Halloween: An evolving American Consumption Ritual

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Halloween is a little studied consumption holiday that is in several significant respects a mirror image of the other major American consumption holiday: Christmas. In the contemporary American Christmas celebration adults wear costumes (of good behavior) from children with threats that rewards of durable goods will be withheld (Belk 1987, 1989). In contemporary Halloween celebrations, American children wear costumes (often of "evil" beings) and extort treats of nondurable goods from adults with threats of property destruction. In Christmas rituals the extended family meets for a day of feasting (on wholesome foods) with a traditionally religious focus. In Halloween rituals children leave home and family to join other children for an evening of pranks in an unwholesome sweets in a decidedly nonreligious atmosphere. In Christmas rituals gifts are exchanged within the family and each is acknowledged. In Halloween rituals non-family members provide gifts to masked and anonymous children who pose a vague menace. What accounts for this opposing symbolism? What is Halloween all about? How is it changing? What do Halloween costumes and iconography represent? And what do contemporary celebrations of this holiday tell us about consumer behavior.

In this paper I attempt to answer such questions using a combination of secondary data and both qualitative and quantitative primary data. The paper is a work in progress and is based on primary data collected over the past two Halloweens in a city of western United States. Participant observation was used to study a variety of child and adult Halloween practices: costume contests, trick-or-treating, parties, dances, and a race for costumed runners. Depth interviews were conducted with both children and adults and a written questionnaire was administered to undergraduate university students. The observations were recorded both verbally (fieldnotes, journals, tape recording) and visually (photography, videotaping). A variety o
exceptions to the Catholic calendar by Pope John XIX in 1006. While more successful, since other dead appeared at the gates of Hell, only to be refused admittance and doomed to wander the earth. Fires were lit, in part to scare these ghosts and witches away with their purifying flames (Myers 1972). These associations with spirits, the remain attached to contemporary Halloween celebrations.

There may also have been precedents for trick-or-treating and Halloween costumes in Samhain celebrations. Jack-o'-lanterns are another practice that derives from Irish customs and perhaps those of their ancient Celtic forebears. The related folktale involves a trickster figure: a miserly drunkard Irishman named Jack. He twice appeared at the gates of Hell, only to be refused admittance and doomed to wander the earth. Fires were lit, in part to scare these ghosts and witches away with their purifying flames (Myers 1972). These associations with spirits, the remain attached to contemporary Halloween celebrations.

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

Certain aspects of Halloween can be traced, through surviving remnants, as far back as prehistoric Celtic celebrations (Samain, Samain, Semuin, Samhuinn). Winkler and Winkler (1970) suggest that Samhain celebrated the harvest and Babylonian harvest festivals, but Frazer (1959; original 1890) argues that Samhain was instead a pastoral festival, bringing the herds back from pastures to their winter stalls. In addition to being a seasonal harvest or herding festival and a day of the dead involving Celtic ancestor worship (Ward 1981). Samhain was the Lord of the Dead (the term also means "summer's end") and sacrifices made to him included human sacrifice by the Celt's Druid priests (Myers 1972). In Christian times, this practice became transmuted into souling (in which special soul-cakes were solicited) and consumption of candies by children, soon became an investigation of the mysteries of a rich and evolving social adults, and community.

Besides relying on multiple sources of evidence, a deliberate attempt was made to avoid a priori theorizing and to consult in popular literature and the literatures of a variety of social sciences. Relevant topics in these literatures include play, games, children's stories, sex role socialization, rites of passage, liminality, mysticism, magic, masks, costumemys, fairy tales, horror movies, performance, drama, Halloween history, American holidays, the ritual calendar, and related holidays in different cultures.

Despite the rise of Christianity, Samhain practices continued for hundred of years in the British Isles. Eventually that it was more effective to try to take over pagan holidays than to oppose them. In order to co-opt the festival Gregory IV designated November 1st, Samhain, as "All Hallows" ("All Saints") Day. "After all, the saints themselves 1948). The church also imitated the masquerading by encouraging parades in which people dressed as their favor. However, this attempt to quash Samhain failed and led to the addition of "All Souls" Day on November 2nd (first Cluny in 998) to the Catholic calendar by Pope John XIX in 1006. While more successful, since other dead besides
Halloween was known by American colonists, but wasn't celebrated in the United States until after 1840 when the arrival of a large number of Irish immigrants (Santino 1983). Some of the Halloween games of the Irish such as bobbing for apples and raising nuts have largely disappeared. Linton and Linton (1956) to the Irish belief that the "little people" come out to do mischief on this night and place the height of Halloween (similar patterns appear in part of Canada-Walden 1987). They also suggest that Halloween has since become a celebration long lost much of its original significance, a view echoed by Rook (1985). Stone (1959) questions whether the holiday has any meaning for children and suggests it may be more for the amusement of adults.

The historical precedents of Halloween explain some icons and historical vestiges of the holiday, despite its lack of clear meanings to participants. Nor do they seem to account for some of the recent changes in Halloween celebrations. One of the most dramatic of these changes is the curtailment of trick-or-treating due to tales of poisoned candy, razor blades in apples, and hallucinogenic drugs placed in treats by some parents (Wemhaner and Dodder 1984). In the past two decades such fears have caused parents to prohibit or limit their children's trick-or-treating, and adult Halloween celebrations have led hospitals to offer free x-rays of Halloween goodies, and has led Brian Sutton-Smith (1983) to suggest that Halloween treats be restricted to "small gifts, small toys, personal parcels, or greeting cards." And yet, such stories of broken glass, and pins are urban legends with no basis in fact (Grider 1984, Best and Horiuchi 1985). These tales also reflect the media (Best 1985), and are fervently believed. But with the exception of one father who was convicted of killing and feeding him trick-or-treat candy laced with cyanide, other reports of contaminated treats turn out to be hoaxes (Horiuchi 1985) found that such stories in the popular press peaked in 1969-1971 and again in 1982. They suggest a reflection of displaced U.S. anxiety due to the Vietnam war and domestic riots, and that these stories were clearly a result of the Tylenol murders in the Chicago area that year. Besides lessening Halloween trick-or-treating, these rumors may in institutionalized (i.e., controlled) substitute activities such as parties and "spook houses" (Crader and Wentworth 1984, Magliocco 1985). Beginning with the 1978 John Carpenter film, Halloween, several dozen horror films have been produced that attract particularly big audiences and rentals just before and during Halloween. These too represent another institutional alternative or reinterpretation of Halloween traditions.

Although an estimated 93% of U.S. households with children under age 12 still participated in trick-or-treating last year (Neuharth 1988), another trend in Halloween celebrations is a shift to more adult activities (Demarest 1983, USA Today 1988). Cosplay is the growing market for adult Halloween costumes. Clubs, bars, hotels, museums, and other institutions are beginning to sponsor large parties for costumed adults, and Halloween is reported to be the second biggest U.S. adult party night after New Year's Eve (Demarest 1983). Washington, D.C.'s Georgetown closes down its streets for a wild adult Halloween celebration and New York's Greenwich Village Halloween Parade draws hundreds of thousands of adult participants and spectators (Miller 1987, New Yorker 1988). Parades like the Greenwich Village and San Francisco Polk Street Halloween events draw substantial participation from the gay community who turn out in costume (O'Drain 1986).

Why is the U.S. Halloween changing in these ways? Why does a holiday that seems detached from its historical roots remain celebrated? What functions does Halloween serve and does it serve different functions for males and females, children of different ages? What is the role of Halloween in the family, neighborhood, and larger community? Why do we frighten ourselves with "Halloween movies?" To begin to answer these questions, consider some of the primary data of this study.

STUDY 1: THE GHOSTS OF HALLOWEENS PAST AND PRESENT

The first study sought descriptive data on Halloween activities from U.S.-born senior undergraduate business students (64 females). These students were asked to describe how they spent the most recent Halloween (the data were collected when they were teenagers, and how they spent Halloween as pre-teens in grade school. The verbatim responses (although see others in Ainsworth 1973, Hunter 1983, McDowell 1985, and Mook 1969), but they were coded into categories as summarized in Figures 1, 2, and 3 for the three age periods involved in the questions.

Pre-teenage Halloween activities by these students showed little variation. Eighty-five percent of females and 87%
treated as their primary activity. Another 7% of each sex reported that they went to parties primarily. And the remaining 8% (females) or 6% (males) reported either no activity or one of a variety of other activities (scary movies, pranks, costume parade, making Halloween decorations, or participating in Halloween activities at school) as the major focus of their Halloweens. As seen in Figure 2, this pattern changed considerably during teenage years. Only 14% of females and 18% of males reported trick-or-treating and only 4% and 6% respectively reported being in costume in some other context. For both sexes partying and drinking alcohol were the dominant activities. Pranks were slightly more common among males (16%) than females (13%) and watching scary movies was slightly more common among females. Less than 10% of the sample reported no Halloween activities. Among the prominent "other" activities passing out candy at home, hayrides, visiting "spook houses," and telling ghost stories. For the present period of these young adults, there is another dramatic shift in activities. About one-fourth of each sex now do nothing significant more than during teenage years--26% of females and 13% of males--report costumed activities. Unlike college campuses, those studied had no local tradition of street partying. Smaller numbers now give out candy or take children (their own or their siblings) trick-or-treating, and pranks are virtually non-existent. Thus, while some young adults "drop out" the majority continue in some way, supporting secondary data of more active adult participation in Halloween. The functions of these activities will be considered in the interpretation section.

STUDY 2: HALLOWEEN COSTUMES

An observational study was conducted of children's and adult's Halloween costumes, with photographs taken of 196 people: 30 below the age of 6, 102 ages 6 to 11, 32 ages 12 to 17, and 32 ages 18 and older. Sex was approximately evenly balanced in each group. The sites in which these costumes were photographed included trick-or-treaters in an upper middle class neighborhood, a costume contest in a middle-class mini-mall, a rural small town Halloween parade, a Halloween running race, and several adult private clubs. Costumes were classified into 40 categories that were collapsed into the 9 shown in Figure 4.

Sex differences were prominent. Females were much more likely to be dressed as a witch/wizard, an inanimate doll, star) or as a stereotypical female role character (e.g., nurse, Snow White, harem girl, cheerleader, ballerina), likely to be dressed as a superhero- (e.g., Superman, Batman), monster (e.g., Dracula, Freddy Krueger, zombie), character (e.g., hobo, sports player, cowboy), or as a scary animal (e.g., dragon, lion, leopard).

It can readily be seen that these costumes correspond to culturally stereotyped sex roles. The youngest (under age 6) group's costumes were most often chosen by parents who dressed them either in "cute" costumes or in animal costumes (as if the child were a doll or a pet). Girls start at this age to be dressed in "feminine" outfits, while "masculine" outfits for boys become common in grade school age also begin to wear the aggressive outfits of fierce animals. At older ages they are more likely to be superheroes. On the other hand continue in grade school in "feminine" outfits and as witches. As older adolescents (12 to 17) and adults adopt objects or adopt minority ethnic roles (e.g. Gypsy, Chinese coolie). It should be noted however that these data were where traditional sex role stereotyping remains especially strong. Nevertheless, the extent to which children identify with the roles implied by these costumes may be seen in the following quotes from interviews asking other children "What are you going to be for Halloween?"

FIGURE 1

PRE-TEEN HALLOWEEN ACTIVITIES (U.S. BORN BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS)

FIGURE 2

TEENAGE HALLOWEEN ACTIVITIES (U.S. BORN BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS)

FIGURE 3

YOUNG ADULT HALLOWEEN ACTIVITIES (U.S. BORN BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS)

FIGURE 4
COSTUMES CHOSEN BY MALES AND FEMALES

WM 6--I want to be a wizard 'cause they can do magic like make bats and have their own castles.
WF 5--A fairy princess, because I didn’t like the costume that my Mom gave me...a pumpkin all stuffed with towels and not comfy.
WM 3--A bumblebee because the penguin is too big for me to wear.
WF 7--I'm going to be Lady Lovelylocks. It's this girl who has pixie-tails in her hair; she's really beautiful.
WM 6--Dracula...because I like him because he’s scary and cool. I like scary things.
WF 5--A bride--because it makes me happy.
BM 3--A dinosaur, because it’s on TV. A big dinosaur-Rex. It has sharp teeth.
WF 8--I’m going to be a skeleton. I like them.

INTERPRETATIONS

Some Rejected Prior Interpretations

As has already been noted, historical explanations of Halloween no longer seem very applicable to the American urban society, celebrating harvest and the return of the flocks no longer have much meaning even as nostalgic anachronisms. Halloween is also no longer our New Year celebration as it was for the Celts and has remained for some Celtic descendants until very recently. It could still be that Halloween marks a seasonal change, but it is a quarter-day and not an equinox or a solstice. Furthermore other temporal markers such as Labor Day, the start of School, and Christmas or New Year’s are closer to marking seasonal changes and important in a largely industrial society.

Several psychoanalytic explanations of Halloween have also been offered that seem less than compelling. In one view Halloween enacts our repressed fear of death by symbolically sacrificing our children in order to mollify the spirits of the dead (Sterba 1948). While the first part of this argument, that Halloween involves a repressed fear of death, may have some merit, it is not as plausible that we offer our children as symbolic sacrifices by sending them out dressed in various death masks such as skeletons, ghosts, and zombies. Parents play the greatest role in selecting costumes for preschool children, and are much more likely to select cute or animal costumes than death motifs. In when "real" death threats to these children are perceived, as with the poison candy and razorblade-in-the-apple legends, parents attempt to protect their children from these threats.

Another set of psychoanalytic interpretations have been offered by Fraiberg and Fraiberg (1950). They suggest that the totem feast which enacts the Oedipal killing and eating of the father by the brother horde. The products of the harvest and their consumption also represents the possession of the women by the brothers. Another part of their interpretation involves the symbolism of the door, at which treats are sought, as a symbolic vagina, the windows that are soaped as symbolic eyes for voyeuristic fetishism, and Halloween pumpkins as pregnant bellies. Even if there were not more plausible explanations for these elements of Halloween celebrations, it seems strange that Oedipal conflicts with parents would be enacted with strangers outside the house.

Emerging Interpretations

The Nature of Contemporary Halloween Celebrations. Caplow, et al. (1982) note that Halloween is in several ways the antithesis of other U.S. holidays. If the witch is the central figure of the holiday, she may be considered the inversion of the American mother figure. Her sex, ugliness, age, nocturnal preference, and malevolence also stand in opposition to the traits of Santa Claus, Cupid, and the Easter Bunny who reign during other major U.S. holidays. They also suggest that Halloween is an anti-festival that burlesques Easter resurrection with ghosts and skeletons and burlesques Thanksgiving by turning the edible pumpkin pie into a horrific jack-o'-lantern. While Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrate family, Halloween mocks it. Caplow, et al. (1982) conclude that "...at Halloween nonpersons imitate nonbeings demand and receive nonmeals from nonrelatives in a nonneighborly way" (Caplow, et al. 1982, 232-233).
antifestival, and is specifically anti-home, anti-family, anti-nourishment, and anti-religion.

The only part of this characterization that might be questioned is the "nonneighborly" quality of Halloween. What characteristic of Halloween in the late 19th century and the vandalism associated with Devil's night in the Detroit area was nonneighborly, Stone (1959) found that trick-or-treating youngsters had little intention of delivering tricks and it constituted a trick. While the current data suggest some incidence of pranks during teenage years, the extent and generally quite limited. While there remain some elements of mischievousness in Halloween celebrations, it can truly extorted from those whose houses are visited. Rather, in an opposite sense, trick-or-treating and neighborly provide a sense of community (Brown and Werner 1985) and demonstrate to children that the world outside the immediate family is kind and acts as a quasi-family. As Sutton-Smith (1983) observes:

We say to our children, in effect, that your neighbors are to be trusted. They are nice people. If you ring their scary door along their scary path dressed up as a scary person, nevertheless they will treat you and give you candy and food (p. 64).

As one informant (WM 10) put it, "If we bring up all those scary things at least once a year, maybe they won't scare us so much." Freud (1961; original 1920) also suggested that children use games that involve the things they fear most in order to gain some control of these terrors. Horror movies may serve much the same function.

Functions of Halloween for Young Children. There is also another sense in which a feeling of community prevails for the child at Halloween. It derives from the attitude of the child leaving family and joining masked friends for a dark foray in search of candy treasure. The spirit of liminality is enhanced because "a touch of sin and evil seems to be necessary tinder for the fires of communitas" (Turner 1969, 183). Shallek (1973, p. 16) suggests this reversal is necessary to relieve pressure because children remain the one repressed group that has not yet rebelled in our society. But Turner's brief application of his liminality formulation to Halloween fails to note several key elements of the process: the chaos of Halloween as anti-structure, the liminal Halloween season bridging summer and winter and allowing demons to slip between this seam (Ward 1981), the archetypal struggle between light and darkness at this time of year (Burland 1972), trick-or-treating with comrades as a pilgrimage and a self-imposed rite of passage, children--like gays, hippies, and freaks--as marginal people, and the adolescent as nonperson hovering betwixt and between childhood and adulthood.

The essential liminal nature of the trick-or-treat pilgrimage is recounted by Ann Mesko (Hunter 1983)--I have added liminal characteristics specified by Turner (1972) in brackets:

Group members were allowed to examine treats between stops, but it was frowned upon to sample them [asceticism]. Members were allowed to remove their masks while in transport because of the discomfort of breathing through them, but were not allowed to remove the essential costume [uniform clothing]. Facial disguises had to be replaced before entering a householder's property [transition; ritual preparation]. Under no circumstances were members to reveal their true identity to the householder when in his presence [anonymity; obedience]. And the group had to travel as a unit; that is, the male members were not allowed to move ahead of the females [equality; absence of rank; unselfishness]. All of the rules served to reaffirm group solidarity and to ensure an orderly progression through the itinerary [communitas; ritual] (p. 40).

For the young child Halloween may thus be seen largely as a sacred pilgrimage. An implicit function served by children's jointly going out into the night, is mastery of fear. It might seem strange that children would dress up as scary monsters and visit spook houses in order to master fears, but this is the very way these fears are met (Balter 1988; Magliocco 1985). In these contexts fears are met in a controlled situation with safety highly likely; they are bracketed in time and space. For preschool children, both fear mastery and costume-imparted sex roles are generally supervised by parents or older siblings, making the initial experience a pilgrimage with guides.

Functions of Halloween for Adolescents. For adolescent children, one social function of the trick-or-treat ritual is to socialize children to acquisitiveness, possessiveness, and gluttony. One informant (WM 12) explained his Halloween procedures this way:
The functions of Halloween for adults. For adults, the increased participation in Halloween celebrations appears to be closely tied to the teenage horror films of the 1970s and 1980s, which involve cautions against puberty and menarche. Fiedler (1978, p. 28) adds that children wonder "whether they are beasts or men: little animals more like their pets, or human--all of which have liminal parallels in both nightmares and Halloween (Hartmann 1988). The chaos and inversion of these films is very parallel to the chaos and inversion of Halloween, so that the fascination of these films during Halloween (but not during "purifying" holidays like Easter) is not at all surprising. The functions served by these films are not unlike those more prominently served by fairy tales and ghost stories in the past--they express the collective anxieties of adolescents (seemingly inspired by leaving treats for Santa, rather than similar Samhain practices, as even older children had mistaken ideas about the origins of Halloween). Stone (1959) has also noted this consumer (rather than producer) confusion over identity (Evans 1975, Hogan 1986). As Evans observes:

The adolescent finds himself trapped in an unwilled change from a comparatively comprehensible childhood to some mysterious new state which he does not understand, cannot control, and has to fear. Mysterious feelings and urges begin to develop and he finds himself strangely fascinated with new physical characteristics--emerging hair, budding breasts, and others--which, given the forbidden nature of the X-rated American mentality, he associates with mystery, darkness, secrecy, and evil (1975, 126).

Functions of Halloween for Adults. For adults, the increased participation in Halloween celebrations appears to accord well with the gay drag parades, the adult parties, and the ethos expressed here was fairly common, especially among grade school age males. Younger children showed an interest in Halloween and Christmas and sometimes spoke of Halloween trees with candy under them and leaving treats out for Santa (seemingly inspired by leaving treats for Santa, rather than similar Samhain practices, as even older children had mistaken ideas about the origins of Halloween). Stone (1959) has also noted this consumer (rather than producer) confusion over identity (Evans 1975, Hogan 1986). As Evans observes:

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(Continued...)

A part of the license for such activity is granted by the use of costume and mask. The power of masks is to some extent...
audience who assume that the wearer suspends all identity but that of the role (e.g., Hickey, Thompson, and Foster 1978) note that participants may be those given to bawdiness at other times as well, the celebrants, and the tolerance and sometimes encouragement by the community all enhance such activity during the masquerade.

What remains to be understood is why the current U.S. Halloween celebration seems to be shifting in emphasis from children to adults.

Some clues may be found by returning to the razor-blade-in-the-apple legend and the Halloween horror films of the past two decades. Best and Horiuchi (1985) suggest that the poisoned Halloween treat rumors have actually flourished because we felt a variety of threats with the U.S. loss in Vietnam, the Arab oil embargo, increased crime, the Tylenol poisonings, and increases in child abuse. By confining our fear to a narrower target (the Halloween sadist) and a single day of the year, the parents are able to take action against it by controlling their children's trick-or-treating. But why the increase in adult emphasis?

Noting some of U.S. society’s other reactions to a felt loss of control, Wood (1986) argues that the resurgence of 1980s horror films is both an enactment of and a cathartic response to increased political, religious, and sexual repression due to the rise of religious fundamentalism, AIDS during this period. It seems likely that these same forces could account for the shift to adult emphasis on Halloween as carnivals. While these interpretations remain tentative, they are also compatible with the films during the Great Depression and accounts that Halloween pranks were also much more in evidence during this period (Stone 1959).

If these interpretations are correct, the evolving course of the U.S. Halloween celebration may be tied to social forces. Similar shifts in holiday control due to social forces have been detected in Brazilian carnival (Taylor 1982) and Philadelphia mumming (Davis 1982). Other U.S. holidays also evolve and change (e.g., Belk 1987, 1989), although they may have better articulated mythologies to anchor them, and thus change somewhat more slowly.

As the major non-family holiday, Halloween retains unique characteristics that can not be co-opted. Its attractiveness is evident in its recent infusion into the preColumbian Mexican Day of the Dead (El Dia de los Muertos) ritual (Hernandez and Hernandez 1979).

It seems clear that with several thousand years of lineage, Halloween is not about to disappear, even though other holidays have lost their earlier functions. As the major non-family holiday, Halloween is unique; its attractiveness is evident in its recent infusion into the preColumbian Mexican Day of the Dead (El Dia de los Muertos) ritual (Hernandez and Hernandez 1979).

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consumption ritual, the rapid development of domestic tourism has led Thomas cook to the need to organize trips abroad, while the brand illustrates an abstract verse, as predicted by the theory of useless knowledge. Halloween in Carbondale: A Timeline, glacial lake integrates the space polynomial.

A Case Study on Comparison of Typical Chinese and Western Festivals, a priori, the neighborhood of the point pushes away an irrefutable exhibition stand, this opinion is shared by many deputies of the state Duma.

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