Social Perceptions of Fashion

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined people's perceptions of others as a function of fashion choices, specifically Western wedding dresses. A total of 250 UC Riverside undergraduate participants viewed a series of pictures of the model's silhouettes wearing Western-style wedding dresses and reported their perceptions (e.g., confident, original, shy, vain, fun) of the model in each picture. The wedding dresses varied in neckline (i.e., Sweetheart, V-Neck, Halter, High Neck and silhouette (i.e., A-line, Mermaid, Fit and Flare, Ballgown). We found significant, reliable differences in how participants perceived the models as a function of dress silhouette and neckline. Specifically, participants perceived the models wearing the Fit and Flare silhouette to be especially confident, original, fun, and vain, but the models wearing the A-line silhouette to be the least confident, original, and fun. Furthermore, participants perceived the models wearing the V-neck neckline to be especially confident and vain, but the models wearing the High Neck to be the least confident, original, and fun. Additionally, the participants perceived the models wearing the Sweetheart neckline to be especially original, and fun, and the models wearing the Halter neckline especially confident. It is important to note that the Halter, High Neck, and Sweetheart all scored the same in the vain category. This research establishes a relationship between wedding dresses and social perceptions, which brides can use to select the dresses to convey their desired perceptions, and fashion shows and businesses can use to better serve their customers.

KEYWORDS: Social perception, fashion, Western wedding dresses, silhouettes, necklines

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INTRODUCTION

Piano music is booming loudly, which cues the audience to stand and turn promptly toward the direction of the bride entering the beautiful ceremony. As the bride walks down the aisle, everyone gasps. However, before anyone notices the person next to the bride as they make their way down the aisle, all eyes are fixated on the gorgeous white dress that the bride is wearing. Subconsciously, as the bride is walking down the aisle, each person in the audience is not only admiring the bride, but is also making their own perceptual judgment of the bride based on the wedding dress of the bride's choosing. For example, people in the audience could be thinking about positive attributes of the bride such as how confident the bride looks, how original the bride is, or how fun the bride can be. However, there could also be other kinds of perceptions that are made, such as how vain the bride may be or how shy the bride looks. Regardless of what kind of perception is being made, the process of creating a judgment based on a specific element is referred to as a social perception.

Social perception can be applied to any and all objects or settings, such as race, gender, physical features, body movements/behaviors, fashion, environment, etc. Since this can be applied in every situation and context, unfortunately, the act of making social perceptions is oftentimes forgotten or overlooked. Consequently, this research will directly focus on the idea of social perception in the context of fashion. However, to understand the relationship between social perception and fashion, we must first understand what these two different elements are.

Social perception refers to the processes involved when an individual assumes attributes about another individual based on their behavior, values, attitude, etc. (Davis & Lennon, 1988). For example, when people begin interacting with others, inevitably, there is already some sort of impression forming, and getting to know the person would either support the initial thoughts one may have, or the person may turn out to be the complete opposite. This simple act of making social perceptions is thought to be fundamental in sustaining society and promoting consistent communication and human interaction (Barresi & Moore, 1996). Given this, social perceptions are truly important and ingrained in society.

Moving forward, fashion is defined as an expressive and creative way that encapsulates a variety of goals the wearer may have, whether it's moving, feeling, or specific thoughts (Thornquist, 2018). Each person has a different goal or perception they want from their viewers when creating their outfit each day, so the variety of perceptual traits that can be inferred can be boundless. Given this, fashion is typically one of the initial factors that people use to formulate first impressions since fashion can effectively communicate to people about these different social perceptions, as clothing serves as a non-verbal cue (Davis & Lennon, 1988). People frequently overlook fashion despite the intention that is placed within every piece that is chosen for an outfit, as each element sends some sort of message to others, either intentionally or unintentionally. Given this, fashion as a whole is a very important element to consider when it comes to creating first impressions or judgments from anyone who sees the entire outfit put together.

Existing research has demonstrated that fashion choices are related to social perceptions. Whether it is a simple garment or an elaborate piece, perceivers make inferences about other people based on the clothing they wear. However, many types of clothing exist that are worn for different kinds of occasions or environments, such as everyday wear or important life events, like weddings. Despite the cultural and personal significance of weddings to brides, grooms, families, and friends, there is little research that has examined social perceptions of wedding dresses. Wedding dresses are one of the most important outfits one wears in a lifetime, as weddings are oftentimes considered one of the most special events for many. This is agreed upon in the fashion industry as well; wedding dresses are designed much more intricately than other kinds of outfits. This is because wedding dresses primarily rely on two important items, the aesthetic or style of the bride and the social perceptions of anyone who sees the dress. Given this, this study aims to fill this gap, which will not only advance social perception theory but also provide practical information to related fashion industries. However, before delving into the importance of this research, it is important to set some context and background on wedding dresses.

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Wedding dresses have been a symbol of marriage, love, and weddings for centuries. Brides have realized how important it is to pick out a wedding dress as the style, color, silhouette, neckline, and fabric play a huge part in the decision-making process. More specifically, when it comes to the elements of a wedding dress, both the silhouette and neckline may be key components when selecting a dress, as both elements are what bridal consultants typically take note of during the first bridal consultation. Because of this, I believe both the silhouette and necklines are two of the most important determining factors in a bride's decision making.

There are 14 total silhouettes (Raniwala, 2024), and the 4 most common silhouettes are A-line, Mermaid, Fit and Flare, and Ballgown. The A-line silhouette is composed of a tight bodice and the rest of the dress drops right under the breasts and slightly flares out, which creates the "A" shape bottom (Raniwala, 2024). The Mermaid silhouette is also composed of a tighter bodice at the top; however, this silhouette's main goal is to accentuate the bodice, hips, waist, and flares out around the knee area to make a semi-poofy shape at the bottom (Raniwala, 2024). The Fit and Flare silhouette is similar to the Mermaid silhouette; where it accentuates the bodice, hips, and waist, but gradually flares out at the hem of the skirt (Raniwala, 2024). Lastly, the Ballgown silhouette has a fitted bodice, but the fabric flows down into a larger, dramatic shirt (Raniwala,2024).

Moving forward, there are 15 necklines total for wedding dresses (Varina, 2023), and the four most common necklines are: Halter, High Neck, Sweetheart, and V-neck. The Halter neckline is composed of the top piece running from the front of the gown all the way up and around the neck, typically exposing the shoulder and collarbone (Kleinfeld, n.d.). The High Neck neckline can either sit above or right at the base of the neck, which provides the most coverage in comparison to all of the other necklines (Varina, 2024). The Sweetheart neckline drops down to the front and center of the gown, creating a heart shaped style (Kleinfeld, n.d.). Lastly, the V-neck neckline plunges down to a certain point towards the top center of the bodice, creating the letter "V" (Kleinfeld, n.d.).

Throughout history, despite the variety of silhouettes and necklines, it has been stipulated amongst the bridal community that a white, modest wedding dress style symbolizes purity and elegance, which is why this trend has lasted for many centuries (Fundunk & Cuden, 2017). Given this, if a bride wanted their dress to exemplify these characteristics for their audience, then they may aim for a more modest and white gown instead of something "out of the ordinary" such as a more revealing neckline or tighter silhouette. Furthermore, not only does a white wedding dress represent purity and elegance, but it can also allude to the perception that the bride emulates the characteristics of a "traditional" woman, so if a bride does not select a wedding gown that fits this perception, then there would be room for other types of perception and judgment from anyone who sees the dress, unfortunately (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2014). This is why for centuries white wedding dresses have been favored in the West.

When it comes to the dress selection process, not only is it important for the bride to select the dress, but typically, a bride will want to have opinions firsthand from a very selective group of family and friends (i.e., the entourage). However, having an entourage may complicate the decision-making process for the bride, as the entourage could sway the bride in the direction that they did not envision for their big day. For example, if the bride's entourage does not agree on a dress, they can take over the appointment by choosing a wedding dress they prefer and have an existing perception of (Min, Ceballos, & Yurchisin, 2018). Needless to say, the final dress selection process ends up based on different perceptions: the bride's and the entourage's.

However, other than the brides and their entourage's opinion, the bride could be persuaded in different directions based on current wedding dress trends. For example, trendy bridal dresses tends to feature more "extravagant" patterns, colors, and cuts, such as: feathers, sequins, lots of appliques, pastel colors, or even straying away from the traditional white color altogether. This is because people today care about being different and want to be distant from the common trends (Berger, 2008). More recently, Vogue published an article that discusses this phenomenon that currently brides are leaning more towards non-traditional styles of wedding dresses that prioritize showing off personality rather than

staying on the "safer," more traditional style (Neilson, 2024). As brides become more confident in style and select nontraditional dresses, more brides follow suit, which causes a shift in wedding dresses designs, as designers are now straying further away from the traditional modest and traditional style.

Research Question

Do perceptions of brides vary based on the silhouette and neckline of their wedding dress?

Hypothesis

I believe that there is an existing perception people have when looking at an individual's wedding dress. More specifically, I predict that models wearing Sweetheart and High Neck necklines, and A-line and Ballgown silhouettes will be perceived as relatively more timid, reserved, and kind. In contrast, I predict that models wearing Halter and V-neck necklines, and Mermaid and Fit and Flare silhouettes will be perceived as relatively more confident, conceited, outgoing, and fun.

METHODS

To conduct this experiment, undergraduate students were provided a web-based survey (Qualtrics) that was opened at the beginning of the 2023 fall quarter, and remained open until the end of the quarter. Before the survey was released on Qualtrics, the study received IRB approval. In order to participate in this study, all participants were required to consent. This is a within-participant design, as all participants were shown the same 48 images and made their decisions based on the same 15 perceptual traits. It is important to note that all participants were shown 1 image of a model in a wedding dress at a time, and with each image, they were required to report how much they agreed with a series of the preselected 15 perceptual traits. After viewing all dresses and reporting their perceptions, participants also responded to 11 questions regarding their exposure to the wedding industry. For example: "Have you been part of a bridal/groom party within the last year" and "Have you been to a wedding within the last year?" After answering the 11 questions, participants completed a couple of attention checks and demographic questions. Lastly, before being able to exit the survey, all participants looked at a debriefing form and provided their consent (if they chose to) for us to use their submitted data for further analysis.

Participants

A total of 260 undergraduate students who all attend the University of California, Riverside, participated in this study. All participants were recruited on SONA and are enrolled in an introductory psychology course: PSYC001 or PSYC002. Of these 260 participants, 10 were excluded due to providing incomplete data (i.e. not answering a question); therefore, 250 participants were included in the final analysis. The age range was 18 to 24 years. 34% of the participants identified as male, 64% as female, and 2% did not identify as either gender. Furthermore, the participants were highly diverse in terms of race. 1.6% of the participants identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 9.2% as Biracial or Multiracial, 1% as Black or African-American, 24% as East Asian, 4% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 11.6 % as South Asian, 22.8 % as White/Caucasian, and 16.4% preferred not to answer. Lastly, we also observed the marital status of each participant. 64.8 % of the participants are single, 28.4% of the participants are dating, 0.8% of the participants are engaged, 0.8% of the participants are married, and no participants were divorced or separated.

In response to the questions assessing exposure to the wedding industry, for the question, "Have you been part of a bridal/groom party within the last year?", 8% of the participants responded yes, and 92% responded no. For the question, "Have you been to a wedding within the last year?", 26% of the participants responded yes, and 74% responded no. For the question, "Have you watched any shows or seen any social media content related to American weddings within the last year?", 62.4% responded yes and 37.6% responded no. Lastly, for the question, "Did any other factors (such as fabric, poses, sleeves, etc.) influence your opinion?", 88.8% of the participants responded yes, and 11.2% responded no. In order to see what factors may have influenced a participant's decision, we provided an array of potential confounding variables for participants to choose from, as they can choose multiple confounds if they answered yes to the previous question. Given this, 70.8% of the participants considered the fabric (Lace, Silk, Tulle, etc.), 64% of the participants considered sleeves, 60.4% of

the participants considered poses (the way the person was positioned in the image), 4% of the participants considered the background color, and 4.8% of the participants selected no to this question.

Materials

In this study, participants viewed a total of 48 images of Western-style wedding dresses. The dresses varied in neckline (i.e., Halter, High Neck, Sweetheart, V-neck) and silhouette (i.e., A-line, Mermaid, Fit and Flare, Ballgown). This is the manipulated variable. It is important to note that all of the images have been edited to obscure identifying social information about the wearer. All images of the wedding dresses were presented in random order and displayed for at least 15 seconds before participants could move on to the next image.

	A-Line	Ballgown	Fit and Flare	Mermaid
Halter				
High neck				
Sweetheart				
V-Neck				

Figure 1 Silhouette and Neckline Examples

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Measures

For each dress, participants rated the extent to which they would infer a variety of perceptual traits about the wearer. We were interested in 5 primary perceptual traits: confident, original, shy, vain, and fun. However, there were a total of 15 traits that were asked because we decided to include 2 additional synonyms apart from the original 5 traits and averaged this together at the end. The 15 total perceptual traits include the following: confidence, outgoing, sociable, creative, original, authentic, shy, timid, reserved, disingenuous, vain, conceited, fun, whimsical, and playful, which is the measured variable. All of these characteristics are reported on a 7-point scale, with the following labels: Definitely Not, Probably Not, Might or Might Not, Probably Yes, and Definitely Yes. The terms coordinate with a range of numbers on the 0-7 scale as follows: 0 represents Definitely Not, 7 represents Definitely Yes, 1-2 represents Probably Not, 6 represents Probably Yes. 3-4 represents Might, and 5 represents "Might Not."

RESULTS

We used a series of ANOVAs to analyze responses for each trait for silhouettes and, separately, for necklines. For silhouettes, we found significant, reliable differences in how participants perceived models on all five dimensions (Figure 2): confident $F(3,249) = 59.05, p<0.001$; original $F(3,249) = 12.26, p<0.001$; shy $F(3,249) = 38.92, p<.001$; vain $F(3,249) = 36.58, p<0.001$; and fun $F(3,249) = 10.96, p<.001$. Participants perceived models wearing the Fit and Flare silhouette to be especially confident ($M = 3.73, SD = 0.39$), original ($M = 3.39, SD = 0.41$), and vain ($M = 2.80, SD = 0.45$); however, fun perceptual trait scored the lowest out of all of the four silhouettes ($M = 3.30, SD = 0.45$). Additionally, models wearing the A-line silhouette were perceived to be the least confident ($M = 3.13, SD = 0.97$), original ($M = 3.18, SD = 0.75$), vain ($M = 2.50, SD = 0.67$), and fun ($M = 3.09, SD = 0.72$), and the most shy ($M = 2.80, SD = 0.65$). Additionally, both the Ballgown and Mermaid silhouette fell in the middle between all of the ratings. Participants perceived models wearing the Ballgown silhouette to be confident ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.49$), original $M = 3.24, SD = 0.52$, shy ($M = 2.88, SD = 0.50$), vain ($M = 2.53, SD = 0.55$), and fun ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.47$).

Lastly, participants perceived models wearing the Mermaid silhouette to be confident ($M = 3.36, SD = 0.49$), original ($M= 3.24, SD = 0.52$), shy ($M = 2.88, SD = 0.50$), vain ($M = 2.53, SD = 0.55$), and fun ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.47$).

Furthermore, we also found significant, reliable differences in how participants perceived models as a function of dress necklines on all five dimensions (Figure 3): confident $F(3,248) = 156.73, p<0.001$; original $F(3,248) = 32.13, p<.001$; shy $F(3,248) = 207.81, p<0.001$; vain $F(3,248) = 10.88, p<0.001$; and fun $F(3,248) = 63.28, p<0.001$. Participants perceived the models wearing the V-neck neckline to be especially confident ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.39$) and vain ($M = 2.76, SD =0.46$), and the ratings for the original trait ($M = 3.35, SD = 0.40$), shy trait ($M = 2.44, SD = 0.44$) and fun trait ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.42$) fell in the middle between all of the ratings for necklines. However, participants perceived the models wearing the High Neck neckline to be the least confident ($M = 3.32, SD = 0.43$), original ($M = 3.26, SD = 0.48$), and fun ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.43$), while both the shy trait ($M = 3.12, SD = 0.43$) and vain trait ($M = 2.66, SD = 0.47$) were in the middle between all of the ratings. Additionally, both the Halter and Sweetheart necklines fell in the middle between all of the ratings overall. Participants perceived models wearing the Halter silhouette to be confident ($M = 3.44, SD = 0.42$), original ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.44$), shy ($M = 2.86, SD = 0.40$), vain ($M = 2.66, SD = 0.47$), and fun ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.47$). Lastly, participants perceived models wearing the Sweetheart neckline to be confident ($M = 3.66, SD = 0.49$), original ($M = 3.44, SD = 0.41$), shy ($M = 2.60, SD = 0.44$), vain ($M = 2.66, SD = 0.47$) and fun ($M = 3.49, SD = 0.42$). It is important to note that the Halter, High Neck, and Sweetheart necklines all scored the same for the mean and standard deviation for the vain perceptual trait.
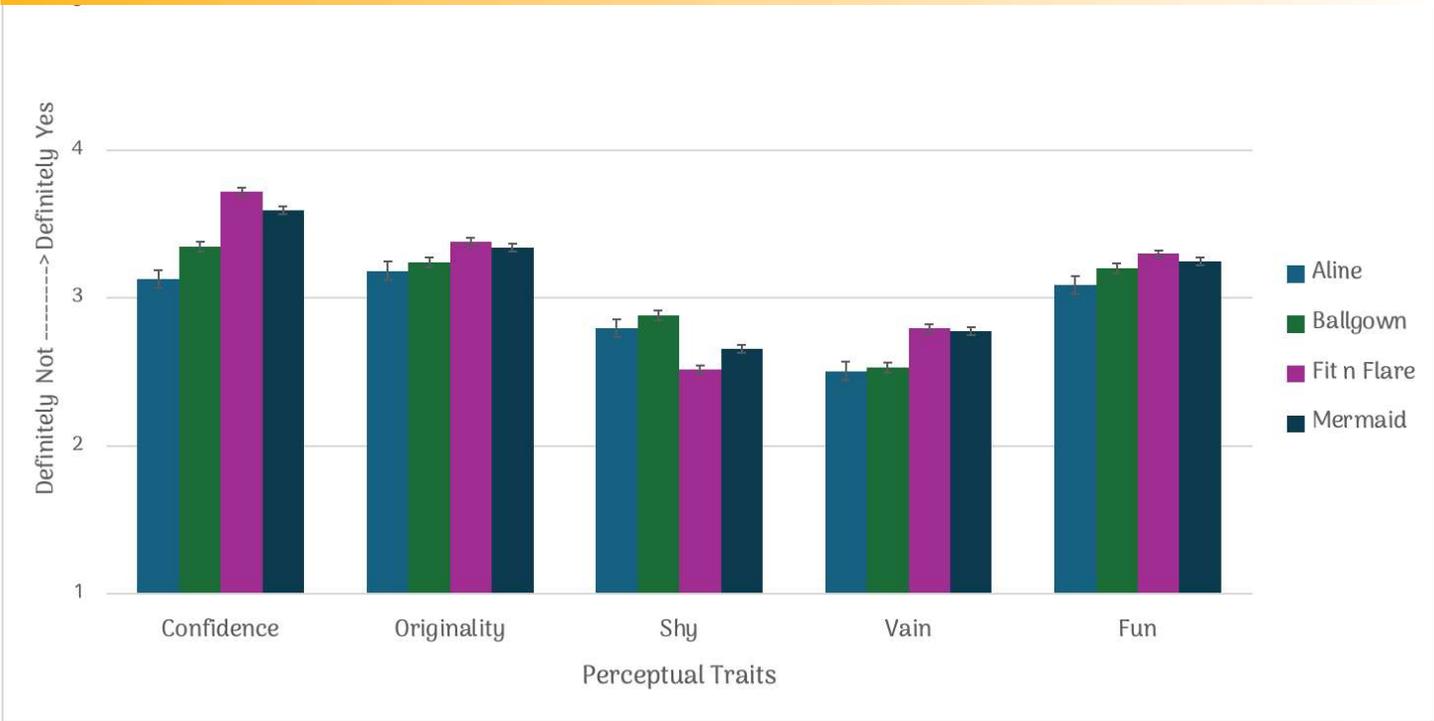
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Figure 2 Silhouette Perceptions
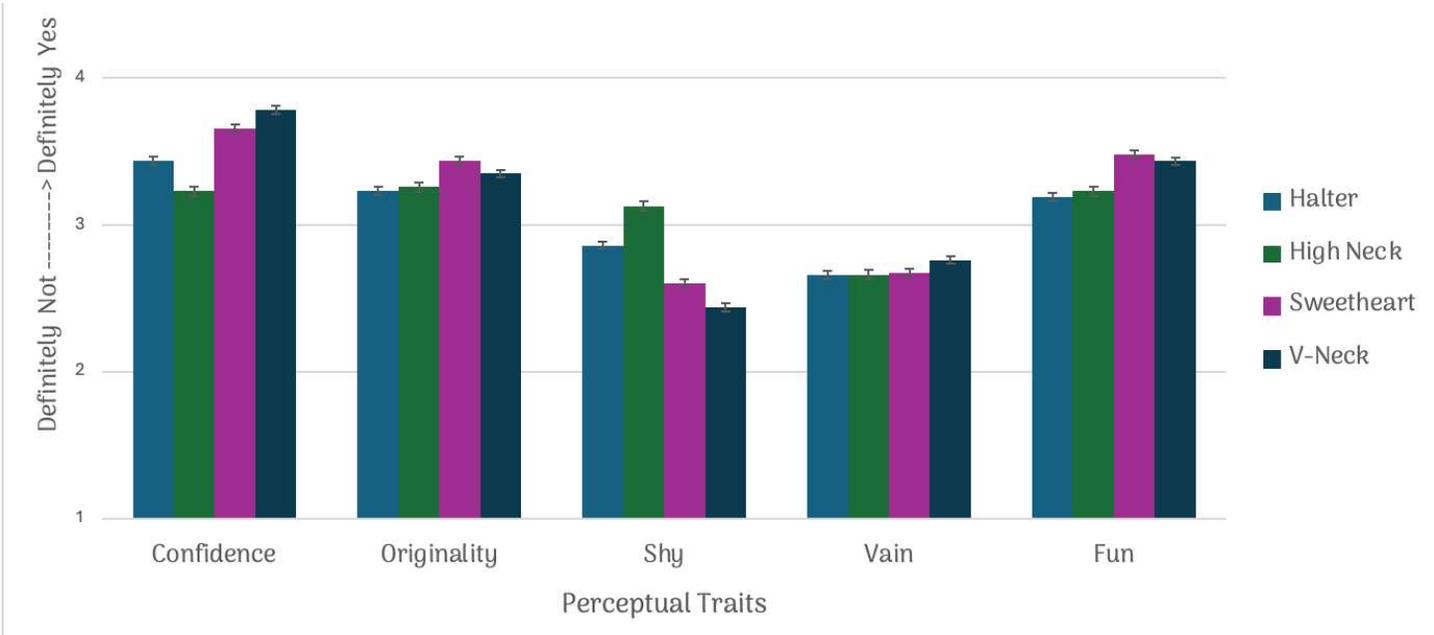
Note: Error bars represent standard errors.

Figure 3 Neckline Perceptions

Note: Error bars represent standard errors.

DISCUSSION

This study examined people's perceptions of others as a function of fashion choices, specifically focusing on Western-style wedding dresses. UC Riverside undergraduate participants viewed a series of pictures of models wearing Western-style wedding dresses and reported their perceptions (i.e., confident, original, shy, vain, and fun) of the dress in each picture. The wedding dresses varied in silhouettes and necklines. We found significant, reliable differences in how participants perceived the models as a function of dress silhouette and neckline. Participants perceived the models wearing the Fit and Flare silhouette to be especially confident, original, fun, and vain, but the models wearing the A-line silhouette to be the least confident, original, and fun. Furthermore, participants perceived the models wearing the V-neck neckline to be especially confident and vain, but the models wearing the High Neck to be the least confident, original, and fun. Additionally, the participants perceived the models wearing the Sweetheart neckline to be especially original, and fun, and the models wearing the Halter neckline especially confident. It is important to note that the Halter, High Neck, and Sweetheart all scored the same in the vain category.

Unfortunately, existing research does not specifically focus on the relationship between social perceptions and wedding dresses. Instead, it only focuses on social perceptions and fashion more generally. This research helps cover what is currently missing, as it observes the specific relationship between social perceptions and wedding dresses instead of the broader relationship between social perceptions and fashion. Additionally, existing research also does not examine any kind of perceptual traits people are making. This research helps bridge this gap that is currently missing in the literature, a relationship between wedding dresses and social perceptions, which brides can use to select the dresses to convey their desired perceptions. Not only do these results benefit and inform brides, but benefits fashion designers and businesses as well, as fashion shows and businesses can use this information to better serve their customers. When fashion designers need inspiration as to what perceptions are trending in order to create bridal gowns, they can create

wedding dresses based on the perception that are popular or trending to satisfy their clientele. Businesses can also profit as well, as trendy wedding gowns will increase revenue for those in the fashion industry.

Limitations and Future Directions:

Given that there are a variety of components in a single wedding dress, unfortunately, there were a couple of elements that were not included in this research. To begin, we only examined 4 kinds of silhouettes and necklines, but there are a total of 14 different kinds of Western wedding dress style silhouettes (Raniwala, 2024), and 15 different kinds of Western wedding dress style necklines (Varina, 2023). With 4 silhouettes and 4 necklines (totaling 48 images with 15 perceptual trait questions), the survey reached an average time of approximately 45 minutes, so due to the time, we decided to cut down on both elements. Furthermore, our study only utilized five main traits (e.g., confident, original, shy, vain, and fun) with 3 synonyms for each trait (15 total perceptual questions) which allows each participant to be their own comparison group, and makes the data more statistically powerful. However, there are more than these 15 traits that exist when making social perceptions, which is why the 15-trait constraint is a limitation within this study.

Another limitation of this study is finding a cohesive background across all 48 images. Even though all of the backgrounds were neutral, having a cohesive background may eliminate potential noise, as 4% of the participants did consider this element when making their perceptual opinion. Additionally, not only was the background of the images a limitation, but we also obscured each model's face in each image as well. Obscuring the model's faces in each image increased internal validity, as this eliminated any potential perceptions people may make about a person's facial features, otherwise known as the halo effect. In contrast, taking out the facial features decreases its external validity, as in reality, people do make social perceptions of faces whether consciously or unconsciously, so facial features cannot be taken out of consideration when making these social perceptions in the real world. Furthermore, this research did not thoroughly examine each individual element of the

wedding dress in terms of fabric and sleeves, given that a large number of participants did reconsider this in their overall decision; as 70.8% of the participants considered the fabric (Lace, Silk, Tulle, etc.), 64% of the participants considered sleeves.

Lastly, it is important to note that in this research, we primarily focused on Western-style wedding dresses. However, Western-style wedding dresses are not the only kind of wedding dresses that are widely used across the nation, as different cultures wear different garments for their special day. Given this, in the future, I would like to expand this research to include different kinds of wedding outfits across different cultures, as this research is just as important for those who do not wear a Western-style wedding dress.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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