Children's understanding of Birthday Parties: a Study of Gender Differences

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Children’s Understanding of Birthday Parties:  
A Study of Gender Differences

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Although the study of ritualistic consumer behavior is becoming a well-developed area, researchers have yet to explore how consumers learn to participate in these rituals. This paper begins exploring this area by examining how children both help to create and understand a ritual that is ostensibly “for” them -- the birthday party. This occasion was chosen because Peracchio (1992) found the children could elicit well-formed scripts of activities that occurred at birthday parties.

In the summer of 1992, sixteen children ages three to five -- nine girls and seven boys -- were interviewed at a child development center in the Midwest. Each child was interviewed twice. Researchers employed an interview schedule such as that recommended by McCracken (1988), and also presented the children with projective stimuli -- specifically, pictures of typical birthday party activities. The children were asked to describe the activities in each picture.

This paper explores the following research questions: (1) What gender differences exist, with respect to children’s understanding of the purpose of birthday parties? (2) What differences exist, with respect to children’s favorite activities at birthday parties? (3) What ritual artifacts (Rook 1985) are most important for boys and girls at these parties? (4) How do boys and girls participate in selecting both the events and the artifacts at these birthday parties? (5) How do boys and girls differ, with respect to their understanding of the purpose of birthday gifts?

By examining how boys and girls participate in birthday parties, we can begin to understand the process by which consumers learn to participate in consumer rituals in American culture.