

Understanding what Christmas gifts mean to children

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to understand what Christmas gifts mean to children by examining the features and styles of the letters that children write to Santa Claus.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Contents and style of 314 authentic letters sent by UK children to Santa Claus were analyzed using an underlying interpretive consumer research approach.*

Findings – *Letters to Santa contain expressions of needs, wants, desires, hopes and dreams related to Christmas. The majority of letters were identified as expressions of wants and desires, while only a few letters contained features of needs or dreaming. This implies that for children Christmas seems to be a rather unspiritual festival concerning having things rather than dreams coming true.*

Research limitations/implications – *The generalization of findings is limited to Western welfare societies. Letters are not originally written for research purposes, and therefore lack background information about the writers and their writing situations.*

Practical implications – *Analysis of letters to Santa offers an opportunity to identify the spirit of postmodern consumption with its contradictory aspects, and understand children as consumers. It is essential to recognize and understand the nature of the desires of today's children as they are an influential set of consumers.*

Originality/value – *The paper offers insights about the contemporary Christmas gift giving from the point of view of children. Contrary to previous studies, the central focus of the analysis is on gift request styles and letters as meaningful entities, not just on product categories or brands as such.*

Keywords *Christmas, Children (age groups), Perception*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

What better describes and expresses western society and consumer culture than Christmas? For example, Belk *et al.* (1989) have noticed that there are two ongoing processes in contemporary society; secularization of religion and the sacralisation of the secular. Consumer behavior is what shapes and reflects these processes. It has been claimed that the celebration of Christmas has moved from churches to shopping centers (Belk and Bryce, 1993). Indeed, the mass hysteria of Christmas consumption has made many of us wonder whether Christmas spirit is still truly present or only be seen in the adverts and movies. Suppose it is missing from adults, is there any left among children?

The purpose of this paper is to understand what Christmas gifts mean to children by examining the features and styles of the letters that children write to Santa Claus. We suggest that gift requests that children write to Santa can reveal the contemporary nature of Christmas festival in the concrete and help to understand children as consumers. In particular, we are interested in how gifts are requested, and whether the gift requests contain any altruistic or mythical Christmas spirit. Exceptionally, we bring out the viewpoint of the child, not that of the gift giver. As Young (2004) has recognized, there is no reason to restrict the discussion of experiential and hedonic consumption to adults only.

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This study is founded in the postmodern consumption studies and discussions related to gift request behavior at Christmas time. Consumption researchers have traditionally highlighted the conceptual contradiction between rational needs and irrational desires. When analyzing gift request styles it is evident that the expressions of consumption-related needs, wants, hopes, desires and dreams are the central focus of interest. Yet, to our knowledge, there are no previous studies that have focused on these facets of children's requesting gifts.

It is also noteworthy that we learn to need, want and dream something culturally (see Belk and Zhou, 1987). Marketing and media have an unavoidable influence on gift requests and desires. Marketers operate as enhancers of the hope and desire of consumer (MacInnis and de Mello, 2005) and often the symbolic focus of marketing promotions is to create desire (Elliott, 1997). One of the first studies regarding children's product desires at Christmas times was made by Caron and Ward (1975), who noticed that television, catalogues and shops are important sources of ideas behind gift requests. The limitations of small sample size and just small differences in socio-economic backgrounds of the informants make the results of this study tentative. However, it may not be exaggerated to suggest that the impact of the mass media and the overall commercial scene around children is even stronger nowadays. Catalogues act as wish books and many dreams about Christmas gifts standing in front of shop windows. Dreaming is not just accepted but widely encouraged (Fournier and Guiry, 1993).

The materialistic aspects of contemporary Christmas have often been noted. However, soft values such as responsibility, caring and generosity are also discernable. In other words, Christmas spirit is present in Christmas (see Belk, 1989). Emotions, experiences and fantasies are easy to attach to the Christmas season as well. On the other hand, Christmas has lost some of its festive uniqueness to ordinary features of routines and performances (Belk *et al.*, 1989). With these notions it is interesting to turn to examine the letters sent to Santa Claus. First we will pay attention to the distinctive nature of our empirical data, and then move on to describe the possibilities it presents and the challenges of analyzing it. Findings of this study are compared with those from previous studies related to gift requesting. We present our conclusions by classifying the gift request styles into distinctive groups. Finally, we discuss what these findings tell us about the postmodern Christmas celebration, the meaning of Christmas gifts for children and children as consumers.

Characteristics of letters to Santa

Santa receives hundreds of thousands of letters from all over the world every year. The empirical data for our study are gathered from those letters that are addressed to the Santa Claus Greeting Centre, at the North Pole in Finland. In 2006, approximately 750,000 letters found their way to the local postal service of Santa Claus, of which 450,000 were written by British children (Santa Claus Greeting Center, 2007). We had the opportunity to choose letters for our research from a large number of letters from 2006. The letters were ready sorted by countries, and we decided to focus on the letters sent by British children to Santa Claus, as they form the majority.

Letters as naturally occurring data make it possible to obtain the authentic narration of children and offer access to the children's worlds and the meanings that they attach to Christmas and Santa Claus. Letters to Santa can give us access to the desires that are openly expressed by children. However, Banister and Booth (2005) remind us that there are ethical questions regarding the child's consent to participate in the study. In this study, it is important to make sure that the use of letters cannot harm those children whose letters we analyze in any way.

We had to exclude some of the letters due to the great volume, and due to quality issues. The letters that did not fulfill our requirements included those written by adults, those that were illegible or which contained adult rather than children's wish lists, and letters that contained only pictures or drawings. To determine the gender and age of the writer, researchers used clues found in the letters, such as name and school class. Lack of background information

about the writers and the writing situations means that the scope of the analysis is limited to that what can be seen in letters. However, content analysis is above all the study of messages, not the communicator (Kassarjian, 1977), so we never wanted to emphasize the background information of the letters and their writers.

Unfortunately, it is not fully possible to exclude the influence or aid of an adult or peers when a child is writing a letter to Santa. However, in line with the notions of Otnes *et al.* (1994a), we assume that the letters are above all expressions of children's own initiatives and sincere desires. Naturally, very young children are not able to express their wishes in writing, and writing skills develop gradually (Shook *et al.*, 1989). Further, it has to be noted that spoken and written language are not the same. It has also been observed that there are also some gender differences in writing styles (e.g. Otnes *et al.*, 1994a). After considering these notions and limitations, we chose 314 letters, of which 176 were written by girls, and 138 by boys.

Ways of analyzing the data

Earlier research with letters to Santa has concentrated on exploring product categories in letters to Santa (e.g. Richardson and Simpson, 1982; Downs, 1983). Researchers have been interested in sex-typed toy preferences in natural contexts to reveal gender role enactment in children (e.g. Downs, 1983; Almqvist, 1997). Other previous studies have focused on examining gendered differences in the writing styles of gift requests and the degree of occurrence of brand names in the wish lists of children (Otnes *et al.*, 1994a, b; O'Cass and Clarke, 2002). These studies act as reference points to this study when presenting general findings regarding gender differences, and the degree of occurrence of brand names in the letters.

Although there were some examples of classification available from the previous gift request studies (Otnes *et al.*, 1994a, b; O'Cass and Clarke, 2002), we felt that they were not applicable to our analysis as such, because the focus of our study was on understanding the underlying messages of gift request styles rather than examining merely the product categories and brands that appear in the letters or communication strategies of children. Instead, we wanted to describe the spirit of Christmas requests based on how previous literature has defined and differentiated between needs, desires, wishes, wants and dreams (e.g. Belk *et al.*, 2000; MacInnis and de Mello, 2005; Fournier and Guiry, 1993).

We began the analysis of the contents of the letters by grouping stacks of letters according to whether the letters contain direct phrasing of needs, wants, hopes and desires. However, it was noticed in the early phase of reading the letters that strict classification of the letters according to contents only would not just be difficult, but also unlikely to produce the best understanding of the overall spirit of gift requests. For this reason, letters were analyzed both in detail (texts and pictures), and as entities. We believe this will improve the likelihood of deriving valid inferences. Moreover, after clarifying the conceptual framework of needs, wants, hopes and desires, we were able to agree the specific dimensions of the gift request styles seen in the letters, and model our classification of gift requesting types. The three members of the research group acted as peer judges in order to gain reliable and unanimous evaluations of the message and meaning of the letters. Those letters that caused differences of opinions were either eliminated from further analysis or handled as interesting cases for further studies.

Results

General comparison of gift requests with previous studies on letters to Santa

In general, British children in our study do not seem to differ greatly from the Australian and American children who were the subject of previous studies (O'Cass and Clarke, 2002; Otnes *et al.*, 1994a, b). In line with the notion of O'Cass and Clarke (2002), children seem to be very brand-oriented in their gift requests. O'Cass and Clarke found that only 28.2 percent of the letters contained no brand names, in our study the number is even smaller with 22.6 percent of letters not naming brands. It seems that boys wish for brands more often than

girls, because 83.3 percent of boys' letters and 72.7 percent girls' contained wishes with brand names. Even though our analysis was not focused on age differences, it was noticeable that brands dominate the wish lists among all age groups represented in our data.

In our data, each letter average 5.2 gift requests. The mode value was ten requests in one letter. The average number of gift requests is higher than in 2002 in the research of O'Casey and Clarke, who recorded a mean of 4.1. In earlier studies regarding gift requests, Caron and Ward (1975) have recorded a mean of 3.8, Richardson and Simpson (1982) 5.3, and Downs (1983) 3.5 gift requests per letter. The highest number of gift requests has been noticed in the study of Otnes *et al.* (1994b) who noted an average of 7.2 gift requests in letters to Santa written by American children. However, the deviation in these averages is not significant enough to claim that there has been a radical change in the number of gift requests. Furthermore, the comparison of the means is only indicative due to different data gathering techniques (situational factors) and writers of the letters (age, nationality) in the above-mentioned studies.

As regards communicative strategies of the writers, Otnes *et al.* (1994a) found that girls' letters to Santa Claus are expressive, polite and contain indirect requests, whereas letters that are written by boys are more often shorter, more task-oriented, and contain direct requests. Moreover, gender differences are visible in the contents of gift requests just as Richardson and Simpson (1982) noticed. It was rare to find mixing in the traditional sex-typed requests of boys and girls. However, there were some common gift requests for both genders, such as game consoles, though, even in these requests, the gender difference could be discerned in specific color choices.

Classification of the request styles

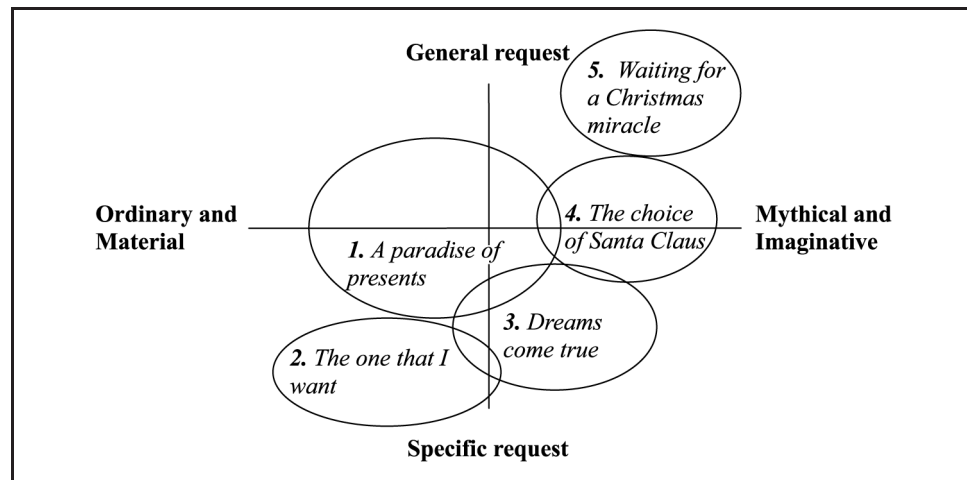
When digging deeper to analyze the letters spirit and request styles of the letters, the contents of the letters were analyzed according to two axes that were considered to capture well the facets of underlying Christmas spirit of the children's gift requests. First, we examined whether the requests are specific (brand names or other details) or general (on a product category level or abstract ideas). This distinction highlights the different nature of desires and needs. Second, we discussed whether requests found in the letters are expressions of ordinary and material wishes or are they based on Santa myth and imagination. In our analysis, a gift request that is ordinary and material is seen as a reflection of materialism, and representing the wants and desires of a child, whereas a gift request that represents mythical and imaginative ideas brings out the more spiritual nature of Christmas and the aspects of dreaming and hope. Finally, five distinctive groups of request styles were distinguished and given titles. These can be seen in Figure 1. Request styles are numbered according to the frequency of their appearance in the data (the largest group = 1).

Based on Figure 1, we can see that emphasis of the letters is in the corner of specific and material gifts. In contrast, wishes that are on a general level and rationalized with needs were very rare. This suggests that Christmas gifts are not about satisfying general needs but fulfilling specific desires. Altruistic or flights of fantasy wishes were also rather rare in our data.

The paradise of presents

The largest group ($n = 202$) consists of letters, which represent a long and mixed list of gifts with or without brand names. We have labeled this group the paradise of presents. Both girls (61.4 percent) and boys (68.1 percent) contribute requests to this group. Requests were often expressed in detail, even in extreme cases with detailed descriptions including page number in a toy catalogue, price of the gift, and where it might be bought. The longest letter contained 51 gift requests implying that requesting might have been more about dreaming than wanting or expecting to get all of those gifts. It is noteworthy that when children wrote their requests using certain templates for letters to Santa with pre-written numbering or a specific number of lines for the requests, children filled all of them, and the amount of wishes

Figure 1 Classification of gift request styles



was typically larger than in other letters. It was also quite common to wish for a surprise at the end of the long specified list of gifts. This may imply that these other gifts are not surprises when coming true. Instead, these gifts are just wanted and received like orders filled, with no place for the gift giver's free choices.

The one that I want

The second group includes letters with only one or two gift requests. In this case, we may assume that the gift requested is indeed important and carefully considered. A total of 65 letters belong to this group, of which 35 are from girls and 30 from boys. There are no clear differences between genders, instead differences by age can be found. Those who wish for only one gift are relatively young (at pre-school age) and they often express their wishes by drawing. This finding was also expected, as writing skills at this age are not fully developed. The gift requested was not necessarily expensive, although it was the only one. Among boys, the wish was typically related to playing with games and cars, whereas little girls wished for Bratz dolls and make-up sets, and older girls more expensive gifts such as computers and DVD-players.

Dreams come true

The third analysis group is labeled dreams come true. This implies that wishes are highly imaginative and based on a certain fantasy of becoming somebody (e.g. becoming a princess) or having something (e.g. pony) that is not currently possible. A total of 21 letters can be classified in to this group. A total of 15 letters were from girls and only six from boys. Thus, in this respect, it seems that dreaming might be more common for girls than boys. Overall, this group is small, and thus not to be considered as typical.

The choice of Santa Claus

The fourth group is constituted around unspecified and general gift requests, which give Santa an opportunity to choose whatever he would like to give. Evidently, a gift becomes more pure and sacred when given as a surprise (Belk *et al.*, 1989). The surprise gift was not necessarily the only gift requested, but in this group it was very strongly emphasized. Only 13 letters can be classified into this group that sits opposite to "the one that I want" group. It was typical for the letters of this group to have a very polite and humble way of writing a letter to Santa, such as: "I would be very happy if you could bring me some presents on your sleigh when you come on Christmas Eve, please".

Waiting for a Christmas miracle

The fifth group is termed waiting for a Christmas miracle, because of the high level of Christmas spirit and hope relating to the gift requests in this group. Letters express faith that Santa Clause can fulfill any request, even to accomplish an impossible task. Requests in this group are perceptibly unselfish and/or emotional, such as: "Would you get my dad a happy heart?" Only 13 letters fit into this group, which contrasts with that of "the paradise of presents".

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, Christmas could be called a festival of shopping for branded toys for kids. After all, the largest group of request styles is "the paradise of presents" exemplified by long wish lists and specific requests. Another typical group of request styles was labeled as "The one that I want". This is somewhat opposite to the first group in regard to the amount of gifts requested, but has a similarity in that branded goods dominate the requests. The third group was distinguished as "The choice of Santa Claus", which shows that children long for surprises. This notion draws support from the research conducted by Just Kid Inc. (Poris, 2005). Poris has distinguished ten major dimensions of "kid fun", one of which is surprising/adventurous fun. On the other hand, the fourth dimension of gift request styles found in our study "waiting for a Christmas miracle" manifests the imagination of kids and mystical experience of Christmas gifts. However, this dimension was a minority segment of the letters. This is somewhat surprising in the light of general expectations that children are not affected by the restrictive boundaries of rational thinking, but are free to express whatever they wish.

As a whole, instead of wish lists we could in many cases use the term want lists or even orders. However, some glimpses of traditional Christmas spirit can be seen in the letters, evidenced by wishes for gifts for other people and for pets. Almost every letter contained the Christmas greeting and a word of thanks. In addition, there is a clear emphasis on gifts being earned by good behavior. Partly this is of course the traditional way of writing, but there is truth in these words, which emphasize the reciprocity of gift giving. In addition, the children often remembered that Santa deserves something too when he brings those gifts that are wished for. Many letters included words such as: "I will leave you a mince pie, milk and a carrot for your reindeer". These kinds of notions concerning rewarding, fairness, caring and deserving open us to new interesting insights for further studies on the socialization of children into the consumption culture.

Interestingly, gift requests by children seem to be full of postmodern contradictions of consumption summarized by Elliott (1997). He has identified the general tensions between:

- the material versus the symbolic;
- the social versus the self;
- desire versus satisfaction;
- rationality versus irrationality; and
- creativity versus constraint.

In this vein, multifaceted gift requests such as: "Dear Santa, May I have a bike, Raleigh computer value pack and a little surprise. I have a dog called Keano, can you bring him a little surprise?" reflect different nuances in Christmas spirit, and indeed different kinds of needs and desires. On the one hand, letters show the materialistic side of Christmas and the dominance of brand names amongst wishes; on the other hand, they show imaginative features and altruism. There are no strict boundaries between rationality and irrationality, or between wanting and dreaming. Taken further, when there are no strict boundaries, it is evident that managing different wants and dreams can also be a very educative experience for a child (see Young, 2004, p. 22). After all, writing a letter to Santa is a unique opportunity for a child to express their desires openly, and for once, act as a real consumer that has a voice to be heard.

Conclusions

The analysis of letters to Santa Claus offers us an opportunity to give substance to the spirit of postmodern consumption and its contradictory aspects, and to understand children as consumers. The discussion regarding request styles exhibits features of contemporary Christmas celebration from children's points-of-view. On the one hand, there is a strong materialistic aspect in the form of brands and long wish lists, while on the other hand, we can recognize some imaginative facets in gift requests. Still, the meaning of gifts could be deepened far more with the inclusion of symbolic meanings and the spirit of Santa myth. We can draw two general conclusions. First, the clear focus of precise gift requests on brands means that children are very aware of what they want. Second, it is essential to recognize and understand the nature of the desires of children today, as they are an influential set of consumers.

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