

**Consumerism and Femininity: Women and Consumer Culture in
Contemporary Hollywood Feature Films**

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Abstract

Since its birth in the eighteenth century, consumer culture has been growing and expanding across the world. It is undeniable that consumer culture has been exerting significant impacts on human life in various ways, in which women are noticed to be more vulnerable to its effects and have closer and more complicated relationships with this thriving culture. This thesis aims at examining how contemporary Hollywood cinema depicts the image of women emerging in consumer culture – the connection between women’s values, attitudes and behaviours and the world of consumerism. By analysing these two Hollywood films: *Bride Wars* (Winick, 2009) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009), the researcher focuses on providing the answer to the question: *How are women in relation to consumer culture represented in contemporary Hollywood feature films?* The research is conducted based on post-structuralist textual analysis. The films under scrutiny are treated as meaningful texts from which fruitful parts are examined to produce answers to the research question. This thesis is expected to bring interesting viewpoints into the studies of films and cultures, and hopefully contribute a humble part to the vast knowledge of the research field.

Keywords: Hollywood film, consumerism, consumer culture, femininity

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1. Introduction

1.1. Consumer culture

The twentieth and twenty-first century has been witnessing a remarkable, enormous, and continuous rise of the consumer culture and the social-cultural phenomena that follow. Human societies, regardless of nationality and socioeconomic status, are actively moving in this culture and significantly influenced by it to some certain extents.

What is consumer culture? This thesis will begin with a list made by Celia Lury (2011) in her book titled *Consumer Culture* in an attempt to give the reader the first fascinating insight into the booming consumer culture – its characteristics and symptoms that manifest themselves in the real-life aspects of human societies, perceived through observation.

Lury (2011, pp. 1-5), then, discussed the fact that there has never been in the history a large scale of products to be produced as such in the present time. The number of goods in the market keeps increasing and has multiplied after a few decades, while the types of goods are getting more and more diverse. Nowadays, all parts of a human and his or her life are commercialized and made available in the market. What used to be state or public exclusive can now be found plenty in the market in various shapes and sizes to choose from, provided and consumed at certain prices.

During this course of time, there is a rapid increase in the forms of goods and service display, exchange and purchase. Traditional market is no longer the only place of consuming where people find and buy products. A great diversity of modern markets has been introduced to meet new consuming demands of people.

Besides the rise of online markets, tangible markets are also soaring in size, scale, number and coverage. More land has been used for the purpose of purchase and consumption. While shopping malls and recreational areas are being built in a greater number and size, “third spaces” (p. 3) that provide consumers with an increasing variety of goods and services are thriving in the modern world. In this context, shopping is no longer only a job; it has now become a leisure activity, and not only any mundane one, but one of the most popular leisure activities in the recent time that contributes enormously to national economic growth.

Lury mentioned the emergence of the credit card that has changed consumer behaviours and the play rules of consumption. Since people are now encouraged to borrow money for purchases, potential consuming ability tends to be liberated, with which consuming speed, scale and frequency are enabled to multiply. Apart from that, the rise of consumption can be reflected through “the rise of brands” (p. 3), in which brands are growing excessively not only in number but also in their profound influences internationally. This rise can also be acknowledged through “the pervasiveness of advertising” (p. 3) and “the growing importance of packaging and promotion” (p. 4). People are treated as potential customers who are resolutely targeted whenever and wherever possible and carefully taken care of in every aspect of life.

In her list, Lury showed that one of many inventions that represent the era of mass production and consumption is barcode. The use of the barcode to “monitor and manage the sales of products” (p. 4) has recorded and proved how incredible the speed and amount of consumption are. Besides inventions, new crimes and illnesses are being born in the age of consumption. Newfound crimes and illnesses keep emerging along with new forms of consumption and have been severely affecting social security and well-being.

With a wide variety of products available and fiercely targeted to potential consumers, it is impossible not to feel overwhelmed and incredibly hard to make decision. In this context, personal style and self-defining through fashion are celebrated. People are now enjoying consumption as a favourite and effective way of introducing one’s identity.

It is undeniable that consumer culture has been making its appearance in various different forms, existing in diverse aspects of human societies, and exerting great impacts on our everyday life. It is associated with the considerable changes in the way the world operates; it offers the fertile and favourable environment for the emergence and development of certain old and new values, attitudes, and behaviours. Within consumer culture, new social vices and sicknesses of the time are born and proliferating, and how we live and perceive our lives have dramatically transformed. Although consumer culture can also positively affect and improve our lives, especially when it has a connection with modernization (Lerner, 1958), with industrial revolutions and social development, and the enhancement of life quality and human well-being, there are concerns about negative effects that consumer culture brings to

our societies. Leiss (1976) raised a concern about the alienation found in consumer culture when material satisfaction replaced familial bonds and other social relationships and interests.

Bauman (1990) also concerned about the relationships between individuals and their communities and societies when noticing a rise of individualism found in consumer culture. Also, the issue of personal identity being regarded in tight association with consuming behaviours was brought into the discussion.

The relationship between consumption and identity has been widely noticed and discussed. In consumer culture, it seems that material values are attached to personal values; personal identities are introduced by the consumption ones make (Dittmar, 1992). In other words, it is believed that what we use are, or make, who we are; what we consume represent ourselves.

This feature of the contemporary consumer culture can be referred to as “the practice of reflexivity”, happening for the fact that “consumer culture provides the individual with resources to inform his or her choice and enhance his or her identity” (Lury, 2011, p. 28). It is this feature that contributes to the notion that “consumer culture is a type of *material culture*, that is, *a culture of the use or appropriation of objects or things*” (p. 9, original emphasis).

It is noteworthy that consumer culture can involve all people from different background. Lury (2011) argued that, although there exists apparent disparities among people from different groups of economic status in the practice of consuming

goods and services, “the relationships between economic wealth and participation in material culture are highly complex”, which suggests that the judgements should be made carefully and comprehensively (p. 12). Despite the fact that “20 per cent of the world’s population – those residing in the rich nations – account for over 80 per cent of total consumer spending,” it cannot be concluded that the poor are excluded from the consumer culture, or even that their wants, wills and actual uses of things, whether commercially exchanges or not, are reduced or restricted (p. 12). This is because not all consumption is made of purchases; and to consume does not mean to spend (p. 12). What is more, the inequality in consumption does not only act as a hindrance but also an impetus that encourages the relatively poor to improve their resources, and to practice, still, social emulation (Bauman, 1990; Gilroy, 2010).

In short, while poverty restricts the possibility of participating in the consumption of commodities, it does not necessarily prevent – indeed, it may incite – participation in consumer culture. (Lury, 2011, p. 12)

When discussing the impacts that “the new consumer demand which accompanied the Industrial Revolution” (p. 24) put on cultural change, Colin Campbell (1989) listed five major issues. First, Campbell argued that “the consumer revolution” was associated with manifold cultural “developments” and “innovations” (p. 26). One of these was, as Plumb (1982) pointed out, the birth or the prevalence of recreation activities as an important part of a revolution in the leisure industry. Together with activities that were born or transformed during this period, activities that used to be restricted or regarded as the privilege of the rich were opened in the market for a wider range of audience; the taste and demand of the middle classes started to receive more attention and gradually became “the dominant new market”

(Plumb, 1982; Campbell, 1987, p. 26). Furthermore, not only in recreation, in other market fields, the overall demand of “the lower classes” expanded and was focused to satisfy (Campbell, 1989, p. 25). This period witnessed a shift in the scale of social demand, from the heavy dominance of the rich to the rise of the middle classes. What is more, the new market opened up with not only the middle classes but also “non-essential” products (Thirsk, 1978; Campbell, 1987). Instead of manufacturing and consuming only products that were considered “essentials” or “necessities”, people were provided with wider selections of diverse frivolous and fascinating items (Campbell, 1989, p. 25). Apart from the basic “needs”, therefore, people could then think of their “wants” and develop their desires. This period also witnessed the development of reading as a commercialized activity, especially in fiction genres (McKendrick et al., 1982; Campbell, 1987). During this time, a new rising demand for books, especially novels, as commercial products emerged and expanded rapidly and strongly, the publishing industry flourished and developed, while “author” started to be treated as a proper profession (Watt, 1957; Lowenthal & Fiske, 1957; Tompkins, 1961; Campbell, 1989). Since these novels were made mainly for the taste of women as the majority of the readership, this period saw “the rise of romantic love” – a “significant socio-cultural development” (Campbell, 1989, p. 26). This movement was critical because it was associated with a notable change in the public attitudes towards romantic love and in the social perspective on marriage consequently, in which love became “not only fashionable”, but, for the very first time, “a sufficient motive for marriage” (p. 27).

In short, the emergence of consumer culture has improved our lives to some extents. Not only does it create a new entertaining and fascinating world, but it also

allows more people to enter and enjoy that world. In a sense, it has opened up the society by breaking old consumer restrictions set between genders and classes. The commercial taste and demand of women and lower classes start to receive more and more attention from the industry. People are granted the accessibility to pleasures that used to be rare and restricted within men and higher classes.

To sum up, it is easy to see that consumer culture has now become a global culture. It is profoundly influencing the way societies work and the way people believe and behave. It is actively affecting the life of every individual. It is discreetly yet powerfully changing, shaping, and manipulating all consumers' minds, values, and attitudes. While consumer culture claims to make our life more convenient and enjoyable, and it is undeniably carrying on its back new inventions that improve our life in its way, it is also creating associated illnesses and crimes to spoil and mess up a world that is already laden with messes and chaos. Given all these facts and characteristics, concerns about consumer culture are understandable, and research on this topic is useful, practical and invaluable, and should be highly encouraged.

1.2. Consumption and gender

There are numerous ways to define consumption based on different perspectives, aspects and periods of time. Bocoock (1993) suggests a literal meaning of the term, in which consumption can be seen as “the use of commodities for the satisfaction of needs and desires” (p. 120). Campbell (1995) views consumption as a group of activities “involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (p. 102). As Boden (2003) comments, Campbell’s definition

shows an “emphasis upon the wide-ranging dynamics of consumption” (p. 4). Boden himself argues that:

Above all, consumption tells us about human relations. Relations with material objects, that is, between shoppers and the products they buy; relations between the individual and society, the consumer and the market; personal and cultural engagements with the imagination, the body and identity; and the relations of gender, age, class, and ‘race’. Consumption is itself an experience, one that is both ‘materialistic’ and ‘mentalistic’ in nature, and one that is shaped by what goods and services are available in the marketplace and how they are appropriated into existing social practices. It is, of course, a socially embedded and embodied phenomenon, put to use throughout centuries for the purposes of social emulation and imitation, as a means of social display and communication, and as a strategy in the power games of competing social groups. (p. 4)

The way of understanding consumption as “human relations” shows an essential, intimate and inextricable connection between consumption and everyday life. Consumption is, therefore, not only the relationship between humans and things, but rather extended to be an enormous web made of linkages connecting humans with humans, and with values, attitudes and beliefs that circulate around human societies.

Boden emphasizes the characteristic of “social emulation”, and argues that it has been the primary motivation for consumption. This argument is widely acknowledged. Many scientists and researchers take this to another extent when endorsing the notion that “the motive of social emulation” (Campbell, 1989, p. 19) was the underlying cause of the modern consumerism that accompanied the Industrial

Revolution. Harold Perkin (1969) claims that, “if consumer demand, then, was the key to the Industrial Revolution, social emulation was the key to consumer demand” (pp. 96-97). Following this idea, it is argued that, the flexible society of the eighteenth-century Britain that was open for “interchange between adjacent ranks” facilitated “social emulation” in which lower ranks imitated higher ranks; this process repeated and expanded until a “dramatic upsurge in demand” was seen (Perkin, 1969; McKendrick et al., 1982; Campbell, 1989, pp. 19-20). However, as McKendrick (1982) himself later notes, social emulation was not a newborn phenomenon of this time, but rather “human nature” (Veblen, 1924) that was especially stimulated in the eighteenth-century Britain by the development of advertising. However, the “manufacturers’ manipulation” over consumers, again, was by no means a new invention. McKendrick, therefore, comes to an important finding that, the key phenomenon that enabled the consumer revolution is the appearance of “modern fashion” in the 1700s, featured by “the very rapid pace of change which occurs in shape, material and style” (Campbell, p. 22). Instead of taking decades or “generations” for a change, “modifications” of costumes started to speed up to the unit of years, even every year (p. 22). Apparently, only with fashion arising as a “medium”, consumers’ emulation can be stimulated and producers’ manipulation supported to boost market dynamics to the level of a consumer revolution (p. 22).

If the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of modern consumerism, the following nineteenth century is argued to mark the special relationship between consumption and women. Loeb (1994) argues that, it was from the Victorian era that consumption was regarded as a women’s task, part and parcel of their domestic work as housewives. During this period, being a woman was understood in the same way as

being a housewife; and as a housewife – a “homemaker” – a woman consumed to maintain the well-being of her family and to satisfy the needs and wants of all family members. Therefore, “the identities of ‘woman’, ‘housewife’ and ‘consumer’ were, effectively, one and the same” (Boden, 2003, p. 9). What is more, this period of time saw aggressive advertising campaigns targeting women which educated them to be good consumers and better, more appropriate versions of themselves by adopting and pursuing “commercially defined femininity” (p. 9). Victorian women becoming “the object of advertising texts” is said to be the consequence of “freer leisure time and an increased propensity to consume” arising throughout this period (p. 9). It was this time when, together with “a great explosion in advertisements for the latest fashions” and beauty products, women began to be taught to spend more on themselves and invest more in their beauty. They learnt to take care of their bodies to meet the newborn standards, and to create appearances that satisfy the gaze of others (Loeb, 1994; Boden, 2003).

Since the nineteenth century, as the advertising industry has been evolving rapidly, it is said that advertisements are not persuading women to only buy products but also adopt feminine ideologies (Winship, 1981; Boden, 2003). In his study, Winship (1981) claims that women are manipulated into purchasing and consuming their own identities as being feminine, instead of purchasing simply beauty products or household devices.

The “dichotomization of the significations of gender” manifests itself in various aspects of consumer culture (Boden, 2003, p. 9). Firat (1994) argues that the process of production represents “the masculine, public sphere”, while that of

consumption embodies “the feminine, private sphere” (as cited in Boden, 2003, p. 9). Discussing the contrasting characteristics of the opposite genders in association with consumption, Boden (2003) argues that:

Furthermore, as part of this dichotomization of the significations of gender, women were characterized as passive, emotional subjects (as opposed to their counterparts – the active, rational male actor) within whom desire can be induced and control can be exercised over perception, behaviour and, ultimately, over their motivations to consume. (p. 9)

Colin Campbell (1997), in his research on consumption and gender, has found out considerable differences between the attitudes and behaviours of men and women towards shopping. The dichotomies can be easily noticed from the results as follow:

Essentially the results suggest that women were much more likely to express positive attitudes toward shopping than were men, and correspondingly that men were far more likely to express negative attitudes toward shopping than women. What is more, women were far more likely to express a strong positive attitude – that is, to say that they ‘loved’ shopping rather than that they merely ‘liked’ it. Correspondingly, men were far more likely to express a strong negative attitude – that is, to say that they ‘hated’ it rather than merely ‘disliked’ it. In addition, women were more prone to express positive attitudes toward a range of different kinds of shopping, whilst when males expressed a positive attitude it was more likely to be toward a very product-specific form of shopping (for example, shopping for records, computers or electrical goods). Finally, women were also much more likely than men to express a preference for shopping above other forms of leisure-time activity, such as watching a film or eating in a restaurant. (Campbell, 1997, p. 167)

Campbell interprets the research findings to see that men incline to feel uncomfortable with shopping and concerned about their masculinity that appears to be vulnerable when being put in relation with this activity. Men tend to be concerned about their “sexual identity” being misconstrued if they get caught while enjoying shopping or stating a fondness for it. Therefore, men try to either avoid shopping completely by replacing it with discreet alternatives or “delegating” it to someone else, i.e. their female kin or partner, or limit any unnecessary engagement with shopping as possible, i.e. restrict the frequency, duration and involvement. This can be explained by the “close identification of shopping” with women which makes it socially perceived as a “female” or “feminine” activity. This identification, according to Campbell, comes to women’s awareness and embeds in their perception since early years of age. As little children, by observing and learning from their mothers and social environments, girls “acquire” their gender identity in which “shopping is basically part and parcel of the activities which help to define the female role” (p. 167). During this learning process, girls develop a sense that shopping is an essential gender characteristic that has obtained an inextricable connection with being a “wife and mother”, and that distinguishes men and women (p. 167).

Taking these gender dichotomies further, Campbell suggests that there exists contrasting “male and female ideologies of shopping”, in which the same activity is viewed differently by the opposite genders. These differences in the attitudes of men towards shopping compared to those of women are argued to ease the pressure of losing masculinity when men actually do shopping and make shopping more acceptable and less threatening for their identities. Accordingly, while men tend to

take shopping as a job that needs to be done to fulfill a “need”, women do shopping not only for the purchases that satisfy “needs”, “wants” and “desires”, but also for the process of shopping itself as a “recreational” activity. Unlike men who shop under a “work frame” that values “rationality” and “efficiency”, women shop under a “leisure frame” that values “pleasure” and “aesthetic and expressive gratification”. This leads to the tendency that men are quick at shopping and often finish the “job” with actual, material results, while women spend hours “browsing” and may finish the “trip” with only spiritual results (pp. 169-171). It has to be confirmed that women do shop for their “needs” and for the purchased products, but they take shopping to another extent by embracing the “intrinsic value in the activity itself”. For women, the shopping experience as a whole is as worth as the commodities, and is sometimes even valued higher since it is the fundamental motivation for shopping and able to stand alone without the presence of any actual purchases. Campbell addresses these gender differences “the instrumental versus expressive dichotomy” (p. 169).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this contrast is formulated in terms of the instrumental versus expressive dichotomy, with men inclined to see shopping as a purely purchase-driven activity related to the satisfaction of need, whilst women are more likely to view it as a pleasure-seeking activity related to the gratification of wants or desires. (Campbell, 1997, p. 169)

Celia Lury (2011) emphasizes the arguably differences and disparities between the roles of men and women, as well as the ironic paradoxes related to gender and consumption that occur within consumer culture. Women are considered to be “the instruments” rather than “the chief agents of consumer culture” regardless of all the tight connections that women have been having with this culture throughout

its history and development (pp. 122-123). This can be explained by the long-term relationship between women and “family economy”, in which most women’s purchases are associated with the entire household’s needs and demands; and the finances are usually not, or not only, theirs to take control or decision on what and how to consume. Also, women are argued to be “subordinated to men” in consumer culture since “their use of commodities is not conducted for themselves, but for others” (p. 127). This is not only about household commodities and the “housework” that women take reluctantly as a job to take care of a social unit, but also about “the work of femininity” that women take voluntarily to satisfy the opposite gender (p. 127).

Berger suggests that this unequal relationship – between man as subject and women as object or possession of his gaze – is so deeply embedded in our culture ... that it is possible to talk of a *male gaze*. ... [This] means that women are conventionally depicted in quite different ways from men ... because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the female is designed to flatter him. Furthermore, so widespread is the process of objectification that men have come to be defined in terms of their actions, while women are judged in terms of their appearance. This has implications for the gendering of subjectivity. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. (Berger, 1972, as cited in Lury, 2011, p. 128)

In the contemporary consumer culture, women are placed under “manipulation” but made to believe that they are enjoying “liberation” and “emancipation” (Lury, 2011, p. 123). First, the immaculate and sexy beauty women pursue is actually created by men – the “producers” – and for men – the “spectator”,

to serve “the gaze of men”. While women believe that they are invested in themselves, for themselves and by themselves, the fundamental cause, purpose and motivation stay within the benefits of men. Second, the “creation” of “individuality” and the “expression” of “own unique sense of self” that are encouraged by the advertisements, the magazines and the media are actually consumer traps. Women believe that they can choose their identities, but, in fact, they are just given “mass-produced” “options” that are decided by the “producers”. Third, it is thought to be strong and independent when women have the right to choose the images women want to express and work hard and skillfully on it; however, it is actually not a gain but a loss when women lose or overlook their born identity and natural beauty. It seems that while pursuing society-made, mass-produced images, women happen to forget to love, respect and treasure their own natural body and beauty. What is more, women are arguably “constructed as consumers of themselves as possessions or commodities” (Winship, 1983, cited in Lury, 2011, p. 126). Many researchers share the same argument that women are consuming themselves, or their own images, as a whole; therefore, women are both “objects” and “subjects” of consumption (Berger, 1972; Myers, 1986; Lury, 2011, p. 126). Furthermore, it is thought that women being released from traditional social roles and taking care of their own needs and beauty is part of their emancipation; however, it is actually just a switch from one confinement to another. As Ros Gill (2009) argues, “instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood, it is now possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key source of identity” (p. 97).

It is ironic that while shopping has become a “worthy and significant” activity and women as constituting the majority of shopping doers are intensively taken care

of by the market and businesses, the image of women shopping are, on the contrary, defined as “irrational, fanciful and frivolous” (Lury, 2011, p. 123). Women, in relation with shopping, are considered as “out of control” and need to be controlled by the rational opposite gender. While shopping can be seen as “an alternative form of liberation”, women seem to be happily willing to be regarded as irrational creatures who need education and instruction in doing their jobs (p. 123).

To sum up, as Boden (2003) claims, “consumption is, of course, heavily implicated in the construction of gender identity” (p. 8). Furthermore, the identity of consumption has long been socially made in a special association with the identity of women. Consumption is not only considered as women’s speciality but also regarded in significantly different ways between men and women in the sense that it means much more for the latter – apart from being an essential job, a domestic work, it can be a hobby, a pleasurable activity that fulfills social and emotional needs (Boden, 2003; Campbell, 1997). During the development of consumer culture, women have always been aggressively targeted by advertising and the media, manipulated into consuming commodities, especially “gender products” and adopting specific beliefs and attitudes towards feminine beauty (Boden, 2003; Loeb; 1994; Lury, 2011; Winship, 1981). It is argued that even though women are made to believe that they are powerful, independent subjects of consumption and free to choose their identities, they are, in fact, only manipulated objects of consumption and given artificial, ready-made identities under the hand of “male” producers and to satisfy “male gaze” (Berger, 1972; Lury, 2011). It is apparent that “men and women are very differently positioned in relation to consumer culture” (Lury, 2011, p. 133), and the relationship between women and consumption is inextricable. It is, indeed, a complicated yet

intriguing story on which further studies are relentlessly required. Research taken on this topic is not only necessary but also fascinating to be conducted and followed.

1.3. Film-based research and Hollywood films

In *Using Film as a Source*, Sian Barber (2015) affirms the capability of film in providing “a fascinating insight” into the reality of human society (p. 1). It is said that “film is a crucial means for understanding the recent past” (p. 1). Film can act as windows through which many aspects of life can be observed and revealed. Barber gives the reader a brief summary of the abilities of film as a medium, through which the possible role of film as valuable source for research is effectively confirmed.

Barber argues that a film can show not only what happens within the film itself, but also what is going on around the existence of the film. First of all, how the film is made and consumed reveal the fashions and expectations of the contemporary society that the film exists. The born of a film represents the values, attitudes and beliefs of not only its audience but also its creators, i.e. the director, the scriptwriter, the producer and the financier. A film shows complex relationships within the social and cultural environment that contains the film. These relationships do not stay only within the film either as a subject or object in the association with its creators and its audience, but also in the extended spheres where social and cultural phenomena arise as a result of or in relation with the release of the film. These related phenomena could be, for instance, the public veneration given to the film stars, the new aesthetic standards in fashion, the social and cultural trends and activities that are born together with the film (p. 1).

William Hughes (1976) and Paul Smith (1976) both agree on the multilateral reflection film makes on the minds of the filmmakers, the attitudes of the viewers, the values of the societies, and the interrelationship between these spheres. William Hughes suggests that “the public’s choice at the box office, provides a crude measure of the accuracy of the filmmaker’s hypothesis about popular values” (p. 71), while Paul Smith argues that “film records the outlook, intentions and capabilities of those who made it; it illustrates in some way the character of the society in which it was produced and for which it was designed” (p. 7).

Sharing the same opinion on the relationship between film and reality and the reflective function of film, Michael Paris (2009) states that:

Since the birth of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century, filmmakers have been recording and interpreting the world around them, reflecting the social and political realities of the society in which they worked. ... Films, therefore, are a powerful window on the past – a source that often allows us not only to see the actual event, or its restaging, but also to understand how the society that produced the film wanted its audience to respond. (p. 129)

As texts, films are fruitful materials for research into how humans make sense of the world, and how human societies are made sense of through artefacts – human products. Although background questions, prudent verification and thoroughly interrogation are always needed when making any interpretations and judgements of film as research material, the value and position of film in research is undeniably significant.

Hollywood cinema has been taking a dominant position in the world cinema throughout the last century. Its extensive coverage, widespread popularity and powerful influence all over the world are undeniable. Although Hollywood has long been perceived as the most quintessential and influential American cultural institution, it does not, in fact, completely belong to American culture or represent American values as people might believe (Richardson, 2010). To start with, Hollywood was “founded and sustained by immigrant Jews” from “Eastern Europe”, who “exiled themselves” later from Eastern America to California but still suffered from discrimination (p. 3). It was at first an “immigrant community” that offered a place of sanctuary for “foreigners” in America, where they expressed their thoughts and presented their ideals (pp. 3-4). Jill Robinson once stated that the internationally famous “American Dream” was just a Hollywood’s invention in the beginning (as cited in Gabler, 1988, p. 1), and the American society shown in Hollywood films are not truly and fully the American reality but rather products of Hollywood’s creativity. During its development, Hollywood has always been appealing to talents from all over the world to bring their values and participate in its filmmaking. Many directors, actors and actresses who are working for Hollywood come from Western countries and other parts of the universe along with their own cultures and together create multicultural products. Therefore, Hollywood films represent various pictures of diverse values, attitudes and beliefs through numerous lenses. Furthermore, Hollywood products are made to fit global tastes, for globally commercial purpose. They are supposed to be international products which welcome viewers from different cultures, enable them to empathy and enjoy regardless of their origins. Hollywood, then, is not a typical representative of how American people make sense of the world, but rather a little reflection of contemporary human societies, recreated through

aesthetic techniques and technical methods. Hollywood cinema, therefore, should be considered as world cinema.

Together with the rise of American power and the widespread of American culture, Hollywood cinema has reached far beyond borders. It is apparent that Hollywood films are continuously making cultural impacts globally and connecting different parts of the world. When people from different cultures come to share similar experiences, a world culture start to be formed. This can be seen as an interactive relationship in which Hollywood culture and the world culture are both affecting each other and working together to move closer. It can be said that Hollywood cinema and the world reality are getting better at reflecting each other.

Using Hollywood films as research materials to examine how they tell about contemporary human societies is possible and achievable. Hollywood films do not only tell the stories of America and its people specifically but open up to a broader sense. Research on Hollywood films, therefore, should not be considered within the limit of American culture as a whole and in general.

The introduction has hopefully given the reader an overview picture behind this research. By examining *Bride Wars* (Winick, 2009) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009), this thesis aims at finding the answer to the sole question:

How are women in relation to consumer culture represented in contemporary Hollywood feature films?

2. Methodology

2.1. A qualitative research of visual artefacts

This study will be conducted under qualitative research methods. As the first insight into this branch of research, in his book of *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, David Silverman (2014) gave the reader a clear and beginner-friendly definition and basic characteristics of qualitative research. Accordingly, qualitative research, in comparison with its quantitative counterpart, is said to deploy “words” and “theoretically based concepts”, through “observation and/or recording,” as well as prior studies or available materials, to produce descriptions and interpretations of social and cultural phenomena. This group of methods is applied by researchers in an attempt to find out “meanings” and “understandings” of the world in different contexts and lenses. Furthermore, qualitative research, unlike its counterpart that heavily focuses on numbers, “often begins with a single case or a few individuals,” and “hypotheses are often generated from the analysis rather than stated at the outset.” Also, it is accepted that there are countless possible ways to conduct a qualitative research, and it is not necessary that they are compatible with one another, or produce parallel or similar findings. (pp. 4-7)

Michael Quinn Patton (2015) claimed that qualitative research “inquires into, documents, and interprets the meaning-making process,” and it is “personal” (p. 3). This is because research inquiries vary significantly at all stages and depend deeply on each researcher individually. To be specific, researchers from different backgrounds have different concerns that raise different research problems, different

approaches that produce different research methodology, and different interpretations that result in different findings (p. 3).

The “personal” and “statistics-free” characteristics of qualitative research are reconfirmed in *Exploring Research* by Neil J. Salkind (2017), in which it is defined as “social or behavioural science research that explores the processes that underlie human behaviour using such exploratory techniques as interviews, surveys, case studies, and other relatively personal techniques” (p. 172).

As listed in *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (Silverman, 2014), there are basically five main groups of method or data gathering under qualitative research, which are interviews, focus groups, ethnography, documents, naturally occurring talk, and visual images. Having a closer look at the last method group on the list, Silverman endorses Emmison’s (2011) argument when classifying visual data into two groups, which are artefacts and the real-life data that is noticed and perceived through the eye of people. Accordingly, films belong to the former group.

Visual research is not new; it is among the most ancient forms of understanding. Every scientific discipline was built on a core of naturalistic visual inquiry, from stone megaliths revealing the seasons when a sunbeam struck a stone, through Galileo’s observation of the phases of the moons of Jupiter, to the central Western figure of Descartes. ... Humans rely on sight to make sense of the material world and to predict future events based on current observations. (Margolis & Zunjarwad, 2018, p. 600)

It is undeniable that visual research has long been contributing vastly to human knowledge and development. People learn about the universe and about themselves through observations. However, the history of image-based research as an independent, systematic branch of science is recorded not so long ago. “Only recently has visual research been demarked as a set of methods distinguished from the fundamental observations of science” (Margolis & Zunjarwad, 2018, p. 600).

Despite the young age, it is noteworthy that the role of visual artefacts in scientific research has been much improved in the past decades (Silverman, 2014, p. 356). The use of cultural and commercial products such as magazines and films as invaluable research materials that reflect social issues and human behaviours has received acknowledgement and widespread support from scholars. Silverman (2014) gives examples of “Denzin (1991, 1995) who argues that we can understand and express ourselves and our social settings through Hollywood films” (p. 356).

2.2. Post-structuralist textual analysis

A text can be simply defined as “something that we make meaning from” (McKee, 2003, p. 4). Accordingly, “whenever we produce an interpretation of something’s meaning – a book, television programme, film, magazine, T-shirt or kilt, piece of furniture or ornament – we treat it as a text” (p. 4). Based on this definition, the concept of “text” is understood in a much broader sense than just written or printed documents that are presented in words. Reading a text, therefore, does not only refer to the act of taking in words on paper or electronic materials such as books, comics, journals, newspapers or magazines, but rather suggests an effort of interpreting “the

various elements of culture” in order to examine how things can tell about cultures and to see how people from different cultures can “make sense of the world” (p. 12).

Alan McKee (2003) gave a clear introduction into the analysis of texts, especially one form of it that tightly connects with the reader (or the “consumer” as in Alan’s words, particularly when discussing commercial products), which assists researchers in looking into how the reader interacts with and makes sense of the text and the world around them. As McKee (2003) put it:

Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology – a data-gathering process – for those researchers who want to understand the way in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. ... When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text. (p. 1)

According to Alan McKee, interpreting texts is also interpreting reality, in which we attempt to see how the author, the reader, and the researcher make sense of the world around them. Interpreting a text is not a story of only the text itself, since how it is born and read depends on the contexts of the creator, the reader, and the reading. Also, if being understood in a narrower sense, in which texts refer to products of human beings, texts – in this situation – are products of human society, and consequently tell stories of human society.

Alan McKee (2003) mentioned three basic or common ways of approaches to cultural differences applied in textual analysis, which are realism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. Among those, post-structuralism, in McKee's opinion, is the most logical way of approaching cultural texts and "sense-making practices", and generally perceiving the world, since it acknowledges the existence of differences and accepts the equality of differences. "In a sense, people from different cultures experience reality differently" (p. 9). It seems not sensible to make judgements on the correctness or accuracy of how peoples see reality or truth, or that this "sense-making practice" is privileged while the others are unacceptable. A post-structuralist perspective, in this flow, supports the belief that "different ways of thinking about the world might be equally valid" (p. 52).

Post-structuralist textual analysis is a research methodology that attempts to examine cultural texts in order to understand the variety of different forms of representation, "the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal" (McKee, 2003, p. 17). It is noteworthy that post-structuralist textual analysis, unlike other methodologies in Literature and Film Studies, does not attempt to study a text as a whole and single existence – a complete form of a work of art that stands alone and expresses itself. This methodology, therefore, does not seek to analyse all details and characteristics contained within a text under a close reading to bring out the values lurking behind layers of unconscious or intentional formation, placement and arrangement (McKee, 2003).

What we don't do in this kind of post-structuralist textual analysis is try to, or claim to, study 'the text in itself', looking at all of its elements as a self-contained work of art. This is another point where this form of textual analysis differs from the kind

employed in traditional English Literature or Film Studies. Those approaches to the analysis of texts want to understand the texts they study as perfectly formed works of art - therefore, every element of them should be studied, because it will all add to the overall understanding ('appreciation') of the text. It's not acceptable just to pick out the bits that interest you and talk about them. (p. 74)

Post-structuralist textual analysis, instead, seeks for answers to cultural questions through specialized selection and examination of important aspects, elements, or features of the text under scrutiny. Since the focus is not on drawing from the text the knowledge of the text itself or the insight into every intention of the text's creator, by selectively analysing potential elements found in cultural texts, answers to specific research questions can be found without taking the research to an unnecessary extent.

Post-structuralist textual analysis is more interested in trying to recover information about practices of sense-making in culture more generally so there is no need to study every element of every text for every question. Rather, you need to pick out the bits of the text that, based on your knowledge of the culture within which it's circulated, appear to you to be relevant to the question you're studying. (p. 75)

Post-structuralist textual analysis has been widely deployed in cultural and film-related research because it proves to be an invaluable methodology for researchers in interpreting cultural texts and seeking for clues of "human sense-making" and "representations of the world" (McKee, 2003). Films, as artefacts made by humans and, therefore, reflecting or affecting human sense-making, together with social consciousness and movement, are treated as fruitful texts under post-

structuralist textual analysis. This methodology allows researchers to freely look at texts, i.e. films in this discussion, from various angles, and examine them through numerous lenses. Different ways of shedding light into prisms give different outcomes of light colours. Different researches and researchers from different backgrounds and cultures, with different interests and preferences are likely to draw different results from the same texts. The nature of post-structuralist textual analysis allows and accepts the diversity of research results, given reasonable and sensible justification.

This research will approach cultural problems under post-structuralist textual analysis. To be more specific, two popular Hollywood films released in the same year will be selectively analysed and specialized examined in search of the representation of women in the context of consumerism. Both revolving around women and consumerism, two films tell two separate stories and reflect the world from different angles and under different lenses. The research will not attempt to sneak into the minds of the creators, judge the correctness of the representations, or claim which of the films reflect the reality more closely and accurately. The research, instead, will seek to produce possible interpretations of the cultural texts that can serve to answer the research question, in other words, making “educated guesses”, as Alan McKee (2003) put it, from reliable evidences under specific contexts and scientific methods.

2.3. Interpretation, representation, and justification

In order to make reliable interpretations of the chosen filmic texts, the research will be supported by several scientific methods. Semiotic analysis will be deployed to analyse

important elements of the texts, i.e. details that have highly symbolic values and are most relevant to the research question. Contextual analysis will also be used as the backbone of the research, which will position the studied elements into specific social framework and under specific cultural codes. Locating the research into specific historical and social contexts and associating it with recorded social trends and phenomena are necessary in order to make and justify the “educated guesses” – the rationality and reliability of scientific interpretations. The combination of semiotic and contextual analyses will enable and facilitate the process of reading the cultural texts and examining relevant representations of the world outside of the texts. This is logical because, as Alan McKee (2003) put it,

... semiotics ... recognizes that much of the likely interpretation of a text depends on contextual information such as genre, wider discourses in culture and ‘intertexts’ ... These contextual sense-making practices are called ‘codes’ in semiotics, and, as with post-structuralist textual analysis, researchers will have different degrees of knowledge about genres, other relevant texts, and wider cultural contexts. Or they may simply be analysing the text in order to answer slightly different questions. (p. 131)

2.3.1. Semiotic analysis

Being known as the “science of signs”, semiotics, which was first introduced in Linguistics, has later been applied in Film Study in order to examine significations of elements in filmic texts. As a study on filmic texts and representations, this thesis will deploy semiotics in an attempt to make sense of the texts, interpret underlying meanings, and find sensible representations of the world. This is possible because

films, as texts and therefore, as “semiotic beings” (Lehtonen, 2000), are “all representations” (p. 79) that tell the “experiences concerning the world” of human society, and how they “interpret the world” (p. 80).

There are several useful terms in semiotics that will be applied to some extent in this thesis to read the chosen texts, which are denotation, connotation, myth, code, syntagm and paradigm. Denotation is widely understood as the “literal”, “dictionary” meaning of a sign, while connotation, as Barthes defines, refers to “cultural meanings that are linked with signs as well as units that are broader in significance – such as metaphors or entire texts” (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 75). The highest level of signification, according to Barthes, is “myth”. Roland Barthes (1973) argued that “myth is a type of speech chosen by history” (p. 118). In other words, myth can be understood as “extended metaphors”, which reflects “experiences within a culture” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 185-186). Every film has several codes that orient specific meanings and convey specific messages of the film. These meanings and messages can be “systematically analysed” by the interrelated systems of syntagm and paradigm (Roth, 2014, p. 17). While syntagm examines texts under horizontal order, paradigm works with vertical relations of texts. In film semiotics, syntagmatic analysis works with elements, or shots, in relation with each other, unlike paradigmatic analysis that focuses on the replacement or substitution of an element, or a shot.

2.3.2. Contextual analysis

There is no text that stands alone and exists independently from other beings, and that has no connection with the world outside of it. Every text has and is all the time busy interacting with stories. The stories can come from behind of a text, i.e. how, where, and when it was made, who made it, in what condition or at what thought it was made, what it was made for, and so forth. The stories can also come from all other directions, beside and in front of the text, for example, how, where, and when it is read, who reads it, in what condition or at what thought it is read, and what it can evoke in different minds, reflect in different space, or convey in different time. These stories are countless and move relatively with the text along the time and around the space. These kinds of background knowledge are the contexts of a text, which bring the text to life and give it meanings.

Each text always has its context which surrounds and penetrates it both temporally and locally and links it with other texts, as well as with other human practices. As much as the meanings of linguistic signs depend on their position in relation to other signs, the meanings of texts are ultimately impossible to study detached from their contexts, since texts as *semiotic* beings do not exist without the readers, intertexts, situations and functions that at all times are connected to them. (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 110)

It is apparent that contexts are inseparable from texts, and different interpretations from different contexts of a text have a position in post-structuralist textual analysis. However, it still requires certain efforts into studying a text systematically, as well as special knowledge and skills in order to produce justifiable, quality interpretations of texts under research for scientific purposes. In *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), a Hollywood film directed by David Frankel, there is a scene

when Andy (Anne Hathaway), the film's protagonist, gives a scornful snort as she sees people having a nervous breakdown choosing between two belts whose colours are "so different", as they claim, but seem to be "exactly the same" through Andy's perception. Andy, then, is given an insightful lecture on the long, fascinating history of the "lumpy blue sweater" she is wearing and that she disregards. Andy is ignorant about the contexts behind and beside of the texts – her sweater, the belts, and all fashion items and the fashion industry in general, and is unaware of their meanings. She does not realize the existence of fruitful texts, unintentionally refuses to read them, and does not have enough knowledge to discuss them. This is why she fails to read them and cannot give justifiable interpretations of the texts. Andy is not, as Mikko Lehtonen (2000) put it, a "qualified reader".

Unlike Andy, this thesis, as a "qualified reader", attempts to examine the chosen texts in relation to the relevant contexts in order to learn insightful knowledge and produce well-founded, justifiable results. What is more, only by placing the texts in the contexts behind and around them, which is also the social and cultural background under research, their representations of the world of consumerism in which women are at the centre can be drawn.

3. Bride Wars

Bride Wars (2009) is a romantic comedy directed by Gary Winick, and distributed by 20th Century Fox – one of the Hollywood biggest entertainment corporations. The film tells a story of Liv (Kate Hudson) and Emma (Anne Hathaway) and their dream-wedding journey that is filled with happiness and excitement, as well as tensions and conflicts.

Liv and Emma have always been best friends since they were just little girls. They are so much different in many ways, from their appearances to their personalities, but they share the same dream of finding true love and having a perfect wedding at the Plaza. After 20 years since the girls' childhood when their wedding dream sparked, they get themselves in the real thrills of preparation for their own weddings. Liv and Emma take each other to the Plaza and meet the renowned wedding planner whom they have always been admiring and longing to see during all these 20 years. At first, the brides-to-be are full of delight and excitement when their wedding days can be filled in perfect slots and they both can be maid of honour in the other's wedding. Tensions and conflicts, however, begin when a misfortune comes with an unexpected incident – their booked wedding days are put on the same date accidentally, and there is no other date available in the next three years. As both of them are determined to celebrate their “big days” at the Plaza, especially in June, and want to have the other to share the happiest moments of their lives, one of them has to decide to change her wedding day and postpone the joy of dream coming true for three years. With a strong, domineering personality that always demands the best and leading position, Liv decides herself that Emma, as always regarded as more

considerate, will (have to) be the one to move the date. In fact, Emma is nearly giving up and voluntarily yielding to her friend until she discovers Liv's discreet action. When Emma finds out that Liv has already decided on her initiative to go ahead and take "their" date without consulting her, Emma feels betrayed and attacks Liv in return. The war breaks out between two brides-to-be, who are supposed to be best friends forever but have now turned swiftly into two furious tigers snarling and scrambling for territory. They both throw in the bridal war the most venomous weapons that not only injure each other but also hurt themselves in the end. The fight, on the other hand, appears to be an opportunity for the young women to learn and realize true love and values. In the most vulnerable time of their lives, Liv finds great support and understanding from Daniel, her fiancé, while Emma only finds herself alone in all the battles. They do literally fight, taking each other down in a vehement wrestling match, in front of all the wedding guests as a way to release their pent-up stress and frustration, open up to each other and resume their friendship at last. After the war, only one wedding remains and proceeds. Perhaps, Liv was right when saying that the wedding date, which is also her parents' anniversary, was 'meant to be.' In the end, true values stay, and false leave. What are the true values, however, in the age of consumption?

3.1. Cinderella girls – a newborn dream

Liv and Emma represent girls who are born and grow up in a materialistic world and the age of consumption. In that world, romanticism seems not to be the best opposite counterpart of materialism, and rationality does not stand against emotionality. These terms and characteristics are rather intertwined to create a fascinating hybrid

generation of consumers who are easily manipulated in the hand of consumer industries. As soon as the film begins, it brings the viewer to a completely feminine girl's world with gorgeous flowers interspersed with sparkling jewellery, i.e. diamond tiara, diamond bracelet, and most importantly diamond ring. In the girls' treasure box, their parents' heart necklace, old wedding photos and used objects are cherished together with their self-made invitation cards, new photos, big layered wedding cake and bride and groom dolls hand in hand to the future. In the world where romantic and materialistic values as well as old and new values converge, it is easy to notice that the fairy tale Prince and Princess are replaced by the real life groom and bride. To some extent, the groom and bride imagery has come to represent a reachable fairy tale, an achievable dream. When the dream of life changing, i.e. becoming a princess or marrying a prince, seems too far-fetch and unrealistic, having a "day changing" that enables girls to dress beautifully in the long, white gown becomes a reasonable and affordable replacement to experience the fantasy. The dream of a perfect wedding came to little Liv and Emma when they happened to witness a lavish wedding and got amazed and smitten with what they saw. It is certain that in the eyes of little girls, the Plaza must feel like a palace, and the wedding couple beautiful prince and princess dancing gracefully in the royal ball. The entire Plaza wedding proves to be an irresistibly enchanting experience typically representing the contemporary white wedding culture.

The white wedding is claimed to have originated from Western culture, particularly from around the United Kingdom.

The earliest recorded instance of a white wedding dress in Western culture is that of the English Princess Philippa at her wedding to the Scandinavian King Eric in 1406. She was dressed in a white tunic lined with ermine and squirrel fur. In 1558, Mary Queen of Scots wore white during her wedding to the soon-to-be King of France, despite the fact that white was a color of mourning for French queens at the time. (Brennan, 2017, para. 18)

Wearing white at weddings, then, became more popular among British brides from royal and upper-class families, while the colour signified wealth and social status (Brennan, 2017, para. 18). However, the ubiquity of the white wedding is attributed firstly to Queen Victoria after she wore a white gown in her wedding to Prince Albert in 1840, and secondly to the industrial revolution that made white costumes more affordable across different classes and approachable throughout the world (Brennan, 2017, para. 20; McGrath, 2002, p. 99; Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 31).

During the 1820s and 1830s, wealthy upper-class British women often wore cream and pale wedding gowns of satin and velvet, embroidered with colorful floral patterns. Only after the 1840s, with Queen Victoria's wedding, did white, a cooler and brighter color than cream, gradually become *de rigueur*, with its popularity spreading across classes. (McGrath, 2002, p. 99)

The colonization brought the white wedding further beyond the borderline of the European countries to other continents (McGrath, 2002). The white wedding, then, travelled a long way to America, Australia, Asia and Africa, starting to make itself a global trend.

In the United States of America, where the white wedding has been flourishing as a social and cultural phenomenon and strongly influencing the global wedding culture, the history of the white wedding can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the celebration was the privilege of the elite and upper-middle class (Dunak, 2013, p. 17). The elaborate white wedding with its rigorous requirements and “lavish consumer expenditure” (p. 18) was a means for the rich and upper classes to show their remarkable network of connections, and to affirm the wealth and social status. It was only until the 1920s that the white wedding opened up itself to more diverse social groups and developed commercially into a promising industry. This period witnessed “the first wave of mass American consumption” (p. 19), in which companies discovered the business potential from relegating the high-class white wedding and customizing it to satisfy the needs of the public. In the Great Depression and wartime that followed, the wedding business met a trough since there was an obvious shortage of time, poor condition and the high possibilities of unexpected circumstances that prevented a thorough celebration. The hardship of the war, however, gave the following decades an ideal social environment for the development of wedding industries. “The desire for romance and individual satisfaction” (p. 20) was the opportunity and motivation for the wedding business to thrive. Also, during this time, the white wedding started to be acknowledged as the American style wedding based on its popularity and coverage across the country. Then came the age of media and the golden era of wedding industry, when marriage remained the ideal institution while the need of individual expression and satisfaction was of significance.

The transitional period between the twentieth and the twenty first century also witnessed the turning point of the white wedding, when several changes in the international context contributed to the development of the white wedding, from mainly a tradition of some limited Western countries to a thriving commercial industry worldwide. The custom of white wedding saw the second wave of its international popularization during this period of time. The cultural imports seen in manifold countries during the wartime continued to be fostered by the profound impacts of Hollywood products and the media that promoted the image of the white wedding. Meanwhile, the end of the twentieth century opened a new era for wedding celebration with the introduction of the 1994 Marriage Act in Britain, which licensed “more unconventional premises for civil marriages” in England and Wales (Boden, 2003, p. 15). This was “a significant step in bringing the wedding occasion into closer alignment with the issues of consumer choice and the aesthetization and individualization of the life course” (p. 15). This enactment paved the way for tremendous social changes that supported and fostered the commercialization of the wedding celebration, the white wedding in particular. The white wedding, therefore, made its evolutionary change in its allegedly birthplace, from a traditional and religious ritual to a commercial and personal celebration. Together with the powerful wave of the American cultural influences worldwide, Britain joining the trend of the new white wedding culture consolidated its impacts and encouraged its popularity internationally.

The beginning of the twenty first century marked a boom in wedding industries, which is greatly attributed to the development of a rising “romantic

consumer culture” (Otnes & Pleck, 2003) and involved active supports from the media.

There are television programs devoted to following wedding planning; films centered on weddings; wedding plots in soap operas, situation comedies, and dramas; an increasing number of magazines devoted to the ritual; coverage of celebrity ceremonies; a plethora of wedding-themed toys and costumes for young girls; and, of course, Web sites. (Otnes & Pleck, 2003, pp. 1-2)

During this period, a conspicuously great amount of television shows and feature films on weddings were released and achieved enormous success, such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Wedding Singer* (1998), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *27 Dresses* (2008), and *Bride Wars* (2009). It was recorded that a show of wedding programmes could attract millions of viewers, and millions of people worldwide avidly followed after wedding ceremonies of celebrities and royal families (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). Apparently, the high frequency of these popular media publications, the public attention drawn to wedding events globally, and the proliferation of bridal magazines (Boden, 2003) have proved a massive social significance of the wedding occasion. As Otnes and Pleck (2003) put it, “the decision to plan and execute elaborate weddings is rarely questioned, and seems now to be considered not only a rite but also a right in North American culture” (p. 3). It was estimated that an amount of 50 billion dollars was “spent on wedding-related products and services” in 2002 in America, and an average of 22 thousand dollars per wedding ceremony, which is approximately six times bigger than that of 20 years earlier (p. 2). Considering the fact that the money spent on weddings by Americans each year surged to 125 billion

dollars by 2005 (Dunak, 2013, p. 4), it is easily observed that the wedding has become an “expanding, commercial phenomenon” (Boden, 2003, p. 20).

Since then, the spread of the white wedding has been sweeping across the globe, gradually taking over the traditional forms of the local wedding celebration, and becoming the most popular wedding norm throughout the world. In China, one of the oldest, biggest and most influential cultures of the East, where the bride are traditionally dressed in red, the white wedding is becoming more and more popular. Even with the brides who have their weddings under the traditional custom, the wish and desire for the image of them in the “Western-style”, modern white wedding dresses are noticed as common and considerable (Brennan, 2017, para. 18). In Korea, one of the biggest economies in Asia, it is recorded that since the second half of the twentieth century, the “Western-style” white wedding has completely replaced the “old-style” traditional wedding (Kendall, 1996). Nowadays, the wedding industry in Korea is growing and extending enormously, with the record of an average of nearly 46 million South Korean won (approximately 40 thousand US dollars) spent on an average wedding in the country (Yonhap, 2017). A recent survey conducted in 2018 shows that the biggest group (38.1 percent) of Korean single residents in their twenties expect that their weddings would cost between 50 and 100 million South Korean won (approximately 45 to 90 thousand US dollars), and 20.3 percent expect between 100 and 200 million won (Statista, 2018).

Although wedding celebration has become a considerable occasion for couples and has made itself an enormous industry, the significance and influence it exerts on men and women, or specifically the groom and the bride, are noticeably different.

Differences in gender behaviours in relation to weddings have been vastly noticed and studied. Diana Leonard (1980) claimed that women were more likely to get fascinated by the idea of wedding preparation and tended to savour the wedding-related consumption, while men not only held a dismissive attitude towards weddings but might also get irritated by the wedding excessive expenses. Cele Otnes and Tina Lowrey (1993) argued that, unlike the groom who paid more attention on pleasing wedding guests and respecting the wishes of the bride, the priority of the bride is herself being the centre of attention – the radiantly beautiful leading actress of her own show. In the research of Emily Fairchild (2014), grooms were recorded to possess “humble” attitudes in reference to the roles they play in their weddings when giving their brides all the decision-making power and the ceremony spotlight. Fairchild argued that this reflected “the notion that weddings are women’s purview, and women should be accorded more attention during the ceremony” (Gendered Assumptions: A Tight Connection among Dimensions, para. 2).

It is argued that the romantic consumer culture that allegedly constructed the contemporary wedding industry is originally influenced by a social and cultural ideology venerating fairy tales. Moreover, among all fairy-tale princesses, Cinderella is considered the most influential and inspiring figure in the lavish white wedding trend (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). With passive feminine characteristics, Cinderella represents “the dominant belief in success” and “fantasy” (pp. 27-28), as well as the pursuit of romantic love and happiness, which has been told to girls in manifold generations. The dream of a Cinderella wedding as the utmost representation of women’s happiness and fulfillment, and a desired rite of passage marking the beginning of a truly worthwhile part of life, therefore, has been deeply embedded in

the female population of the society, and fully employed and stimulated by the business to manipulate its female customers in a society of materialism and consumerism. It is noteworthy that the fairy tale of Cinderella is never the quintessential story of Western culture that originated and represented Western culture exclusively. This character and the related storyline are rather the shared product of all cultures, of the human society all over the world in general, cultivated and accumulated over time, and which represent social desires and people's dreams of a complete life change. In fact, the oldest version of Cinderella is recorded to appear in China, an Eastern culture, as early as more than a thousand years ago (Waley, 1947, p. 226; see also American Wedding Study, 2002, as cited in Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 26¹). This partly explains why the white wedding can travel all the long way to conquer various different cultures across the planet, and has been exerting profound influences in the international wedding culture. The princess-like white wedding dress and the fairy-tale white wedding celebration have become not any woman's own dream, but the dream of every woman.

“I always knew my wedding would be the happiest day of my life. Now I will dance with you until we have six babies and a house,” says little Emma to Liv while playing the role-play wedding game (*Bride Wars*, 2009, 2:49-2:57). Apparently, in the eye of the girls, a marriage, with a house and children, signify happiness and fulfillment – a supposedly utmost ideal life a person desires to have and longs for.²

Liv and Emma have been infused with this “basic” lesson by the time they learn to

¹ The original source of this data in Otnes and Pleck (2003) is noted as “Condé Nast Bridal Infobank, American Wedding Study, 2002. Unpublished”.

² The institution of marriage was much promoted and supported in American society during the years after World War II. A family with a suburban house and children was the dream of American adults (Dunak, 2013). Liv and Emma's parents are people of the age of white wedding and family fantasy, who pass on the dream to the girls.

read and write. They have learnt that their wedding days must be “the happiest day[s]” of their lives for an obvious reason that the days mark dreams coming true, when they can be princesses and have all they ever wish for.

Back to the first scenes of the film with the wedding “treasure” box of little Liv and Emma and the girls’ dream-realizing story, the arrangement idea is fairly explicit to learn. Their box is filled with “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue,” and “something completely magical” (Bride Wars, 2009, 2:20-2:21) as in the narrative of the wedding planner. The interpretation of this old English saying can be easily found in numerous online bridal magazines within one single click, such as *The Spruce*, *The Knot*, *My Wedding*, *The Feminist Bride*, *Modern Wedding* and so forth. The definition, based on these magazines, is as follow:

Something old symbolizes the bride’s family, her past, and tradition. Something new is a symbol for a bride’s new life ahead of her. Something borrowed is traditionally loaned from a happy bride, and it symbolizes happiness. Something blue is a symbol of fidelity, purity, and love. A sixpence in her shoe is the symbol of future prosperity and wealth. (Callaway, 2018)

First of all, the viewer may notice a purposeful switch of concepts made by the wedding planner, in which she changes the original phrase “a sixpence in her shoe” into “something completely magical.” A sixpence is apparently a piece of cold material, and specifically a currency unit. Albeit culturally significant, it remains a sheer embodiment of materialistic values and notions, exists with a certain pricing and valuation that can be accurately measured. Meanwhile, magic is neither material nor measurable. It is abstract in concept and intangible to capture, yet undeniably

appealing and enchanting. Moreover, if something is described to be magical, it is decided to possess the quality of being unusually fascinating or miraculously extraordinary. Accordingly, being magical is supposedly being something marvelous that its existence is unexplainable, as though coming to life from fairy tales. The descriptive adjective “magical” not only gives the notion of the object, but also visualizes the feelings within the subject, which are delightfulness, wonderment, and appreciation. Therefore, the wedding, or more precisely the Plaza wedding as in the narrative of the wedding planner, is something worth desiring for, and whose spiritual values are too immense to describe, yet too obvious that no further elaboration is needed, and too sacred to measure. The material value of a wedding or a wedding at the Plaza, i.e. how expensive it is, seems to be dismissed by the wedding planner, perhaps too vulgar to be even worth considering, of which her attitudes can be shown by her brief break after a slight rise and stretch in her voice at “something...” to express a considering moment, followed by a conclusion of “completely magical” with a little laugh (Bride Wars, 2009, 2:20-2:21).

Delightfulness, wonderment, and appreciation are also what the viewer can find from the expression of little Liv and Emma when they happen to see for the first time of their lives a “magical” wedding at the Plaza. The following scenes are taken with close-up shots, from the blue hairpin in the bride’s hair to Emma’s dreamy face while holding the hairpin in her hand and silently admiring it, then to Liv and Emma both looking up in amazement. No utterance is recorded, but the thoughts and feelings of the two small protagonists are almost visible, from which the viewer can see a newborn dream growing up inside them. The scene in which Liv and Emma discreetly peer into a wedding hall from behind the half opened doors is a figurative image. It

shows the viewer that the two little girls have just found a wonderland, or a dreamy world that is appealing enough to enchant them and embed in the young and pure souls of theirs. The moment they discover the enchanting fairyland, and that fairy tales are reachable, childhood dreams all come vividly real and they can never escape from them until the day they waltz gracefully into the world behind the doors – their fairylands – in their beautiful white dresses.

This scene shows the continuation and inheritance of social ideologies and cultural values. The wedding hall symbolizes an enormous, real-life treasure box made exclusively for adults, designed especially to match their grown-up childlike, or childish, tastes and wishes. When Liv and Emma open the huge doors of the wedding hall, they actually open a real-life treasure box. Perhaps, the wedding lady herself, just like Liv and Emma, used to have a little treasure box when she was their age, and finally had it transformed successfully twenty years later. Her success, then, continues to inspire Liv and Emma, and other girls in their generation, to dream and believe in their dreams. The believes and actions of previous generations, therefore, sow the white seeds in the minds and souls of the next generations, watered by the white industries to grow bigger and blossom one day. As the film makes it, the seeds inside Liv and Emma do grow well and fully blossom; and their childhood treasure boxes do transform successfully, somehow, into enormous, real-life treasure boxes. This process is a natural and historical development, like successive waves running through generations without any clue of an ending point in the near future. In the very end of the film, after both Liv and Emma have fulfilled their childhood dreams in white, the viewer learn of a new generation on their way to come in no time: both of the women are pregnant, happily expecting their little seeds to come out to the world.

The flowers have blossomed; the fruits have been harvested; new seeds are being sown into the land again; new dreams in white will be once more planted. Dreams after dreams, believes and values transferred through generations: the flow is not due to end yet.

As bride and groom in the childhood wedding game, instead of exchanging rings, Emma gives Liv the blue hairpin. First of all, besides the cultural meaning found in the old English saying, the colour blue is scientifically proved to bring the sense of being “expensive”, “reliable”, “serious”, and “purity” (Grimes & Doole, 1998; Paul & Okan, 2010; Won & Westland, 2017). The blue is also considered to bring the sense of sweetness (Conover, 1995; Ouverson, 1992). The hairpin, therefore, symbolizes the supposedly traditional meaning of the white wedding ritual, which are “the ideals of innocence, virginity and purity” (Boden, 2003, p. 18), and the girls’ dream of a lavish white wedding at the Plaza. The interesting part here, however, is that this little piece of accessory has a plainly ordinary look and does not seem to be as expensive as its colour might represent. It is something simple and affordable that a girl can touch yet special and precious that a girl treasures and desires to possess. These meanings appear to be the exact messages wedding industries intend to make. The way the hairpin travels in the film also represents the circulation and transition of perception and values. Accordingly, before this piece of accessory comes to Liv and Emma, it first appears to belong to a Plaza bride Liv and Emma happen to see one afternoon. On the one hand, this scene evidently reflects the traditional meaning of “something borrowed, something blue”, in which an item of a happily-married woman can be considered a symbol of love, happiness and good-luck marriage and can be passed on from bride to bride. On the other hand, from the

perspective of the science of consumption, however, the journey of the hairpin signifies the original purpose of consumption, which is to facilitate “social emulation and imitation,” and through which “human relations” can be revealed (Boden, 2003, p. 4). The wedding, as a cultural performance, and the consumption it entails are also “a means of social display and communication” (p. 4). It is a tool for wedding couples, especially brides, to present to the public the tastes they have learnt and support, the values that are both “materialistic” and “mentalistic” (p. 4) they have been influenced.

3.2. Wedding women – a romantic and materialistic creature

There is an interesting “coincidence” in the film, which is that the engagement ring box has the same bluish colour as the childhood hairpin; they are both little pieces of jewellery; they both come to Liv as a magical little thing from someone else, and both drop down at her feet unexpectedly to her utter astonishment and excitement. However, if the hairpin comes completely without Liv’s anticipation and acts as the starting element that makes and marks Liv’s wedding desire, the Tiffany box is what Liv has been awaiting and acts as the consequent element of her wedding desire. Here, the linking thread can be detected. The colour blue of the Tiffany box, besides all the symbolic meanings as discussed above, represents the childish part, the girly dream that is still hiding inside the strong, successful, young woman. That childish, girly part is inside Liv – an “obnoxious” and “overbearing” lawyer; it is also inside Emma – a considerate and “bendy” teacher. This shows that a white wedding can be the dream of any women regardless of personalities and professions; it is always there waiting to be found, stirred up and stimulated by a powerful hand. The detail that the

box drops down unexpectedly is an implication of the quality of being romantic and magical, something people long for but not plan for.

There is always a dualistic connection between romance and material that is well arranged throughout the film. Not only does the Tiffany box refer to romance, but it is also an object of materialism. It is widely known that a Tiffany engagement ring³ is a “symbol of true love” (Tiffany & Co., 2018) that can cost a couple thousands of dollars. It seems like love has a price, and true love costs a fortune in the world of materialism and commercialism. When Emma receives a marriage proposal from her boyfriend, the first thing she does is to phone Liv and tell her best friend about the engagement; and the first thing Liv asks is all the detailed features of the diamond ring.

Emma: I—I’m engaged. Fletcher just proposed, like, two minutes ago.
I’m engaged.

Liv: Colour?

Emma: Colourless.

Liv: Cut?

Emma: Brilliant.

Liv: Clarity?

Emma: Slightly included.

Liv: Carat?

³ Tiffany & Co. is an American “iconic” jewellery brand (Hughes, Bendon & Pehlivan, 2016) that was founded nearly two centuries ago. The company is renowned for its engagement rings, which are “the most sought-after symbol of true love” (Tiffany & Co., 2018). Even the “iconic” “Tiffany Blue Box” is “the most recognizable and most desired retail container in history” and the “embodiment” of “material dreams and desires” (Klara, 2014, para. 1-4).

Emma: Almost, maybe just under [Whisper]

More than he could afford. I'm sure.

Liv: Ohhhhh

Both: [Squeal]

(Bride Wars, 2009, 14:14-14:33)

They seem to be professional when discussing the ring, as though two diamond specialists assessing a piece of rock. The dialogue runs smoothly back and forth as if they have researched and planned it for their entire lives, and they have an incredible ability to understand each other over the “rock” discussion. Similar situations are noticed to take place in several following scenes, one with the wedding theme, and another with the Vera Wang wedding dress.

Marion: Now, um, we should discuss themes.

Emma: Elegant, minimalism with romantic texture

Liv: Classic, traditionalism and trendy infusion

Marion: I'm impressed.

(Bride Wars, 2009, 20:31-20:41)

When being asked by the wedding planner about their choices of wedding themes, Liv and Emma do not miss the merest fraction of a second, confidently give their own answers in unison, as though they have prepared themselves with all the wedding notions and knowledge for this moment for their entire life. While Emma looks explicitly exhilarated, Liv does not need to either stop what she is in the middle of or spend a moment to consider before giving out her choice.

Emma: Oh my God. Oh My God! Miss Wang... Oh... Lace bodice

Liv: Basque waist – 10-layered tulle – [Sigh] – You should try it on.

(Bride Wars, 2009, 21:59-22:13)

As soon as Liv and Emma spot the dress in the shop, they are totally captivated; their looks fix on the dress as though being hypnotized. Immediately, they start their professional assessment with a flurry of wedding dress terminology. Indeed, a Vera Wang wedding dress, which can cost a wedding couple thousands of dollars, is the most desirable item every bride-to-be wish for. As the shop assistant in the film puts it, “You don’t alter Vera to fit you; you alter yourself to fit Vera” (Bride Wars, 2009, 23:17-23:20), it is evident that a wedding item, within wedding consumerism, is lifted to a higher, more important and powerful position than the person who pays for it and owns it. This reflects a society in which people carry items on their heads and worship them. Apparently, living in fairy tales is not cheap, but a princess-to-be is heartily willing to pay for her fantasy.

All the objects and events occurring in the film signify an inextricable connection between romanticism and materialism that engage with the modern wedding, especially emphasize the “consumeristic” aspect of the wedding in the age of consumerism. The first person to visit as soon as Liv and Emma get proposals for marriage is not anyone in their families, but a wedding planner. The first thing they give out when they decide on their weddings is their credit cards. This means money is the first and foremost material of a wedding, since purchasing goods and services, as well as getting families, friends and involved people do the same, are all what the brides do and enjoy in preparation for their weddings. The viewer notices the scene

where Liv and Emma confront another bride-to-be in a homeware mall while she is clearly collecting items for her wedding gift list. While Liv goes to a hair salon, Emma visits a skincare centre, and they both go for shopping after shopping before having a hard bachelorette party. Apparently, the film represents the quintessential picture of a consumer culture that revolves around the modern white wedding in America.

In the current context of consumerism, it is widely acknowledged that weddings have become an expensive, wasteful occasion of extravagant expenditure to satisfy the need of individual expression and social emulation, and savour the love of consumption, or the consumption for the sake of love (Boden, 2003; Otnes & Pluck, 2003; Dunak, 2013). It is important though to be aware that, the wedding is not all about materialism and rationality, but also the rise of Romanticism and the realization of fantasy (Boden, 2003; Otnes & Pluck, 2003; Dunak, 2013). As Boden (2003) put it, there are always disparities and dualities dwelling in consumption; the wedding as a commodity also possesses this aspect. Accordingly, the combination of Romanticism, fantasy, and rationality is considered “key dimensions of wedding consumption” (p. 46). As an inevitable consequence, the wedding industry has created a new generation of bridal consumers, who can be referred to as “superbride” (Boden, 2003). The term “superbride” is to address the new bridal identity, who possesses a dual personality of being both rational as a “project manager” organizing her own wedding calmly, professionally, and reasonably, and simultaneously emotional as a so-called “childish fantasizer” wishing to fulfill her romanticized imaginations by her supposedly “once-in-a-lifetime” wedding. Boden (2003) emphasized the crucial role of bridal magazines not only in generating “this new breed of ‘superbride’”, but also educating them into

wise and knowledgeable bridal consumers who make smart choices and have admirable tastes, and, furthermore, give critical appraisals of other brides' choices and tastes (p. 60).

Liv and Emma have proved themselves to be the best examples of Boden's theory by simply being the typical "superbrides". By consistently showing their incredible knowledge on bridal products, such as engagement rings and wedding dresses, Liv and Emma make an amusing impression that they have been avidly reading and learning tips from, most probably, bridal magazines for twenty years. Not only good learners, they work brilliantly in the role of wedding critics when giving sharp comments on their mutual friend's wedding.

Liv: Not too shabby – Caviar cocktail hour

Emma: Cigar roller – White glove service

Liv: Celadon cymbidium orchids

Emma: Great DJ. So we both admit it's beautiful.

Liv: Um, yeah...

Emma: But? Do you think it's the work of Marion St. Claire?

Liv: Oh... Marion's a visionary.

Emma: Mm? Oh...

Liv: If it had been my wedding...

Emma: Oh, just say it.

Liv: It ain't June.

Emma: And it ain't the Plaza.

Liv: It's the elephant in the room.

Emma: Yeah.

(Bride Wars, 2009, 03:18-03:47)

This detail reflects a society in which people criticize each other based on their labels, superficial and materialistic items, and how well they perform their weddings.

3.3. Wedding women – the rise of femininity

Given the central role of bridal magazines in the prevalence of wedding consumer culture, Boden (2003) emphasized that “one of the specific pleasures bridal magazines offer their readers can be termed the pleasure of ultimate femininity” (p. 61). In other words, brides are encouraged to employ the best of feminine characteristics in their weddings, and persuaded to invest “time, effort and expenditure” (p. 61) in the ceremonies and themselves – the paramount figure of the events – in order to earn unforgettable, successful and spectacular weddings. The white wedding, therefore, appears to be labelled as the best and biggest show of the femininity display; and as it is expected to be the once-in-a-lifetime event, brides should do their best to make it perfect and savour the pleasure of the preparation, most of which involves heavy consumption. Moreover, the bride’s “big day” is now regarded as the performance and exhibition of her own bridal identity (Boden, 2003; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Dunak, 2013). These intertwined aspects have made the wedding an occasion of “Romantic or hedonistic consumption” (Boden, p. 74). Although consumption has long been considered to be in a special relationship with women, it is claimed that women consume wedding goods and services not only for the sake of consumer pleasure, i.e. purchasing for happiness, but rather for the sake of love (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). As other cultural and commercial products that support a

“love culture” (p. 11), the wedding and experiences it may bring have become one of the most powerful “symbols of romantic love” (p. 267) that women blissfully consume.

The femininity that the white wedding promotes is depicted densely in a few shots in an attempt to display briefly the activities of Liv and Emma as brides-to-be during the preparation weeks before their weddings. A series of medium close-up, close-up, two shot, cut-in and over-the-shoulder shots are taken consecutively, through which the delight on their faces and the intimacy of the two best friends are focused on and highlighted. In all the scenes, the protagonists can be seen smiling brightly and blissfully by the beautiful blooming flowers, the pure white wedding gowns, and the wedding catalogues. Emma gently lifts a flower to her nose, closes her eyes to feel its floral fragrance, and releases a serene and contented smile. Liv lies down in the couch, rests her head comfortably in Emma’s lap, looks up at her friend and laugh cheerfully in the middle of a wedding discussion. Meanwhile, Emma looks down at her friend, slightly tilts her head to one side, gives a wide and delightful grin, and raises one hand up in a girly gesture in which her fingers are positioned gracefully.

The femininity aspect that the white wedding entails can also be observed when Liv and Emma sequentially visit beauty salons to embellish their beauty in preparation for their “big days”. While Emma wishes to possess a “pre-wedding glow” by applying honey skin tone, Liv plans to trim her hair and colour it “lowligh” in an attempt to exude elegance. Both of them pay great attention to their beauty in a way that is clearly instructed by the wedding industry, which is tremendously

supported by bridal magazines. The bridal beauty, accordingly, promotes a feminine beauty that has long been socially constructed. A standard bridal beauty should present the flawless beauty of a real-life princess, i.e. slim and sexually attractive body, bright and healthy skin, immaculately lacquered nails, long lovely hair in sweet French pleat or elegant bun, and a decent scent. Also, the bridal beauty of choice has to match the theme and details of the whole bridal show – the wedding. In order to obtain a perfect image, a bride needs to plan and invest her time, money, and effort for months ahead of her wedding. This explains why Liv has a built-in gym in her office, while Emma takes up dance lessons.

3.4. Wedding women – a moderator of values

Although the lavish white wedding is considered to be an elaborate celebration of femininity, it is not necessarily a performance of gender inequality or discrimination, and not intentionally supported by wedding couples to embrace and promote patriarchy. The cultural role and ritual position of the modern white wedding have changed comprehensively since its origin back in Victorian era. Nowadays, along with all the “erosion” of traditional and ritual meanings that it used to signify (Boden, p. 18), the notion of a bride, or a woman, as a commodity or asset to be transferred from man (her father) to man (her husband) has been gradually disappearing in a society of liberty and individualism. The white wedding, therefore, has become more of a compromise of values, in which Liv – a feminist woman who “always lead[s]” (Bride Wars, 2009, 04:09-04:10) – is voluntary to be escorted by her closest male kin and accorded to her future husband. It is evident that the historical meaning of the performance is completely disregarded and instead, being considered just a natural,

indispensable, ritual part of the wedding. For Liv, the fact that she walks down the aisle having her brother beside her merely represents the acknowledgement and blessing from her family – the closest and dearest people who apparently hold special positions in her life and her heart. The presence of her family, as well as her best friend makes the ceremony more complete and meaningful in manifold ways; without whom by her side, Liv would feel alone and unfulfilled. Liv, on the other hand, never intends to lose her autonomy, independence and leadership of her own life. This is proved by the details that Liv clearly chooses whom to be with and decides on whom to be married to all by herself; she is willing to confront her boyfriend and ask for a marriage proposal; she decides on the wedding matters and pays for them without waiting for her fiancé's approvals (weddings have been considered an event by women, for women as mentioned above). In the end, she takes Emma – her best friend and supposed to be her maid of honour – to hold her hand along the aisle, which indicates that accompanying the bride in her rite of passage is an honour given to the dearest or most influential family member, rather than the one who “owns” the bride as in the old interpretation.

Besides the dreams of trendy white weddings that (re)present the brides' identities, families and traditional values also exert a certain influence in the formation of their dreams and related decisions. The role of family in Liv and Emma's weddings is deliberately yet delicately shown from the beginning to the end of the film: from their parents' old wedding photos when they were small to the old wedding dress of Emma's mother. This shows the inheritance and continuation of traditional values and social consciousness, also signifies the traditional/modern

duality of the white wedding. Discussing the connection between family and individual, as well as tradition and modernity, Dunak (2013) put it:

As couples struggled to satisfy personal wants while still pleasing their families, they found in the wedding an opportunity to connect tradition (however mythologized) to modernity. [...] Weddings became sites of attempted compromise where couples negotiated a relationship between personal, familial traditions and the idealized "traditions" they wish to replicate in their modern white weddings. (p. 27)

The viewer notices that, while adoring the beautiful trendy Vera Wang wedding dress, Emma insists to wear her mother's old wedding gown, which is apparently old-fashioned with a dull ivory colour of time. She decides that the wedding is her dearest dream, and her mother is so important to her that she deserves a special involvement with it. The mother's old wedding dress in a personalized modern wedding signifies the cultural inheritance and familial basis of the wedding. Although the marriage is now a personal choice, and the wedding presents personal identity, it remains unchanged that the marriage, either as an institution or a relationship, is still a familial matter and has an inextricable connection with families, and that an individual identity is partly defined by the social and cultural environment that nurturing the person, in which family plays a crucial role. The decisions of Emma as the bride, therefore, appear to be made under certain attachment and influence of her family.

4. Confessions of a Shopaholic

Confessions of a Shopaholic (2009) was directed by P. J. Hogan, and “distributed by Touchstone, a subsidiary of the Disney Corporation” (Todd, 2011, p. 57). The film tells the story of Rebecca Bloomwood (Isla Fisher) and her shopping addiction.

Rebecca Bloomwood is a vivacious young woman in her twenties, who is crazy about shopping. Shopping has always been the greatest love and passion of her life as it brings her the lust and pleasure she cannot find from anything else. Her shopping habit becomes problematic since it is out of her control and she is unable to afford her excessive shopping. Rebecca has been trying several methods, under the insistence of her best friend, to treat her shopping addiction but it remains hopeless, while her credit bills continue to come flooding in.

Rebecca is a journalist, working for a small Gardening magazine, while her dream has always been to work for *Alette* – a renowned fashion magazine. When Rebecca unfortunately loses her job, however, she ends up working for *Successful Saving* – a “money” magazine. Although finance is never the strength or interest of hers, her writing that is based on her own shopping experiences is found to convey popularized economic messages and able to reach a vast number of ordinary readers, who are non-specialist everyday consumers. As a result, her column becomes an immediate success, and soon she becomes internationally well known as a personal finance guru who gives people advice on using money wisely, while ironically she is herself in huge debt.

Meanwhile, Rebecca falls in love with Luke (Hugh Dancy) – her editor – and starts a romantic relationship with him. During all this time, the city debt collector tries to confront Rebecca and follows her around, while she tries to elude him and tells people he is her crazy former boyfriend who has been stalking her ever since they broke up. When her career and love life start to blossom, she loses them all. On the national television show to which Rebecca is invited as a financial specialist, the city debt collector comes and reveals the dark secrets about her debt situation and how badly she handles it. With her lies being exposed in the worst way, Rebecca ruins her career on the national television, loses her boyfriend, and hurts her best friend.

It is only then that she finally determines to take genuine action. She opens a sale and auction event, under the help of her family and the peers in her shopaholic therapy group, to sell off her clothes and collect money to pay off her debt. Unexpectedly, Luke secretly sends people to come and give her a hand. Afterwards, Rebecca gets her best friend and her boyfriend back, and starts fresh with a healthy lifestyle, in which there is no more toxic relationship with excessive shopping.

Women are completely lost

It might sound a bold declare, but not at all an exaggeration, to say that women are represented as being completely lost in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009) – the Hollywood filmic adaptation of the worldwide best-seller series by the British novelist Sophie Kinsella. This representative characteristic is deliberately highlighted by all means and can be observed in different channels even before actually watching the film.

First of all, the title of the film is a symmetrical compound of two highly connected parts, which are “confessions” and “shopaholic”. By definition, confession is “a statement that a person makes, admitting that they are guilty of a crime; the act of making such a statement” or “a statement admitting something that you are ashamed or embarrassed about; the act of making such a statement” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary online, 2018). Meanwhile, a person who is a shopaholic, just like workaholic or alcoholic for example, can be determined to perform an excessive use or activity (in this case, shopping), shows an abusive or loss-of-control state, and is often treated as suffering from a dysfunction. In other words, a shopaholic can be considered as having an addiction – a brain disorder (Henderson, 2001) – to shopping. Making an impression of crimes and diseases, apparently, the word choice for the naming of this romantic comedy reveals an intention of creating chaotic vibrations.

Besides the title, the official posters of the film also reflect the same impression. In the posters, the film’s heroine is depicted as a young woman in her twenties stiffening with wide-eyed astonishment. She is popping her mouth open in a complete daze and bewilderment, perhaps being perplexed or frightened. She looks as though she suddenly freezes while in the middle of an activity that is supposed to be exciting and energetic, with a huge cluster of colourful carrier bags in her hands. It even goes a further step when this image is pasted on a giant carrier bag just like a decoration. Apparently, the usual order is overturned as humans appear to be decorations of objects, not the other way around. In one poster, the heroine is located by a quintessentially yellow New York taxi, in the middle of a road on a city avenue. Instead of getting into the taxi, she is standing outside, trying resolutely yet fruitlessly

to load her mountain of carrier bags into the taxi. The young woman looks lost in her own reality.

Confessions of a Shopaholic (Hogan, 2009) constructs a system of dualities that highlights the state of confusion young women are encountering when struggling to find their way, and savouring on the way through a confusing world full of temptations. The battles of dichotomies are reflected through the contradictions in the characteristics and behaviours of the protagonist and the world around through her eyes and perceptions. The following of this section will thoroughly examine these dualities and contradictions within the protagonist as a representation of women in the world of consumerism.

4.1. Shopping addiction – illness and therapy

Women, in the world of consumerism, are prone to a new disease, known as “shopping addiction”. This newfound type of addiction can be considered the disease of the times. The irony is that, in numerous recorded cases, this illness is originally treated as self-medication (Trussell, 2007). It is used as a remedy for other social diseases – a temporary escape from the reality’s problems – the root causes.

Developed societies have built up the sense of “the alienation and lack of community” (Cushman, 1990; Elliott, 1994; Faber, 2003, p. 191; Shields, 1992) among their members, inadvertently leaving emptiness in the crowd and digging invisible holes in each of the individual. People are bored and unhappy, wondering about their lives and searching for their selves. The pressure and puzzle of life urge

people to look for temporary solutions and lower their mind's resistance to temptations. When stores are ubiquitous and designed especially to attract people, soothe their feelings, and give them beautiful experiences, weak minds and vulnerable souls easily become "compulsive buyers", who often see shopping as a "retail therapy".

Faber (2003) argues that, "compulsive buying has been variously viewed as an addiction, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, an impulse control disorder, an affective-spectrum disorder, or an extreme form of normal buying" (p. 177). Many researchers have found a clear connection between compulsive buying and other personal characteristics such as low level of self-esteem (Elliott, 1994; Faber & O'Guinn, 1989; Faber, 2003; Scherhorn et al., 1990) and high probability of depression and anxiety (Christenson et al., 1994; Edwards, 1992; Faber, 2003; Scherhorn et al., 1990; Schlosser et al., 1994; Valence et al., 1988). Accordingly, compulsive buyers tend to use consumption as a temporary treatment to reduce tension. Short-term benefits of the shopping experience are these customers' motivations behind their impulsive and excessive behaviours (Faber, 2003). In these cases, the urge to shop does not derive from the "functional desire for the item purchased" (p. 178). The benefits of the products or services themselves are less important and vastly outweighed by the mental and spiritual benefits that the shopping process provides. As Danielle Todd (2011) puts it, "the primary motivation arrives from the psychological benefits derived from the buying process itself rather than from the possession of purchased objects" (p. 56). This motivation leads buyers to seek for "retail therapy" in consumption, in which they find "social contact" and alternative fulfilment of their "inner needs", "build their self-esteem", "relieve stress",

“boredom” or “alleviate loneliness”, and uplift themselves (Huddleston & Minahan, 2011, pp. 57-60).

There exists a noticeable gender difference in regard to consumption and shopping behaviours. Studies have shown that women are much more prone to compulsive buying problems than men (Black, 1996; Faber & O'Guinn, 1989; Faber, 2003; Scherhorn et al., 1990). This can be explained by the fact that consumption is socially regarded as a feminine job, almost for women exclusively (Boden, 2003, p. 9; Faber, 2003, p. 191). Also, women are more likely to receive wider range of social benefits, such as expanding and enhancing interpersonal relationships, through consumption than men (Faber, 2003, p. 191). Furthermore, women, unlike men, view shopping as an enjoyable hobby, a good therapy, and a recreational activity instead of a mere functional job. Shopping, for women, is “something to be enjoyed, savored, and prolonged” (Faber, 2003, p. 191), not just to be done. Therefore, they tend to invest more time, money and effort in shopping than men, and are more likely to fall for its short-term benefits (Campbell, 2000). Women, conventionally “characterized as passive, emotional subjects”, “within whom desire can be induced and control can be exercised over perception, behaviour and, ultimately, over their motivations to consume” (Boden, 2003, p. 9), are believed to be easily manipulated by the consumerism. Also, the confusion given by the recent, on-going changes in gender roles and social status is considered to make women more vulnerable to excessive shopping. Especially when women have long been made target group when it comes to consumption, surrounded and attacked from all directions in the society of capitalism and consumerism, they are more prone to fall into consumption traps and shopping temptation.

In *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009), the protagonist is featured as a shopaholic, who treats shopping as “retail therapy”. Rebecca Bloomwood unconsciously uses shopping as a means to fulfill the intangible void inside. Her soul is thirsty for thrilling and exciting moments, and desperate sometimes for an escape from boredom or loneliness. It can be easily noticed that her excessive buying does not derive from a pure desire of the item’s functional benefits since most of the time, the viewer sees she buys things that she does not need and then forgets she even has them. As she confesses, “a store can awaken a lust for things [she] never even knew [she] needed” (Hogan, 2009, 02:30-02:40). Clearly, Rebecca shops to fix her inner needs – fix the way she feels and perceives the world. How Rebecca’s world looks like without the fix of shopping, through her eyes and mind, can be observed with a little help of a filter.

If all shops and purchases were removed from the scene, the life of Rebecca Bloomwood would appear to be infused with boredom and emptiness. The juxtaposition of the world within and without shopping is noteworthy. Her office area, both at the *Gardening* and *Successful Saving*, is depicted to be nondescript. The colours are all dull, with the dominance of white, grey and brown. The shades are either too dark and dismal or too bland and faint. Her colleagues seem to be rigid and old-fashion, wearing unfashionable hair and clothes, boring pairs of glasses, and staying uninterestingly behind the desk. The jobs look monotonous and tedious. The whole atmosphere, which is completely lifeless and spiritless, becomes a plain background to highlight Rebecca, a bright and lively girl who is always dressed in vibrant and garish colours. Rebecca does not seem to fit in. She stands out all alone,

feeling segregated like a dot on a white paper. The plain background of ordinary people can be seen everywhere, for example, in the streets, the business conference, and the television show studio.

The juxtaposition comes early in her childhood, when Rebecca is just a little girl and not yet autonomous or financially independent to enter the consumption world of her choice. There is a clear contrast between the “real” world and her “mom” world, as she recalls, and between the world behind the glass windows and the one outside of the shops. On one side of the picture, “mom” world appears to be poor and old-fashioned, with robust yet boring features and dull brown colour. There is only one little girl in one sad pair of shoes in that world, which infuses it with lonely, empty and even mortifying atmosphere. Meanwhile, the “real” world exudes an appealing and charming vibe from “shiny, sparkling things”. In that beautiful world, pretty girls look happy and content, trying on numerous shoes whose bright and lovely colours resemble the shades of rainbow and fairy unicorn. The pretty, happy girls are laughing cheerfully at each other and their adorable shoes, and laughing scornfully at the poor little girl and her ugly shoes. The little girl, in the contrary, looks up at the enchanting world of the pretty girls with an expression of admiration and aspiration. The more she is fascinated by the “real” world, the more she is upset and disappointed when looking back down at her “mom” world. The world behind the shop windows, through the eyes of little Rebecca, is always flashy, brilliant, and fascinating. It is far more alluring and delightful than the outside world, therefore so compelling and tempting.

It can be noticed that little Rebecca has rather low self-esteem, and so does the Rebecca of twenty years later. It is able to capture her feeling insecure, intimidated or jealous of the appearance, specifically the fashionable clothes and beautiful bodies, of other girls (Alicia “Long Legs” for example). It is the low self-esteem that often motivates Rebecca to look for uplifting experiences from shopping. She needs a constant fix to feel better about herself. Rebecca chooses an expensive dress that she cannot afford, instead of the cheap maid-of-honour dress prepared for her best friend’s wedding, because expensive, fashionable clothes make her more confident, love and appreciate herself more. Rebecca appears to be the best example of modern women who struggle with psychological problems of the times and seek for the fix from the therapy of the times – shopping.

Apparently, shopping lights up the world of Rebecca Bloomwood. In other words, shopping, for Rebecca, has become the marine light shedding through the dark and sinister ocean of reality. She finds shopping an escape and gets dependent upon it for the short-term pleasure and arousal effects it brings. Rebecca repeatedly shares with the viewer her strong, beautiful and pleasurable feelings that stores and shopping bring to her. Anytime she talks about it, her face is lightened, her eyes are dreamy, her look is distant as if wandering in a different world, her breath is fastened, and her voice is imbued with a genuine passion. “The experience is enjoyable,” says Rebecca, “well, more than enjoyable. It’s... It’s beautiful.” “The joy you feel when you’ve bought something, and it’s just you and the shopping,” she continues, “isn’t that the best feeling in the world?” (Hogan, 2009, 56:45-58:00). When Rebecca recalls her shopping experiences, with all the falling in love and lustful moments, she describes it just like a romantic relationship, “only it’s better” (02:15-02-25). When she

ecstatically screams out loud, “Oh yes! Oh yes!” (02:50-03:05), it is the sound of the most extreme, ultimate emotional excitement and physical arousal. It seems like shopping to Rebecca has become the best substitute for her emotional void, which enables her to experience these special feelings without the presence of a man.

After all the instantly, temporarily positive feelings that the purchases bring, compulsive buyers are left with the feelings of “remorse, guilt and fear” (Christenson & Faber, 1996; Faber, 2003, p. 192; Scherhorn et al., 1990). While the real problems remain unfixed, compulsive buyers suffer further from possible troubles of “mounting debt and financial problems, bankruptcy, interpersonal conflicts with family members, divorce, passing on this behavioral problem to children, as well as other legal, emotional and even physical problems” (Christenson et al., 1994; Faber, 2000 & 2003, p. 192; McElroy et al., 1994). These are the possible long-term effects compulsive buying can cause, obviously negatively, on addictive buyers.

Rebecca is the typical victim of shopping addiction or compulsive buying. Out-of-control shopping behaviour leads her to a huge debt of nearly ten thousand dollars and a constant fear of being caught and exposed. The miserable concerns do not only stay within financial issues, but also relate to psychological tension and mental health. Rebecca lives in agitation, evasion and continual lies. Further consequences of this situation come when all the lies and exceedingly unacceptable doings hurt her family and friends, and ruin her relationships and career prospects. The scene in which Rebecca is forced to sit down and run through all her purchases shows her state of great confusion. While Rebecca has to use alcohol to soothe her anxiety and give her courage to face the frightening reality, she appears to be in the

position of a fearful wrongdoer in utter panic and denial being interrogated and brutally judged. Her state of mystification, emotional collapse and paralysis is depicted best when Rebecca lies down on the floor, covered by a heap of credit bills, looking blankly at the ceiling in a daze, and wondering, “They said I was a valued customer; now they send me hate mail” (Hogan, 2009, 15:20-15:40). Rebecca’s question represents a common question of young people who get lost in the credit world.

The temporary, superficial solution of energy recharge and emotion solace lasts for an instant, before she is quickly left, again, with emptiness and unsolved problems, until she feels an urge to take it again. This happens constantly, reinforced by the frequency of the repetition and the expansion of uncovered holes inside, until it becomes a heavy addiction. The genuine confession of Rebecca, also the helpless cry of a shopaholic, echoes in the space and embeds in the heart of the viewer, “When I shop, the world gets better. The world is better. And then it’s not anymore. And I need to do it again” (Hogan, 2009, 1:16:30-1:17:00).

Like other forms of addiction, shopaholics ceaselessly crave for, and therefore continuously seek to repeat, the short-term positive effects that come along with the shopping process, which is sufficient to satisfy their constant void, regardless of the long-term negative effects that are also entailed and make more profound impacts on them later in life (Faber, 2003, p. 192). “The specific behavior becomes repetitive and problematic because immediate outcomes play a disproportionately large role in learning compared to more long-term effects” (Elliott, 1994; Faber, 2003, p. 192). In

addition, women “shop more frequently, allowing for repeated reinforcement of this behavior” (p. 191).

By repeating the experience, the film’s protagonist reinforces the habit, and makes the compulsive buying severe. Although the unbalance in psychological and emotional state urges Rebecca to shop as a therapy resource, the therapy is abused and comes back as her illness in the end. Ironically, her addiction of compulsive buying is an illness caused by an illness, an illness that develops from an abusive therapy. The addiction the film’s protagonist suffers from, however, is not only in fiction. It is a real-life phenomenon, a social sickness that has been affecting millions of people in the world. In his article, Danielle Todd (2011) refers to a study conducted by Stanford University that showed that there were more or less than 24 million people in the United States alone suffering from compulsive buying. Given the rise of consumerism, the estimated number must have been surged since then, in the United States and worldwide. The group therapy for shopaholics that Rebecca reluctantly joins under the insistence of her best friend proves the prevalence of this disease of the times in the contemporary society (Todd, 2011).

The sickness – therapy cycle of Rebecca Bloomwood manifests itself in the green scarf – the most symbolic item of the film. The existence of the green scarf is the embodiment of the society – the consumerism, materialism, social beliefs and values – that causes Rebecca’s sickness. It is then the therapy for Rebecca in her attempt to fix herself – to feel good, to look good, to love herself more, to be more secure and confident. In spite of the current financial situation, Rebecca decides to listen to the mannequin’s coaxing, which is also her inner voice, to buy the scarf, even

if it means she has to ask for money from a stranger and lie about it. At this phase, the therapy becomes a sickness when it takes control of her behaviours and makes negative impacts on her. The green scarf, in the end, represents a therapy for Rebecca as she hands the symbolic item to another woman, which signifies her renunciation of the bad shopping habit and the last step of her complete transformation. When the scarf comes back to her at last, it is now changed its representative meaning to an unexpected gift from a loved one, an item that symbolizes love and romantic niceties instead of materialism and shopping addiction. The fact that the important scarf only comes back when Rebecca has fully transformed to a different self signifies a fresh start of her life, a healthy chapter in which relationships begin and grow with love, not money.

Getting lost in the whirling vortex of the contemporary society, women, represented by Rebecca Bloomwood, are running blindly around a vicious cycle of consumption. Shopping is first a therapy, a source of short-term pleasure and a hiding place for a temporary escape from reality and negative feelings; then it becomes an addiction, and requires another therapy in the end.

4.2. Materialism and Romanticism

Although shopping addicts are usually perceived as being materialistic, they might actually be more of romantic souls than expected. Several studies have found the connection between compulsive buying and the level of fantasizing one might involve. Accordingly, compulsive buyers are reported to have a significantly high inclination towards fantasy (Edwards, 1992; Faber & O'Guinn, 1989; Faber, 2003;

Goldman, 2000). They tend to have a fertile imagination, which is employed in visualizing themselves being able to afford the goods or services, picturing the exciting prospects that will follow the purchases and the good results that the items in consideration will bring (Goldman, 2000).

The decision-making process of Rebecca when persuading herself to buy the green scarf provides convincing evidence that tells the viewer the heroine of the film is a romantic buyer. First of all, the detail that a store's mannequin is able to not only communicate like a human being but also employ critical thinking to convince a person to completely change her decision reveals the fantasy world of the shopaholic. The persuasive, eloquent speech of the mannequin shows not only a logical structure but also an impressive emotional intelligence. In fact, the performance is the reflection of Rebecca's own inner voice, using the mannequin to make the persuasion more objective and reliable, and therefore, the decision more justifiable. In the imaginative speech, Rebecca visualizes herself in the green scarf, i.e. how beautiful she would look and how confident she would feel in it, also how impressed the rest of the world would be. The existence of the "fairy" mannequins, either good or evil, plays a crucial role in highlighting the romantic characteristics of the consumer world. Shopping, therefore, is not only rational jobs in which humans make one-way impacts on materials, but rather fantasy dynamics within "the secret dream world"⁴ of every single consumer, in which thoughts bounce back and forth, objects actively exert influences on humans, and fantasies are secretly real in the silently exploding minds of the consumers.

⁴ *The Secret Dream World of a Shopaholic* is the original British title of the first novel in the Shopaholic series written by Sophie Kinsella.

Rebecca Bloomwood is clearly a compulsive buyer with great imagination. The border between materialistic and romantic motivation for her shopping is mostly blurred out. Rebecca sees the world through romantic eyes. The viewer can see an intriguing invasion of boldly romantic ideas into the materialistic land through the mind of the protagonist. Rebecca once amazes a bank owner by suggesting him to change the displays of his bank by decorating it with garish and eye-catching ornaments and to run a banking sale – an idea that feels surreal when attached to the soulless “money” world. Rebecca does not distinguish materialistic and romantic values; all of her material purchases bring her immeasurable spiritual values, which are also the starting point of her purchasing decisions. For Rebecca, shopping is the best romantic relationship in which all of her senses can be pleasantly awakened. As she admits it herself, her heart melts when she sees stores even more than when she sees attractive men. A shop, in the eyes of Rebecca, is not a commercial world but a real-life fairy wonderland. This fantasy perception and the integration of materialistic and romantic values came to Rebecca since she was a little girl and has been growing up with her from ever since.

Confessions of a Shopaholic (Hogan, 2009) begins with the childhood memory of the protagonist being recalled under her own narration. In front of the innocent eyes of the little girl, a materialistic and commercialistic world opens up brightly. The world full of prices taught little Rebecca the very first lesson in life: High prices buy you short-term happiness and low prices buy you long-term sadness; therefore, what you should do is to regularly recharge your happiness by loading yourself with high-priced products. It is evident that, in this context, commodity prices are unified with spiritual values.

Little Rebecca: When I was a little girl, there were real prices and mom prices. Real prices got you shiny, sparkle things that lasted three weeks, and mom prices got you brown things that lasted forever.

(Confessions of a Shopaholic, 2009, 00:25-01:00)

The contrast between the “real” world and “mom” world is highly noticeable, as discussed above, and the choice of colours speaks up manifold things. The “real” world in the eyes of little Rebecca has the lively colours of the rainbow and the unicorn, e.g. pink, blue, green, yellow, orange, red, purple, glittering gold and silver. It is widely acknowledged that the rainbow symbolizes hope, while the unicorn signifies fantasy, something too beautiful to exist. In other words, they are far-off and unreal; and the beliefs embedded in these symbols are solely products of imagination, false faiths created by humans to comfort themselves. It seems to be ironic enough when the most surreal world is referred to as the “real” world. It appears that real prices make surreal things reachable.

Little Rebecca: But when I looked into shop windows, I saw another world. A dreamy world full of perfect things. A world where grown-up girls got what they wanted. They were beautiful, like fairies or princesses. They didn’t even need any money. They had magic cards. I wanted one. Little did I know, I would end up with twelve.

(Confessions of a Shopaholic, 2009, 01:00-01:45)

Apparently, dreams come to real life with real prices. When dreams are caught and taken to the market, all girls can become fairies and princesses just as they wish. In the eyes of little Rebecca, the “dreamy world” of young girls and women emerges

behind the shop windows is a world in pink and white, with lady-like, long dresses and sparkling tiaras. In that dreamy, fairy world, the girls happily swivel around in pretty garments and admire their beautiful reflections. They are happy because their imaginations have just all come true with more fantasies following. The sense of fantasy emanates from all details in the “dreamy world”, even when it comes to “cold” money. Little Rebecca uses the word “magic” to describe the cards that grown-up girls use to get their fairy dresses. The soulless credit card, then, is not a mere inanimate object anymore; and money seems no longer cold as it is often regarded. The most material object suddenly becomes an amazing magic wand in fairy tales, with which you easily get what you want in only a graceful wave. Again, the word “magic” effortlessly transforms the whole story into the matter of romance and aesthetic, not anymore “vulgar” materialism.

The green scarf appears to be the best symbol of the integrated, inextricable values of materialism and romanticism. It is evidently a material item, produced and offered for sale – at a high price obviously – in a materialistic world. It is an expensive scarf that embodies people’s material desire and the rise of materialism. The colour green of the scarf also suggests some interesting meaning when it is traditionally considered to represent money in the European culture. On the other hand, it is connected with the fantasy world of the buyer and evokes their romantic dreams. Regardless of how materialistic the starting point might be, the scarf actually makes a romantic relationship. The scarf at the beginning and at the end, despite being the same material item, carries different meanings and values. In the end, it is no longer a fantasy of an individual, but a real love story of a couple; it is not anymore the embodiment of the materialistic world, but a memento of love and

romance. The scarf also represents the protagonist's transformation, marking the turning point in her awareness development and behavioural orientation, in which she renounces materialistic values and short-term benefits for spiritual values and long-term well-being.

Rebecca introduces herself with all materials attached, i.e. credit cards, fashion brands, discount and money, all plastered on her body like glittering medals. She seems to be an embodiment of a materialistic world. Rebecca, however, does not completely see or treat that world in a materialistic way. Instead, she sees a romantic fantasy world that fulfills her emotional needs, brings her pleasure and awakens her senses. Consumption, therefore, means much more to women than just purchases. The materialistic and romantic motivations behind women's consumption are sometimes difficult to be separated. The mannequins are not only "a physical embodiment of Becky's faulty inner voice" (Todd, 2011, p. 56), but also symbolize the great temptation of the stores, the influence of the social beliefs, and the manipulation of the capitalism exerted on women as consumers.

4.3. The dilemma of identities

In the recent time, women find themselves positioned at the crossroads of identities. They are struggling to find a way in between the traditional concepts of femininity, the commercially constructed feminine identity, and the personal identity – the peculiar traits of self. The media and commercial industries, including magazines and advertisements, have been shaping the social concepts of femininity. The ideals of feminine beauty and desirable image have been defined and targeted at women as the

main force of consumers to orient their tastes and induce their desires (Loeb, 1994; Boden, 2003). Women are not only encouraged to improve their image up to the standards, but also prompted to find their own styles and express their own identities through consumption.

Rebecca Bloomwood appears to represent the allegedly traditional feminine characteristics in manifold ways, from her appearance to her thoughts and behaviours. With long wavy hair, wide innocent eyes and lovely bright makeup, Rebecca seems to represent the looks of a supposedly fairy princess. The colour choice of her clothes is always bright and girly, blooming like a flower garden. Pink, followed by orange and purple, is noticed to be the dominant colour that reoccurs most frequently in her choice of outfits, accessories and personal items, i.e. shirts, dresses, coats, scarves, bags, portable computer, stationary and so forth. The looks she applies when she appears for the first time and introduces herself to the viewer should be the best representative of the contemporary self of hers, in which she wears a whole pink set of dress, coat, and boots, mixed with red and white accessories – a perfectly feminine taste. Throughout the film, she is found wearing dresses and high heels in most of the scenes she appears. Rebecca possesses personalities that seem to fit in the widely acknowledged feminine traits, i.e. she is absent-minded, erratic, impulsive, emotional, credulous, sociable and imaginative. Every of her gestures and emotions is also adorably feminine, for example, when she sharpens her pencil, brings it to her lips and gives it an innocent sharp blow, or the fact that she always notices little things such as a small photo frame.

The attractiveness of personal identity creation does not neglect Rebecca Bloomwood. It can be noticed that Rebecca loves the idea of building personal trademark and expressing herself through what she wears. In the very first scene of the present time, Rebecca makes her entrance by striding confidently in the street and listing her clothes and accessories as part of her self-introduction, following her name and occupation.

Rebecca: Rebecca Bloomwood. Occupation: Journalist. Jacket: Visa. Dress: AMEX. Belt: MasterCard. It's vintage. And I got one percent cash back. Bag: Gucci. It's worth every penny.

(Confessions of a Shopaholic, 2009, 01:45-02:00)

The way she lists out her personal information and items on spot reminds the viewer of the street style column in the women's magazines, where ordinary people get approached in public places, asked for full-length photos and the clothes they are wearing for the purpose of public display of their fashion styles and personal tastes that are open for public discussion and criticism. As Rebecca admits it herself in the novel:

It's a habit of mine, itemizing the clothes I'm wearing, as though for a fashion page. I've been doing it for years – ever since I used to read Just Seventeen. Every issue, they'd stop a girl on the street, take a picture of her, and list all her clothes. 'T-Shirt: Chelsea Girl, Jeans: Top Shop, Shoes: borrowed from friend.' I used to read those lists avidly – and to this day, if I buy something from a shop that's a bit uncool, I cut the label out. So that if I'm ever stopped in the street, I can pretend I don't know where it's from. (Sophie Kinsella, 2000, p. 21)

Apparently, Rebecca craves for creating her self-image, and longs for praises for the consumption she makes and attention to the items she uses. The Hollywood adaptation, however, makes this characteristic another level by emphasizing the materialistic obsession flourishing in the credit world. The film's protagonist, instead of just listing her items by their brands, notes them with the credit cards she used to make each of the purchases. Consumption, then, defines her not only through the products, but also the means she purchases them.

The item that identifies Rebecca the most in *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009) is the green scarf, a symbolic item that is brilliantly designed to convey numerous significant meanings. The green scarf represents both the social embedded feminine identity and the personal identity of the film's heroine. First of all, the image of a scarf commonly connotes the warmth, coziness, tenderness, sweetness, security, and loving and caring senses. The scarf, therefore, is often regarded as a signification of a woman, especially a traditional one – one of the family, a kind and beloved mother, and her characteristics rather than a man. Moreover, a thin, light, and silky scarf can be likened to a slender and elegant woman who exudes gentle and feminine feelings, while a trendy scarf evokes an image of a fashionable one. Apart from being a fashionable item with highly functional values, the scarf, as an invaluable and flexible accessory, can also be used to create the sense of personal identity, “a definition of [one's] psyche” (Hogan, 2009, 05:20-05:30).

When Rebecca sees her favourite scarf is now on sale, she gets drawn into it naturally. Immediately, she is transfixed with lust and completely seized by the desire to possess the scarf. Nevertheless, she manages to withdraw her eager fingers,

clenching them tight in resonant fists, turning away chin-up firmly, and convincing herself that she does not really need a new scarf especially given the severe debt situation she is encountering. She is, however, quickly turns around right after that hard decision, as quickly as though she has always meant to, thankfully grasped by the siren voice of the mannequin.

Rebecca: Rebecca, you just got a credit card bill of \$900. You do not need a scarf.

Mannequin: Then again, who needs a scarf? Wrap some old jeans around your neck, that'll keep you warm. That's what your mother would do.

Rebecca: You're right. She would.

Mannequin: The point about this scarf is that it would become part of a definition of your psyche. Do you see what I mean?

Rebecca: No, I do. Keep talking.

Mannequin: It would make your eyes look bigger.

Rebecca: It would make my haircut look more expensive.

Mannequin: You'd wear it with everything.

Rebecca: It would be an investment.

Mannequin: You would walk into that interview confident.

Rebecca: Confident.

Mannequin: And poised.

Rebecca: Poised.

Mannequin: The girl in the green scarf.

(Confessions of a Shopaholic, 2009, 04:50-06:10)

The viewer can see the psychological struggle inside her mind, in which she imagines a dialogue with the mannequin, and the process of her giving up and falling

for the enchantment. The heroine of the film releases her mind freely to be hypnotized and gradually persuaded by the mannequin. Rebecca even encourages the mannequin to elaborate its speech and allows it to enchant her till the end. By repeating the key words after the mannequin, lapping up everything it pours in her ears, she lets herself enjoy the arousal flooding through her mind and body, and continuously climbing up to the top of the pleasure. It all reminds the viewer of a burning love course, which erupts at the decisive shot of the spell: “the girl in the green scarf.” Evidently, Rebecca only needs an irresistible urge and reasonable excuses to justify her desire and foster her determination of making the purchase. The promise of a signature identity sounds too appealing to deny any further, and strong enough that Rebecca yields to it and gaily makes up her mind. “Oh yes!” it is the moment.

The green scarf, then, does identify Rebecca publicly and represent something even bigger. Among all of her clothes and belongings, the scarf is associated with her career success and achievements, represents the people’s beloved journalist globally – bringing her name out to the big world. This special item becomes, surprisingly as the mannequin once says, the embodiment of her tastes, her story and the voice from inside, her individual, single identity, “part of the definition of [her] psyche.” “The girl in the green scarf”, however, manifests its meaning another step further than that by carrying itself over the image of Rebecca Bloomwood as a single individual. Since the nature of working as a social journalist is to raise up a slice of reality, reflect the society from angles, and speak up the voice of specific communities, “the girl in the green scarf” represents people like her – a generation of the young and hungry, living in the world of materialism and consumerism with both the enjoyment and confusion it brings, wondering about life and real values, getting lost and tired in the battle of

identities and self definition. Rebecca, under her pen name, has actually accomplished the initial idea she comes up with when first starting her column, as to infuse it with a sense of “an everyman”, by which the common concerns of women are brought up strongly and officially.

4.4. The loop of femininity – or a new round of a spiral?

Nowadays, with tremendous improvements in gender equality, women are acknowledged to have gained numerous critical political achievements, vastly enhanced their social power and consolidated their independent role. Nevertheless, contemporary women are found bewildered at “a middle point between the two extremes of traditional femininity and feminism” (Williams, 2012, p. 3). It is argued that there has been occurring a so-called “third wave feminism”, in which women are encountering “competing and sometimes contradictory ideologies” of femininity and gender representation (p. 3). What might happen is that, “if two competing ideologies are presented as being equally and fully attainable, individuals may face unrealistic demands to fulfill both, leading to confusion, tension, and even low self-esteem” (p. 3). On the other hand, the generation of women who manage to harmonize “traditional femininity” and “resistant femininity” is now generating a new form of femininity called ‘empowered femininity’ (p. 71).

Besides the “traditional femininity” that is noticeable, the “resistant femininity” can also be recognised in Rebecca Bloomwood. The heroine of the film knows exactly what she would love to do and has a strong career aspiration. She heads forward tenaciously to her dream with great enthusiasm and no fear of falling.

The viewer sees her run around, fall down and get hurt sometimes but quickly pull herself up afterwards. Although she gets her life into troubles in the end for being impulsive and irresponsible, she is undeniably independent and spiritually fierce. Rebecca does not expect to rely on her family and friends to solve her personal problems and get her out of her own troubles, either with her financial or career issues.

When the whole world suddenly slams the door in her face, Rebecca does not let herself give up and fall down; instead, she becomes stronger at the centre of the storm. She musters all her courage and determination to take action, proactively searching and requesting for help.

Rebecca: I'm Rebecca Bloomwood and I'm a shopaholic. I destroyed my career on national television. I lied to the man I love. I hurt my best friend. I invented a stalker, and I don't even speak Finnish. But I have a plan, and I need your help. Who's with me?

(Confessions of a Shopaholic, 2009, 1:28:00-1:28:40)

The scene in which Rebecca hastily runs to the shopaholic therapy group, introduces herself loudly and clearly as a shopaholic and asks for support from her peers indicates a complete change inside the heroine – a sense of self-acceptance and self-actualization is coming to enlighten her. She bangs the door open, shows up with great desperation yet with all determination and excitement emanating from inside, and gives a bound and determined statement as ever. Rebecca no longer tries to deny her sickness and failure; instead, she is willing to confront them without the need of coercion, and ready to overcome them by her own spiritual strength.

However, Todd (2011) argues that the ending of the film adaptation, which is greatly changed compared to the original novel, suggests “a step backward instead of forward” (p. 57) in regard to the issue of feminism, and negates all tenacious efforts of the heroine to build up a modern feminine image. Accordingly, the protagonist is rescued from her troubles by a Prince Charming. Not only does Luke discreetly help Rebecca pay off her debts, but he also motivates her to get out of her addiction, and gives her a job afterwards. If Luke is the one who saves Rebecca from her desperate need of money for the green scarf at the beginning of the film, he is again the one who saves her from her desperate need of money for her bad situation at the end of the film. From small money to big money, from trivial stuff to crucial case, it seems like Luke is the answer to all the problems of Rebecca. The fact that Rebecca relies on Luke to handle her life issues indicates that women are weaker, independent creatures that need to be rescued by men, who are obviously stronger, more sensible and powerful. In the end, she yields to life and chooses a safer, easier, perhaps wiser pathway. This line, therefore, reinforces the “patriarchal ideology and conservative values” (Todd, 2011, p. 57), and perpetuates the traditional concepts of femininity.

On the other hand, the ending, albeit attaching to a compromise of the heroine with the “resistant femininity”, shows the self-awareness and strong will of hers to end her bad habit and poor situation on her own. In fact, she manages to solve the problems she has made by her own solution and action, without knowing the little discreet support from the man she loves. If Luke is omitted from the scene, the viewer can clearly see that good results are earned completely by the efforts, mentally and spiritually, of Rebecca. Furthermore, the job that is arguably given to Rebecca by a male saviour is actually the achievement that Rebecca earns by herself and

unarguably deserves to get. If the story is observed from a different angle, it becomes evident that Rebecca, from the beginning of the film, has proved to be a brilliant writer and the exact type of journalist that Luke needs for his magazine. With her own efforts and talents, Rebecca is actually offered a special position at *Alette* that she always dreams of, but she refuses it and chooses Luke and his “money” magazine instead. This is the choice she makes voluntarily, not a blessing she has to take in the last resort. It is, therefore, the man and the job that need the woman. It is, after all, the woman and her qualities that come and save the man.

The green scarf, again, comes to the scene as an outstanding embodiment. By being the paramount witness and representative image of the rise of women, it represents the “empowered femininity”. The green scarf is associated with the protagonist’s career success and travels with her beyond her territory to bring her stories and concerns worldwide. This symbolizes women’s achievements and the internationally acknowledgement of women’s viewpoint, as well as the narrowing of gender gap in regard to general awareness and common issues. The scarf, on the other hand, represents the mentally and emotionally weakness of women since its existence is linked with debts, lies, addiction and dependence. The fact that in both of the times when the crucially important scarf comes and returns to Rebecca, she only gets it either with or from the hand of a man, implies a subordinate position of women to men.

Apparently, the Hollywood film *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009) represents a wondering generation of women in the contemporary society with on going changes in gender attitudes, rather than merely a move “backward or forward”.

Rebecca is found with both “traditional femininity” and “resistant femininity”; she has the power over her life but uses it in a wrong way, so she retreats wisely and switches the power in another direction. Women fight diligently and get tired. They are lost but finding a new way.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Restatement

Since its birth in the eighteenth century, consumer culture has been growing and expanding across the world. It is affecting human life in various ways. It has been exerting significantly influences on our values, attitudes and beliefs. How people live and perceive their lives have been dramatically changed forever. Following the Industrial Revolution, there has never been in human history wide range of goods and services mass-produced and amply available within a click as there is now. Within consumer culture, people have invented numerous functional and recreational goods, services and activities that enhance human life, provide it with convenience and pleasure. Besides good effects, there are undeniably manifold negative consequences of consumer culture. Newborn crimes and illnesses have come to human society, bringing more temptations and troubles to the already chaos. One of the most popular illnesses of the time is shopping addiction, to which women are found more vulnerable. Women have a history of relationship with consumption since this activity has been viewed as an essential task of women as wives and mothers. Along the development of consumer culture, the advertising and the media have always been targeting women, manipulating and making them loyal customers. Also, women, traditionally regarded as more emotional gender in many cultures, tend to enjoy shopping more as a recreational activity. All these reasons together make women more prone to excessive and compulsive shopping behaviours.

This thesis aims at examining how contemporary Hollywood films depict the image of women in consumer culture, i.e. how the connection between women's values, attitudes and behaviours and the world of consumerism is built in Hollywood cinema. By conducting a scientific research into *Bride Wars* (Winick, 2009) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009), this thesis focuses on providing the answer for the question: *How are women in relation to consumer culture represented in contemporary Hollywood feature films?*

The research is conducted based on post-structuralist textual analysis. The films under scrutiny are treated as meaningful texts from which fruitful parts are examined to produce answer to the research question. Post-structuralist approach has two typical characteristics, which are the acknowledgement of differences and the selectivity of analysis. The former means that a post-structuralist textual research does not expect to celebrate the one and only approach. It does not intend to acknowledge a specific "human sense-making" while objecting the others. The approach of this research is, therefore, a possible interpretation made in association with the context of the researcher; the approaches of different research materials are also treated fairly without bias. The latter means that a post-structuralist textual research does not attempt to analyse all details of the texts under scrutiny, but preferably select and examine only important elements of the texts that are potential sources of research findings. This research, therefore, does not touch all the elements of the chosen films; it instead studies a few significant details in order to give the best results within the limit of a master's thesis.

5.2. Findings

Bride Wars (Winick, 2009) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Hogan, 2009) both discuss women and consumer culture of the twenty-first century. Both of the films highlight ludicrous pictures of contemporary consumer culture and excessive behaviours of young women gone wild with shopping through humorous voice of romantic-comedy. The focused aspects of those depicted by each of the films, however, are fairly different. While the former focuses on wedding industries, the latter addresses the topic of shopping addiction.

Bride Wars (Winick, 2009) shows the viewer a society in which women are imbued with dreams of lavish white weddings since their childhood. The fairy tales of princesses in beautiful long dresses finding true loves and living happily ever after, especially of Cinderella, have been read to girls for generations, which stimulates their princess dreams. The media and wedding industries target women, deploying these feminine childhood dreams, creating and stirring romantic fantasies to manipulate them into materialistic desires. There is hardly a boundary between romantic and materialistic in contemporary wedding culture. Romance and true love have price tags and dreams can be purchased to the extent of the costs couples are willing to pay. Women become romantic and materialistic creatures who think fancy and talk money. Wedding, particularly white wedding, has become a celebration of femininity. Women magazines play a crucial role in building standards of femininity for weddings and encouraging women to pursue that image for a successful once-in-a-lifetime big day. Women are also found to be moderators of values. They are carrying within themselves different, even contrasting, values and attitudes, and trying to

harmonize them in modern weddings. In the contemporary context, the femininity celebrated in the traditional white wedding does not signify the gender inequality. The bride being escorted by her male kin and taken to her husband no longer refers to the interpretation that she is a commodity possessed by men – the stronger sex. Modern women can be beautiful feminine princesses while being strong, powerful, assertive and confident at the same time. They can also take wedding a personal and familial event simultaneously. Modern weddings are, indeed, special occasions to celebrate individual identities, present personal tastes and fulfill one's own dreams. However, they can also be maintained as occasions to connect generations and fulfill the wishes of family members, more specifically parents, under the thoughtfulness and flexibility of the brides.

Confessions of a Shopaholic (Hogan, 2009) depicts a tempting society in which women are completely lost in a dreamy yet dangerous world of consumerism. It is ironic that shopping addiction is a sickness developed from a therapy. Modern life with a lot of pressure, alienation, boredom and temptation lures people into shopping as a therapy to release stress and a source of pleasure. Women are more vulnerable to the spell of shopping, and more prone to do it excessively and compulsively. When shopping becomes out of control and causes negative consequences for the doers, it turns into a sickness that needs another therapy; the fix turns into the fault and needs another fix to get desperate women out of troubles. There exists a paradox which is that women as shopping addicts are actually romantic as much as materialistic they might seem to be. They are talent at fantasizing and come to making purchases by the seduction of their fantasies. Shopping appears to be not the story of solely products but the whole experiences that explode in the

shopper's mind and bring them intangible benefits. Women in contemporary society are placed in the crossroad of identities. They consume to express personal identities, to follow the media-instructed identities, and to meet traditional identities. They struggle to combine standards and harmonize values, to stand out in their own paths but not to stand behind in the common way. In the intense race for identities, women appear to create new feminine identity. It is not "a step backward", as Todd (2011, p. 57) argues, but rather a step to another direction, not necessarily stronger or weaker.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for further research

One of the limitations of this research is the limited number of films analysed. Two films on women and consumption hardly represent the entire body of Hollywood films related to the topic; and a few fictional characters cannot refer much to the reality. However, the purpose of the research is not to form any extrapolation from the findings. The research, instead, focuses only on the chosen texts themselves for the input and output of information and does not aim at making generalizations, inferences or judgements for extended contexts.

Another limitation of this research is the limited number of research question. Instead of expanding the scope of the research and drawing wider range of results from the given materials, the research chooses to focus only on one question of representation. This choice is made to avoid a superficial thesis, dedicate the whole space and effort in examining thoroughly one problem within the limit of a master's thesis.

Further research can be conducted in the directions of either extending research materials or developing research questions. More Hollywood films of the same topic can be examined, and further follow-up questions can be raised. Contemporary Hollywood romantic-comedies can be mentioned as *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006) and *Sex and the City* (King, 2008 & 2010). Besides, there are manifold films that touch the topic or include women being located in consumer culture that can be explored. Some suggestions of possible research questions can be, for example, “How are women’s consumption philosophies represented in contemporary Hollywood films?” “How have women’s attitudes towards consumption changed in Hollywood films in the past 50 years?” “How does consumer culture affect women’s social relationships in contemporary Hollywood films?”

This thesis is expected to bring interesting viewpoints into the studies of films and cultures, and hopefully contribute a humble part to the vast knowledge of the research field.

6. References

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