A Halloween Community: the Role of the Marketplace in Response to Social Isolation

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There are those that believe that the marketplace is a dull, dehumanizing space void of family, community and creativity (Kozinets, 2002). Yet the marketplace remains an attractive, alluring and even growing dominant logic that many come to actively embrace. The purpose of this research is to contribute to our understanding of the marketplace by exploring some dimensions underlying the allure of the market. Using the context of Halloween this paper explores how the amorality of the marketplace, the very thing some consumers are trying to escape actually attracts consumers and provides consumers with an opportunity to temporarily build social bonds.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Our field’s understanding of the marketplace has grown dramatically over the past few years. One line of research finds the market to be an authoritarian institution containing amoral, or even immoral, totalizing logics based on self-interest leading to dehumanizing community fragmentation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In order to escape these dehumanizing logics, consumers must escape the hegemony of the market (Kozinets, 2002). Another perspective presents the marketplace as providing cultural capital upon which consumers draw to construct their lifestyle and identity projects (Holt 1998). However, a common point of both perspectives is that the marketplace, as constructed by marketers, is a dull, manipulative and an unreflective space void of family, community or religion (Holt 2002). Yet the marketplace remains an attractive, alluring and even growing dominant logic that many consumers come to actively embrace. The purpose of this study was to contribute to our understanding of the marketplace by exploring some of the dimensions underlying the allure of the market. One key finding in this investigation was that the very amorality of the marketplace attracts consumers and provides consumers with an opportunity to build social bonds.

An ethnographic study of Halloween was conducted from August to November 2004. I immersed myself in the festival. Observations and field notes were taken at multiple sites including retail outlets, community events, bars and dances. I conducted 20 unstructured interviews with different individuals/families before and after Halloween. These participants came from diverse backgrounds ranging in age from 6 to 80, and demonstrating various levels of involvement with Halloween from trick-or-treating to putting up elaborate yard displays. I also followed one family through the consumption experience from buying the costumes and decorations to following them around on Halloween weekend to a community dance and trick-or-treating. For the purpose of this current paper, I analyzed my field notes as well as 5 transcribed interviews involving 7 participants.

Three themes emerged from the data: social isolation, temporary community and the role of marketplace within a Halloween hypercommunity. In today’s world of double-income families, urban sprawl and long commutes, people are feeling a time pressure which leaves them socially isolated from their families and communities (Putnam, 2000). Halloween gives consumers an opportunity to chat with neighbors and temporarily reduce their social isolation. Consumers in this study long for the past where life was simpler and people were closer to friends, families and neighbors.

In response to social isolation, Halloween gives consumers a chance to construct a temporary community. Halloween has many of the same characteristics of a hypercommunity (Kozinets, 2002). It is bound by both time and space and is an intense experience. Halloween decorations typically go up the night before Halloween and are dismantled as early as 9 P.M. on Halloween Night. The majority of activity happens quickly during an intense period between 5:30 and 8:30 P.M. and dies off just as quickly. During this time period it seems everyone is out of their houses on their porches chatting with kids and neighbors about Halloween and neighborhood news.

Like a hypercommunity there is a caring and sharing element to the Halloween community that manifests itself through families. Through the wonderment and excitement of the children, the community comes alive. Parents get a chance to step out of their social isolation, experience the enjoyment of their childhood and reconnect with their families and neighbors. Halloween is a hypercommunity where consumers attempt to strengthen social ties but unlike the Burning Man hypercommunity, Halloween is created well within the marketplace.

In this study, consumers readily admit that commercialization is central to Halloween. They understand that items provided by the marketplace are in a sense “amoral” – void of social meaning other than the attempt by companies to sell more products and make a profit. It is this amorality that makes the rituals of Halloween safe and accessible to the masses. Halloween is widely advertised by companies, and likewise, Halloween decorations and other paraphernalia are accessible and convenient for busy consumers despite Halloween’s marginalized past. The marketplace offers Halloween, a “safe-haven” in the sense that it is “amoral”. The Halloween merchandise is safe, physically and creativity with store bought costumes, decorations and candy. The wide variety of ever changing Halloween merchandise is also a source of safe creativity that allows consumers to exact Halloween rituals of family and community.

Consumers are actively trying to escape the social isolation of their daily lives. But very few people can escape the marketplace because they do not have the financial or time resources to access events like Burning Man. On the other hand, almost everyone has access to the marketplace. The allure of the marketplace is that consumers have access to it and can temporarily create communities that are creative but at the same time safe like the ones seen on Halloween. The amorality of the marketplace, which is what many say is its fault, may ironically be the very characteristic and allure that provides the consumer the opportunity to achieve some of the communal and self-expression/ideals that were previously thought only achievable outside of the marketplace.

REFERENCES