, 1997, p. 211). Historically, local communities dictated the norms that governed the wedding (Bulcroft et al., 1997). So, what happens to the ritual when the “community” is expanded to the global village?

Since the 1960s sweeping demographic shifts, greater mobility, and increased educational opportunities have caused profound lifestyle changes worldwide (Stanton, 1995). Exposure to alternative cultures, values, and people has resulted in a “larger, more amorphous…marriage market…with a lack of a clear geographical and socially circumscribed context” (Bulcroft et al., 1997). Religion and ethnicity have become less important in delineating the pool of eligible partners as endogamy, the custom that requires individuals to marry within their own racial, religious, and social groups, has declined. Westernization has led to racial, religious, and ethnic tolerance and diversity in marital relationships (Triandis, 1995). Moreover, as romantic love has overtaken the practice of arranged “matched partners,” cross-cultural weddings that join individuals and families with differing values have increased (Pleck, 2000).

The quote that begins this paper consciously recognizes this diversity and speaks to the conflict in values experienced while planning a cross-cultural wedding. Such conflict is associated with cultural ambivalence, which Merton and Barber (1976) identify as the emotional conflict that emerges because of value conflict among members of the same society. However, our paper recognizes a more specific variant of ambivalence. Specifically, we define cross-cultural ambivalence as the emergence of mixed or multiple
emotions that arise from conflict among values, norms, traditions, and practices of different cultures not found within the same society.

Values (and conflicts) can be internally driven (Madrigal and Kahle, 1994) or externally driven (require the judgments or opinions of others; Homer and Kahle, 1988). Both types are important in wedding planning because partners and their extended families impact the ritual. Given the greater propensity for differences in internal and external values for cross-cultural weddings, ambivalence is magnified for these participants. Cross-cultural ambivalence also may differ from cultural ambivalence because it often results from acculturation as individuals within cross-cultural relationships experience changes in identity, values, and norms (Bochner, 1982). Such acculturation occurs “unevenly” across individuals, but may result in acculturative stress when social support is lacking (Berry and Kim, 1988). Living outside of one’s culture and planning a highly meaningful and personal event (Breger and Hill, 1998) may also add to the stress of wedding planning. In addition, as a result of cultural conflict, couples, and families can experience “heated arguments. . .over finding religious services that won’t offend either culture, planning receptions that honor both sides equally and accommodating an array of guests” (Nguyen, 1996).

Many brides—especially those planning cross-cultural weddings—use the Internet as a resource because it enables them to easily access information and communicate with widely dispersed providers of wedding resources (www.theknot.com annual report, 2000). Our research revealed one of the most-used resources on wedding websites was the message board. Such virtual communities “emerge from the net when enough people carry on . . .public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993). These communities are bound together not usually by geography but by common norms, interests, values, and even consumption activities (Kozinets, 1999). Virtual communities often serve social as well as functional needs (Alon et al., 2001). For wedding planning, such communities focus on the shared ritual and offer camaraderie and information exchange.

We explore the ways virtual communities help brides-to-be manage cross-cultural ambivalence as they plan their weddings. We address the following two research questions: (1) What roles do wedding message boards play for brides as they plan cross-cultural weddings? (2) How do brides use these Internet communities to cope with the cross-cultural ambivalence they experience?

This paper adds to the literature on weddings in consumer behavior (e.g., Otnes and Lowrey, 1993). Past research has offered important insight into emotions associated with wedding planning (Otnes et al., 1997) and has illuminated differences in the priorities of brides and grooms (Lowrey and Otnes, 1994). Work on cultures outside the United States has also examined weddings; however, much of this research is quite dated (e.g., Kendall, 1989; Wilson, 1972). In short, cross-cultural influences have not yet been considered.

2. Method

This study employs a new qualitative research methodology called Netnography or “ethnography on the Internet” (Kozinets, 2002). It allows the researcher to gain access to consumer discussions by observing and/or participating in communications on publicly available online forums. Given that women now comprise more than half of the Internet audience (Myers, 2002) and 71.6% of all Internet users are said to use newsgroups or chatrooms (Reid, 1996), this method was relevant for understanding brides-to-be and the planning process. Netnography allowed us to unobtrusively collect data and study processes and patterns of behavior (Jorgensen, 1989). The first author conducted observations virtually, participating in and observing conversations among cross-cultural brides-to-be in public computer-mediated environments. We archived messages on three wedding-related websites: theknot.com, ultimateway.com, and weddingchannel.com—because of the prevalence of communications related to cross-cultural weddings on these sites. Relevant message boards were found by examining top-level headings (e.g., planning and international) or searching for words related to cross-cultural planning (e.g., “calling all Irish brides”). Forums typically consisted of 5–10 participants. We archived messages from relevant forums and retrieved, downloaded, and printed them. Approximately 400 postings from brides-to-be in 16 countries were analyzed for 1 year (August 8, 2000 to July 7, 2001).

3. Analysis

Although international in scope, postings on these boards primarily occurred in English. Phrases in a second language were more common among regional message groups. Messages observed across the three sites were similar, so we collapsed them into one large data set. In examining the functions of wedding communities and cross-cultural ambivalence, we employed a bottom-up approach to understand how the virtual community helped brides-to-be cope with the ambivalence. The first author coded the text according to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), reading the postings several times, moving from the specific to the general, and devising categories. Categories were then clarified by revisiting the data several times, grouping responses into like categories. The resulting analysis yielded themes that helped define the functions of the wedding message boards and outlined the ways brides coped with cross-cultural ambivalence. The second author audited these themes and made suggestions and corrections in the interpretation and writing phases.
4. Interpretation

4.1. Roles of the virtual community in resolving brides’ cross-cultural ambivalence

Historically, a bride and her mother have shared the responsibility for wedding planning in Western cultures (Pleck, 2000). However, as Western women have become more mobile and delay marriage, the bride often experiences the burden (or joy) of planning a long-distance ritual (www.theknot.com). As such, she may turn to a wedding planner, or to virtual wedding communities, for advice. We observed that these communities played distinct roles in the lives of participants, similar to what Alon et al. (2001) found in their investigation of mother-to-be and new mother virtual communities.

4.1.1. Friend and counselor

In general, brides-to-be used message boards to solicit advice, opinions, and information, as well as to gain emotional support, social comparison, and camaraderie. The shared information transcended superficial communications, as participants offered both advice and private thoughts. Advice included “how-to’s,” traditional dance steps, recipes, and historical and cultural information. Introspections often revolved around sex, romance, and family problems with a level of intimacy typically reserved for close friends.

An important marker of “community” is consciousness of kind (Gusfield, 1978). Similar to what Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) noted in their study of brand communities, the brides in intercultural forums felt a connection to one another beyond the weddings they were planning. Many shared concerns about immigration, employment, and discrimination. This connection created an intimacy through empathy and helping, reinforced through storytelling and feelings of moral obligation to help, also characteristics of community building (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Introductions were made in response to a “roll call” (e.g., “Where is everyone from?”), which consisted of identifying one’s culture, one’s fiancé’s culture, and the wedding location. Once members were introduced, queries followed to brides-to-be about traditions or opinions on dresses, invitations, or other artifacts. The support and intimacy gained by virtual listening, helping, and teaching during times of stress are offered by AP: “You have no idea how glad I am I found this forum for international brides. My fiancé is American; we will get married down here in Sao Paulo. Like you, I’m doing most of the work by myself, which on one hand is good—I get things the way I want: but it’s also a lot of work (April 15, 2001, weddingchannel.com).” Many women admitted they relied upon the community; according to a frequent poster, “It’s incredible how you can really feel better when you talk with other brides and share the same worries and doubts….”

Venting was another common need fulfilled by posting to the message boards. Maria discussed the problems locating bi- or trilingual ritual artifacts (June 19, 2001, weddingchannel.com): “Now, I hate to be a downer, but I went through HELL to find a bilingual invite. I don’t know why, but I just couldn’t find any invitation company that makes them. You can get them in one language or the other, but not in both. I finally did end up getting bilingual invitations but they cost me a fortune $736 for 75!!!” Although “venting” was not unique to intercultural brides, the content of their complaints was. Ana, who was from South America, explained: “It’s such a perfect place to vent, I guess so many of us internationals are apart from our FH’s as we try to put a ceremony and reception together that we need the shelter of a good chat. I know it has helped me to know I am not alone in this long-distance planning thing. And that feels good” (May 3, 2001, weddingchannel.com).

4.1.2. Consumption advisor

In addition to emotional support, brides often exchanged marketing-related information, recommending websites, or if located in a similar geographic region, sharing stories or asking questions about local vendors. These online word-of-mouth references result in customers becoming part of the “marketing force” (Modzelewski, 2000). As noted in Kozi-nets (2002), these discussions often revolve around goals to “inform and influence fellow consumers about products and brands” (p. 2). As such, brides who had acquired desired information and were “in the know” about cross-cultural wedding particulars were similar to the “market mavens” consulted by others attempting to navigate the marketplace (Feick and Price, 1987). While more common in local forums (e.g., “Boston”) they were not entirely absent from intercultural discussions. For example, KC (May 4, 2001, www.theknot.com) offers: “Personally, we’re not having figures on top of our cake, but I stumbled across this site...that seems to have a *ton* of toppers. I don’t know anything about them, but they do custom toppers for interracial couples, etc.” Brides-to-be discussed favorite national beers and provided recommendations for music. Others located in ethnically diverse areas asked if anyone knew of bilingual DJs or priests or banquet halls nearby. Fellow community members appear to be credible sources of consumer information, as the stature of being a community member carried with it the aura of credibility.

Another way participants acted as market mavens was by providing insight into traditions of a bride’s or groom’s culture. When Manny became engaged, she turned to her fellow net-savvy brides, “The wedding is going to be in Germany, where my partner is from. How can I plan or even start preparing anything? Is there a website for international weddings anywhere?” (April 17, 2001, www.theknot.com). A respondent offered ways to avoid disastrous results for cultural conflicts and minimize cross-cultural ambivalence: “Make sure you are aware of any cultural differences so you do not offend anyone in the planning process. Wedding customs can vary greatly from one country to another. Next, I would ask your partner who you can entrust to help you...”
make this long distance plans. Future mother in law, close relative...they will become your new best friend. They will need to make these arrangements for you if you cannot make a trip there before the wedding. Good luck" (Kimz, April 20, 2001, www.theknot.com).

In sum, the message boards on the wedding websites provided the intercultural brides with a place to share information with others like themselves, receive and offer emotional support, and learn about cultural rituals and consumer outlets—all roles typically carried out by one’s friends and family. As Otnes (1998) discovered about bridal salons, Internet message boards fulfill many roles, in this case, that of social club, shoulder to cry on, and school.

4.1.2.1. Coping mechanisms employed by brides for managing cross-cultural ambivalence. Cross-cultural ambivalence was clearly evident in messages posted to these boards, because messages often contained the word “help!” Brides-to-be learned or communicated strategies for dealing with cross-cultural ambivalence by renegotiating or creatively crafting various ritual scripts and artifacts when cultural discrepancies arose.

4.1.3. Abandoning familiar cultural norms

As Otnes et al. (1997) observed, couples sometimes experience difficulties in obtaining ritual elements for their weddings. These difficulties can lead to nonpurchase or elimination of ritual elements. When brides-to-be simply could not locate artifacts they wished to include, they turned to message boards for solutions. For example, in the United States, it is proper to provide reply cards with stamped envelopes in the invitations. Several American brides living or sending invitations abroad conveyed dismay when they learned foreign stamps were not sold in domestic post offices: “Hi, my fiancé is from Ireland so we have lots of situations that are new, foreign, or unprecedented(Burroughs, 1998). This is evident in PCs post (March 12, 2001, ultimatewedding.com): “Hello everybody! I just found this international post, and I’m so happy to see people here in the same boat! My boy is being no help about the tradition thing either...so I’m making it up as I go along 🙁 I’m glad you guys are here for support! I hope I can be of some help to you, too.”

Some couples sought a “hybrid ritual” where couples “splashed a few ethnic colors onto the standard canvas” and others attempted a “syncretization” or a blending of cultures to produce a new result (Pleck, 2000, p. 241). Both techniques reflect the tendency for cross-cultural couples to practice bricolage, or the “reordering and recontextualizing of objects to communicate fresh meanings” (Clark et al., 1975, p. 53). However, in most cases, brides tried to maintain an equal balance of traditions across cultures.

Others understood the symbolism of creating a balanced wedding ritual, but also were concerned with the practical. Katrina is a biracial marrying a biracial: “I guess where I’ve run into the most difficulty is trying to figure out which traditions to incorporate...we’re trying to pick from and honor more than two cultures. We want to include, but we want the ceremony to flow, be cohesive and make sense” (July 6, 2001, weddingchannel.com). Often,
4.1.4.1. Personalization. While the ethic of the “lavish wedding” has dominated this ritual in recent years, couples often now have another goal in mind—creating a distinctive ceremony (Otnes and Pleck, in press). The cross-cultural wedding frees up couples to create ceremonies more to their own liking, because they are automatically in a situation where some traditions can be ignored and new ideas can be introduced. Lee’s comments reflect her intention to “do her own thing”: “My FH is Jewish from Argentina and I am Chinese from Singapore. We think that is really difficult to try to mix our two cultures together. We decided it would be easier to just take the elements from the two cultures that we think means something to us, and weave them into our ceremony and wedding. We know that some members of our family will be offended one way or another, because we didn’t do everything that is considered sacred in our respective traditions. We hear rumblings in the background. Hopefully, they will not erupt at the wedding! I guess our idea is honor the ideals that embody our background. Hopefully, they will not erupt at the wedding.”

4.1.4.2. Repeating or doubling ritual elements. Another way cross-cultural couples modified the wedding ritual was to simply include to sets of ritual artifacts and scripts from each culture. Such “doubling” procedures were most commonly observed in reference to language choice. Translation and multilingualism become important issues when family members and ritual audience do not share a language and there is one wedding. Because language use is a signal of what the couple values and is key to understanding the ritual scripts involved in the ceremony and reception, brides sometimes stressed over all the creation of bi- or trilingual verbal and written materials. “We are getting married next summer and we have a huge problem: Since we are an international couple our families speak different languages. How do we get them to connect? My parents speak very little English. His family’s side doesn’t speak my language at all. I need help!!!” (Sam, April 4, 2001, www.theknot.com). Responses to posts like Sam’s often relayed different ways of addressing the situation that recognized both symbolic and pragmatic issues. Iris replied to Sam with the following: “This is what we’re doing: My guy’s family is 100% Polish—we’re going to have the ceremony in English, with very detailed/translated programs for his family. We want to be sure that his grandma will understand what is going on this special day! Bear in mind, it is making our program a DISASTER—it is feeling like a book—but, you could have different programs for each language and alternate colors so that you can easily distinguish which is which? Just a thought...Good luck!” (April 4, 2001, www.theknot.com). Silla, an Argentinean with an Indian boyfriend, presents a similar dilemma, offering a tongue-in-cheek solution: “We communicate in English. I know that it will be ‘our day’ and the important thing is for us to understand everything what is said but also, I would like my family to be comfortable, especially my parents, which makes me want it in Spanish. What should I do? Say the vows in English and then translate them? Put a big screen in the church and add captions? Sometimes I just wish we all spoke one language...” (May 13, 2001, ultimatewedding.com).

The wedding dress is another artifact that is often doubled. Several Chinese brides discussed wearing a white Western wedding dress as well as the traditional red gown. WedLA writes how they will combine two Asian cultures, “I’m Korean and my fiancé is Chinese. We’ll be doing a formal outdoor wedding, but having a Chinese/Korean banquet the next night. I’ll wear both a Korean and a Chinese dress. Should be fun” (June 27, 2001, weddingchannel.com). Music also allows couples to capitalize on both local cultures. Beyond bilingual disc jockeys, some brides select multiple bands and others go for combinations, like Carlotta who writes, “I’m 100% Italian, of course I’m having an Italian wedding—I’m having an Italian band (also a DJ for the Americans) we do not want anybody to be disappointed” (May 12, 2001, weddingchannel.com).

Finally, some brides-to-be, especially those from upper-middle class families, end up creating two entirely separate ritual ceremonies, in essence doubling everything (inter-
view, E. Parker). This strategy often occurs due to pressure and influence from family and other important ritual audience members and sometimes also because of religious or geographic differences. In essence, with this strategy each family is able to attend a wedding in their own culture. However, for the bride-to-be, the strategy can involve compromise. The sacredness of the special day (and artifacts) may be diminished due to the doubling. One woman wondered “which anniversary to celebrate?” and another referred to the wedding in “her hometown” as “her real wedding day.” In addition, creating two ceremonies also added to the bride-to-be’s stress due to additional and long-distance planning and extra expenses.

5. Conclusions

This research examined the role of virtual wedding communities in helping cross-cultural brides-to-be cope with cross-cultural ambivalence in their wedding planning. An analysis of messages posted across three wedding websites demonstrated the emotional support and the consumption, sharing, and cultural advice offered by “virtual” friends and pseudo-planners, rather than mothers, relatives, real-life friends, or wedding planners. Undoubtedly, the commonality created and reinforced through story-telling and common experiences allowed these brides-to-be to connect with one another and develop trust. Cross-cultural ambivalence and conflicts emerged as brides attempted to locate ritual artifacts, combine ritual audiences, and create and modify ritual elements into one ceremony. Message board participants offered information, support, and advice in an area where there are no rules or scripts to follow. No etiquette books have been written and no two cultures are alike. Many brides-to-be from these boards learned how to create either a “hybrid” or carefully balanced ritual to please ritual audience members and communicate cultural identity. Issues related to language, music, and dress and the resultant negotiation and compromises were illuminated. Emphasis was sometimes placed on honoring both families, even to the extent of brides holding two ceremonies. Although many of the coping mechanisms that brides used were also found among a study of brides and grooms with subcultural differences (Otnes et al., 1997), cross-cultural brides exhibited a wider repertoire of coping mechanisms, no doubt because their task of ritual creation was more complex.

Extending previous research in consumer behavior, we identify a special type of cultural ambivalence specifically related to individuals experiencing cross-cultural value or norm conflicts. These conflicts, like same-culture conflicts, often result in mixed emotions and stress. However, cross-cultural ambivalence may be heightened due to increased pressure from acculturation and to a greater propensity for misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Past research has demonstrated cross-cultural differences with respect to coping with stress (Taft, 1986) and with the acceptance of cognitive or emotional inconsistency or the ability to live with multiple, conflicting emotions and values (Triandis, 1995). Thus, how individuals experience ambivalence and resolve it very likely depends upon culture. Future research should seek to delineate the construct of cross-cultural ambivalence and its antecedents and consequences. Indeed, cross-cultural ambivalence is likely to be relevant to other consumer contexts related to globalized products, brands, and communications. With more and more people moving cross-culturally, notions of bicultural identity, acculturation, and consumption become important factors in determining buyer behavior (e.g., Penaloza and Gilly, 1999) and advertising persuasion (e.g., Holland and Gentry, 1997). To what extent do these mobile “globalized” consumers hold onto their traditional cultural values and attitudes—and how do they adjust to the values of their new culture? In addition, factors related to positive or negative attitudes toward national cultures and the country-of-origin of products may cause cross-cultural ambivalence to occur. Marketers would be advised to understand the factors that lead to feelings of cross-cultural ambivalence and the processes involved in their resolution.

Future research might also examine the growing inclusion of symbolic ethnicity (including signs or symbols from one’s cultural heritage) in weddings among second- and third-generation immigrants. Some discussions on message boards involved these ideas with interesting intergenerational conflicts, such as those where children of immigrants wanted to reintroduce ethnic traditions that had died out in the community. Additional methods could examine the wedding planning process more intimately. Questions posed directly to brides (and grooms) regarding negotiation among family and the couple might yield important insights. Observations made at cross-cultural weddings might also offer knowledge of ritual audience.

Because the three English-language commercial websites were all created by American commercial vendors, they offer only a glimpse inside the processes of cross-cultural wedding planning and findings may not be generalizable. Although brides wrote from more than 16 different national cultures, most of them were from North/South America or Western Europe. In addition, they all had access to computer/Internet and were therefore not representative of brides worldwide. Still, the demographics seemed to mirror those of most cross-cultural couples (e.g., well-educated, middle class; Blau, 1977; Whyte, 1990). Many participants admitted the wedding websites originating in their own cultures were not as sophisticated as American versions. We hope this study will encourage further exploration of cross-cultural ambivalence, in ritual context and beyond.

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