Consumption As Contaminating Innocence: a Study of Children's Birthday Parties

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Are children’s birthday parties occasions for material abundance and the embrace of commercialism? A study of Australian mothers finds it not to be so. Consumption is to be managed to ensure it does not contaminate the innocence of childhood—especially in such a special context as a birthday party.

**BACKGROUND**

Birthday parties represent the most personal celebration of all annual celebrations (McKendrick, Bradford, and Fielder 2000) and serve to both individuate children and socialise them into larger groups (Shamgar-Handelman and Handelman 1991; Weil 1986). Despite the apparent simplicity and fun of children’s birthday parties, they are multi-textured, multi-layered events (Schoonmaker 2006) that have offered researchers opportunities to study family ritual and socialisation (Ottes, Nelson, and McGrath 1995), gender socialisation (Ottes and McGrath 1994), rites of passage (Weil 1986), income-constrained celebration consumption (Lee, Katras, and Bauer 2009), and the consensual processes surrounding motherhood (Clarke 2007). In addition, the Australian children’s birthday party industry is conservatively valued at AUD200 million and is part of the US$220 trillion that women spend globally per year (Silverstein and Sayre 2009). Given that younger children’s parties are family celebrations which concentrate on children and build broader social ties, their organisation and orchestration is usually completed by mothers (Clarke 2000). Thus, the context of birthday parties offers marketing researchers the opportunity to study how a mother’s consumption intersects and frames her own and her family’s identity (Thomsen and Sorensen 2006) and her enactment of this identity. In understanding birthday parties as enactments of ideology or public performances by mothers (Goffman 1959), a broader understanding of their significance can be gained.

**METHOD**

To understand the cultural, family and individual influences on women as they planned and navigated their child’s birthday party, this research was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the forces at play for women in the public performance of their role as mother. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight mothers of children who were between five and seven years at their most recent birthday party. Variation across the sample was sought in relation to child’s age, school attended, birth order, and child’s gender. Semi-structured interviews were used to discuss cultural, family, and individual influences on mothers as they recollected how they planned and navigated their children’s birthday parties. Goffman’s (1959) performance theory was used as the analytical lens to understand the actions of the mothers and directly addresses Fisk and Grove’s (1996) call to apply the drama metaphor more broadly in marketing. It also moves marketing literature about children’s birthday parties beyond the ritual frame.

**FINDINGS**

The children’s birthday parties were all complex social and personal events where mothers celebrated and demonstrated an intimate understanding of their children and also maintained her and her child’s social networks. Through this, the birthday parties provided a significant social space in which the women performed their identities as a mother to herself, her child, her family, friends, and the broader community. They represented a celebration of the individual child and a time of reflection for the mothers.

Media, children’s schools, memories from childhood, and reference groups did not merely present different options or provide recommendations for children’s parties, they also provided a normative framework and created a social discourse of good mothering (Banister and Hogg 2007). To be a good mother, the mothers enacted three ideologies—the mother’s love was shown through the personalisation of the party to her child, the children were made to feel special with a focus on non-material means, and childhood was protected by the mothers so it could be fun, innocent and simple. For the mothers in this research, birthday parties were also occasions where commercial consumption activities, consumer socialisation of children, and teaching children the importance of relationships over and above materialism (Miller 1997) intersected.

In orchestrating their children’s birthday parties, the mothers were hostesses, directors, protectors, event planners, friends, family members, and mothers of the birthday child. The complexity and number of roles each mother assumed made this an involved and consuming performance for the mothers and caused them all a level of anxiety which had to be managed. The two key roles played by the mothers were director and teacher at their children’s birthday parties. As directors they used consumption to assist in staging the best party possible, and as educators they sought to educate their children as consumers and thus protect their children from being exploited through commercialism (Cook 2008).

**DISCUSSION**

The mothers all purchased goods or services in the course of organising and orchestrating their children’s birthday parties, and they did so with both themselves and their child in mind (Cook 2008). Importantly, consumption was representative of interpersonal care (Thompson 1996) and was used and viewed by these mothers more as an “expression of relationships (rather) than some mindless materialism” (Miller 1997, 75) as it was used to socialise children (Ottes and McGrath 1994) and to demonstrate love through intimate knowledge of their needs and likes. By personalising their children’s birthday parties, the mothers also used consumption to define their and their family’s identity (Clarke 2000) and demonstrate their position in consumer culture (Schoonmaker 2006). Importantly, this personalisation of the birthday party through consumption and other acts was viewed as the opposite to the commodified birthday parties that were offered by venues such as commercial play centres. Whilst consumption was a tool in enacting the mothers’ ideologies, its use and type was constrained by each mother’s individual commodity frontier (Hochschild 2003). Each mother defined this frontier individually and uniquely. It was the responsibility of the mothers to set limits on the level of “commercial violation” (Hochschild and Machung 1989, 284) into the home and party and determine the commodity frontier.

Excess commercialism is generally felt to intrude upon the sanctity of childhood through either exploiting children or forcing them to mature early as consumers in order to be able to successfully navigate the efforts of marketers (Cook 2008). The mothers in this study educated their children as consumers through gift exchange processes and demonstrated that birthday parties are a celebration
of ‘togetherness’, rather than material consumption. Mothers are re-affirming the importance of birthday parties as family rituals (Otnes et al. 1995) and events to forge community togetherness (Schoonmaker 2006).

REFERENCES