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Advances in Consumer Research Volume 17, 1990 Pages 508-517 HALLOWEEN: AN EVOLVING AMERICAN CONSUMPTION RITUAL Russell W. Belk, University of Utah

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 Santa Claus) and extort 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 non-durable 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 order to obtain unwholesome sweets in a decidedly non-religious atmosphere. In Christmas rituals gifts are exchanged within the family and each is personally and lovingly 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 one million people in the western United States. Participant observation was used to study a variety of child and adult Halloween practices including fairs, parades, 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 and interviews were recorded both verbally (fieldnotes, journals, tape recording) and visually (photography, videotaping). A variety of secondary sources were consulted in popular literature and the literatures of a variety of social sciences. Relevant topics in these literatures include fears, nightmares, play, games, children’s stories, sex role socialization, rites of passage, liminality, mysticism, magic, masks, costumes, decoration, legends, myths, fairy tales, horror movies, performance, drama, Halloween history, American holidays, the ritual calendar, and related holidays in different cultures. Besides relying on multiple sources of evidence, a deliberate attempt was made to avoid a priori theorizing and to continuously cycle between the primary and secondary sources as new interpretive themes emerged. Beginning with participant observation and immersion in Halloween celebrations, the project has developed via an interactive and continuous process of theory formulation, application, modification, and expansion (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). What began as a simple investigation of the solicitation, acquisition, and consumption

of candies by children, soon became an investigation of the mysteries of a rich and evolving social ritual involving children, adults, and community. AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT Certain aspects of Halloween can be traced, through surviving remnants, as far back as prehistoric Celtic celebrations of Samhain (variants: Saman, Samain, Semuin, Samhuinn). Winkler and Winkler (1970) suggest that Samhain celebrated the harvest and was influenced by Egyptian and Babylonian harvest festivals, but Frazer (1959; original 1890) argues that Samhain was instead a pastoral festival marking the time of bringing the herds back from pastures to their winter stalls. In addition to being a seasonal harvest or herding festival, Samhain was a Celtic new year's 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). A survival of this Halloween practice in Europe substituted black cats to be burned in the wicker cages that would have contained criminals or captives before the Romans banned human sacrifices in 61 A.D. (Linton and Linton 1950). On Samhain night the ghosts of the dead emerged and visited their old homes. Witches and hobgoblins with more orgiastic, mischievous, or malevolent intent also roamed 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 dead, debauchery, and evil remain attached to contemporary Halloween celebrations. There may also have been precedents for trick-or-treating and Halloween costumes in Samhain celebrations. James (1961) reports that in Gallic celebrations of Samhain, the skins of slaughtered animals were worn as a disguise to invoke the spirits of sacred animals and that this masquerade feature continues to survive in the Scottish Highlands. According to Myers (1972) banquet tables were prepared for visiting ghosts and after the feast the ghosts were led out of town by costumed villagers. Harvest beggars are also thought to have asked for food and traces of a masked procession that asked for contributions in the mysterious name of "Muck Olla" survived into historic periods (Linton and Linton 1950, Ward 1981). In Christian times, this practice became transmuted into souling (in which special soul-cakes were solicited) and eventually into children's bearing "a penny for the Guy" (Fawkes) in England and trick-or-treating for candy in the U.S.. Jack-o'-lanterns are another practice that derives from Irish customs and perhaps those of their ancient Celtic forbearers.. Irish children have long hollowed out potatoes, turnips, and rutabagas, made carved faces on them, and placed lighted candles inside (the pumpkin appears to be an American modification). The related folktale involves a trickster figure: a miserly drunkard Irishman named Jack. He twice tricked the Devil into promising not to take his soul. The first time he told the Devil he would accompany him to Hades if he could have sixpence to enjoy one last drink first.

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