

[Research Paper]

## Commentary on *Gift-Giving, Sharing, and Consumption Holidays*

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This article is a commentary on a forthcoming book *Gift-Giving, Sharing, and Consumption Holidays (Legends in Consumer Behavior, Volume 7*, edited by Cele Otnes, Sage Publishing).

I first took up Christmas as a theme of study for my Ph. D. dissertation. As is true in the United States, Japan is a huge Christmas market. Christmas cake, for instance, is believed to be a 40 billion yen (four hundred and eighty seven million USD) business. U.S.-born TV personalities on Japanese television fuss about the Japanese way of Christmas, observing that the “Japanese like to party on Christmas, but an authentic Christmas is spent quietly at home.” Their comments made me feel strange. Is there such a thing as an authentic Christmas, I wondered? If so, who decides what is authentic and what is not? These were the questions that made me decide to take up Christmas as a research theme.

My research would not have been possible without the rich fruits of Russell Belk’s years of studies. I have been most profoundly influenced by Russ’s attitude as a researcher and by his approach to the research subject. To have Russ’s articles compiled and published here is happy state of affairs indeed.

### Santa Claus and Jesus Christ

No one can ignore Russ’s accomplishments when studying Christmas. While researchers of consumer culture theory attempt to compare different cultures and clarify their differences, Russ operates from another perspective. He tries to

understand by immersing himself into the consumption milieu of a certain country or subculture. Russ’s work reminds me of the importance and effectiveness of clarifying the nature of informants’ consumer culture by associating closely with the informants as fellow human beings, instead of comparing the culture with one’s own, acting on the assumption that people in different cultures are therefore different people.

Two of Russ’s five articles on Christmas that inspired my research are Belk (1987) and Belk (2000). These works point out that Christmas is also practiced commercially in the United States.

One of the interesting features of Belk (1987) is its focus on the coexistence of Santa Claus and Jesus Christ despite their contrasting properties; that is, the profane, symbolic God of materialism, and secular Santa Claus versus the holiness of Jesus Christ. In this work, Russ clarifies why these two can co-exist during the same holiday, and how contrasting aspects represented by the two are accepted as being compatible. By conducting meticulous qualitative interpretation and quantitative content analysis on each and every feature and story of a massive amount of Christmas-related works that have appeared in American mass media, including films, television, magazines, short stories and novels, comics and comic books since 1940 (Belk 2000), Russ succeeds in revealing that Christmas in the United States is able to accommodate these two contrasting figures.

I was particularly influenced by Russ’s finding that the origin of even a consumer culture that is

taken for granted today can be historically ambiguous. This led me to the realization of the importance of inquiring how a consumer culture attains legitimacy despite its ambiguity. I point out in Kimura (2001) that today's Christmas phenomenon is a product of layers of historical and cultural factors rather than the result of one single point of origin.

The birth of Jesus Christ as the origin of Christmas and Santa Claus as the gift bringer are stories that have been created by religion and coincidental folklore. As such, one cannot verify their origins. The birthday of Jesus Christ had been believed to be January 6 until the early fourth century. It was the strategy of the Roman Empire to establish Christ's birthday to be December 25, the day of the winter solstice. The Roman Empire deemed that day as the appropriate day of birth for Jesus, who was often compared to the sun. The strategy was an attempt to mitigate conflict and friction among customs and religions both within and outside the empire and to assimilate Christians.

Santa Claus as gift bringer is the product of centuries of mixing and melding of numerous factors based on the life of St. Nicholas, who was born to a devout Christian family in 270 A.D. in Patara, Asia Minor. The image that many people today have of Santa Claus was developed in 1823, when the poem written by Clement Clarke Moore was first published. *The Night before Christmas*, illustrated by W. W. Denslow, depicts Santa Claus as a large, jolly man riding in a sleigh drawn by reindeer. In Belk 1993 Russ points to other factors that have been mixed and melded into the modern-day Santa Claus, including the British Father Christmas, the French Pere Noel, the Dutch Sinterklaas, the Danish Jules-Missen, and the Romanian Mos Craicun.

The historical analysis and discourse analysis conducted by Russ are effective methods of depicting the transformation of a consumer culture. I once studied how the Christmas cake obtained

legitimacy in Japan (Kimura 2006). I used such data as newspaper and magazine articles, newspaper ads, picture books and children's literature, treatises and academic works, and other references published between 1900 and 2000 to analyze how the perception of the Christmas cake transformed over time. During the twentieth century, the evolution of the Christmas cake in Japan occurred in five phases, each of which had its own legitimate Christmas cake and its own body of consumers. Taking guidance from Russ's interpretive research methods, I was able to clarify how each of those five renditions of the Christmas cake obtained legitimacy.

### Is There A Santa Claus ?

Using such material as the movie *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Russ reveals the close relationship between Christmas and materialism (Belk 1993 and Belk & Bryce 1993). As a Japanese person, I was quite surprised to learn that Christmas in the United States is indeed affected by commercialism and materialism, and that the holiday has become a postmodern spectacle. My surprise stems from the perception in Japan that an American Christmas is holy and authentic, unaffected by materialism.

*Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (1994 version), directed by Les Mayfield, is a movie about the existence of Santa Claus in which two positions are represented. One is constructionism and the other is essentialism.

The lead character is an old man named Kris Kringel who claims to be Santa Claus. To be sure, he does look like the Santa Claus with whom we are familiar, and he is certainly knowledgeable about what toys children want as Christmas presents. Throughout the film, his and other people's practical accomplishments construct the social reality that Kris is Santa.

The scene of the public hearing to determine if Kris really is Santa Claus is the highlight of the movie. In this scene, constructionism and

essentialism clash. The two positions are represented by different characters. On the constructionist side there is Brian Bedford, a young lawyer who has a liking for Doris Walker, a single mother with a daughter named Susan. On the essentialism side there is Doris Collins, the district attorney; and Judge Henry Harper, who presides at the public hearing.

At the public hearing, Brian presents constructionistic evidence. Because constructionism embraces the belief that people's practices construct reality, it tries to verify reality by presenting people's concrete actions. Brian's two witnesses do just that. Young Daniel Laurey, who claims that he received a bicycle from Kris as a Christmas present, says he thinks Kris is the real Santa Claus because "He's very nice. And he works at Cole's. And he's got elves." Mrs. Collins, wife of the district attorney, testifies that when her children visited Cole's Department Store with their father, he told them Kris was indeed the real Santa Claus.

According to essentialism, only what is visible is the truth. Doris exemplifies this position. At Cole's Department Store, where Brian has taken Susan to see Santa, she tells Brian, "She meets an actor—a very good one with a real beard and a beautiful Santa suit—sitting smack dab in the center of a child's fantasy world. So who does she believe? The myth or the mom?"

District Attorney Collins' three witnesses at the public hearing present similar essentialist evidence. A scholar testifies that St. Nicolas, who is believed to be the model for Santa Claus, was a bishop in fourth-century Asia Minor and that Pope Paulo VI eliminated St. Nicolas' Day from the list of official celebrations of the feast day and made it an optional memorial day in 1969. An army colonel who went on expeditions to the North Pole testifies that he found no sign of human habitation, barns, or workshops and that it would be utterly impossible to construct workshops in someplace as completely barren as the North Pole. A reindeer is the third

witness. When Collins demands that Kris make the reindeer fly, Kris declines, saying, "He only flies on Christmas Eve."

What kind of a verdict can Judge Harper render, given this conflict between constructionism and essentialism? He argues as follows, using American currency as a metaphor:

*It's a one-dollar bill. It is issued by the Treasury of the United States of America, and it's backed by the Government and the people of the United States of America. Upon inspection of the article, you will see the words: In God We Trust. We're not here to prove that God exists. But we are here to prove that a being, just as invisible and yet just as present exists. Federal government puts its trust in God. It does so on faith alone. It's the will of the people that guides the government. It is and was their collective faith in a greater being that gave cause to the inscription on this bill. If the government of the United States can issue its currency bearing a declaration of trust in God without demanding physical evidence of the existence or nonexistence of a greater being, then the state of New York by a similar demonstration of the collective faith of its people, can accept and acknowledge that Santa Claus does exist and he exists in the person of Kris Kringle. (Mayfield 1994)*

In the decision, we can see that when the collective faith becomes describable, intelligible, reportable, and analyzable through practices, its subjective matter can turn into objective reality. All of these features are revealed in the practical actions of the people (Coulon 1995).

Consumer researchers are often fascinated with Christmas and Santa Claus because these two have simultaneous materialistic and altruistic aspects. Russ has proven that Christmas and materialism are inseparably related. Santa Claus as a symbol of materialism is attributable to deliberate maneuverings by corporations and media.

A department store is regarded as an edifice of

consumption. In Charles Chaplin's movie *Modern Times* (1936), for instance, a department store filled with commodities is depicted as a symbol of affluence. Belk (1993) points out that in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Kris contributes to sales of the department store while preaching to children the existence of Santa Claus and family love. In the last scenes of the 1994 movie, Susan is presented both with a huge mansion (materialistic) and a family (profane) by Kris.

Thus, in Christmas, secularization and commercialization can coexist with altruism and social affirmation. Christmas also provides a context that justifies materialism. Russ' argument explains the justification and even sanctification of secularized and materialized Christmas in Japan, where young couples under the spell of the catchphrases "Romantic Christmas" and "Holy Christmas" exchange expensive gifts from Tiffany or Cartier. One of Russ's contributions to consumer culture theory is his refusal to criticize a phenomenon as simple materialism. Russ calls attention to the importance of the anatomy of the mechanism through which materialism is sublimated to altruistic behavior. In this way, he reminds us that materialism is only one of aspect of a phenomenon.

### **Materialism Creates Authentic Santa**

By far the strongest inspiration that I have drawn from Russ's massive volume of studies on Christmas concerns the concept of authentic culture. As Russ and I researched consumption and Christmas in Japan, we frequently came across live Santa Clauses, including the "real" Santa Claus from Finland, the authentic Santa Claus from Norway, and the Santa Claus who was officially endorsed by the Greenland International Santa Claus Association. Furthermore, there were part-time Pizza Hut delivery boys, stylists at the hairdresser's, and doormen of karaoke parlors all dressed in Santa Claus costumes. We discovered

that the Japanese hold a common perception of Santa Claus. Those we encountered in Japan were mostly dressed in red, had white mustaches and beards, and wore red caps. Japanese people are exposed to Santa Claus in the movies, TV programs, magazines, and picture books, and some Japanese believe that a real Santa Claus lives in the North Pole.

In Kimura (2007), I attempted to clarify how a real Santa Claus is created. I gathered data by conducting interviews and undertaking fieldwork in both Japan and the Nordic Santa Villages in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, investigated how cultural authenticity in tourist areas is constructed, and clarified how a sense of the real is created.

My investigation of how a tour destination creates cultural authenticity was based on Russ's concept of materialism. Visitors at Finland's Santa Village, which is the most successful among the three, look very happy when they see the "real" Santa. The village uses strategies of materialism to help it succeed in creating a genuine and real Santa. Everything about the Santa Claus in Finland—his appearance, his manner, and his voice—is exactly as we are used to envisioning him from the American Santa. No images of Saint Nicholas are necessary to create a sense of realness. The CEO of Santa Village insisted that their Santa is the original. However, there is a paradox: in order to create the original and authentic Santa, reference points are needed. In other words, without Coca Cola Santa, the Finnish Santa is never able to become authentic. The village makes visitors spend money to purchase things—for example, photos taken with Santa, postcards and stamps for writing to friends, and souvenirs for the family.

The Finnish Santa cannot be authentic without dipping him into materialism. Thanks to studies done by Russ, I was able to clarify that other countries aside from the United States also try to justify their materialistic Christmas using Santa Claus.

## Videography

In May 2003, after hearing me speak on Christmas in Japan at the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference on Historical Analysis and Research in Marketing (CHARM) at Michigan State University, Russ proposed that we research consumer behavior and Christmas in Japan together. In order to reveal how and why Christmas came to be accepted in Japan, we conducted fieldwork and interviews in Japan from December 17 until December 24, 2003. Our findings were published in Kimura and Belk (2004) and Kimura and Belk (2005).

Considering the broader debates on globalization, localization, and domestication, we found that marketers and media play important roles in promoting a global Christmas, but that Japan adapts to, rather than simply adopts, these imports. We concluded that what drives globalization is not homogeneity but perceived heterogeneity.

One particular research method that I learned from Russ really allowed us to recognize the heterogeneity of Christmas in Japan. This research method is called videography. (Russ and Rob Kozinets have held Film Festival at Annual Conference of the Association for Consumer Research since 2002. For details of this research method, see Belk [1998] and Belk and Kozinets [2006].) One of the lessons I have learned from Russ is that I should never intrude on the hearts of my informants. Being a sincere ethnographer, Russ tries to understand the informant from the vantage point of an insider by acting together with the informant as one of the culture's members. Videography allows us both to not intrude and to apply an outsider's viewpoint. Having this outsider's viewpoint is an advantage of ethnography.

On the other hand, videography also allows us to have an outsider perspective at the same time. For instance, when Russ was surprised to find through the camera lens an illustration of Astro

Boy on the Star of Bethlehem on top of the Christmas tree at Kyoto Station, it was the astonishment of an outsider. Being a Japanese, I was an insider, and the illustration of Astro Boy on the star did not elicit any reaction from me. Thanks to Russ, who brought in the viewpoint of an outsider, we were able to notice that Christmas consumption in Japan has an aspect of localizing something non-Japanese—that is, changing Western things into something familiar.

## Conclusion

Russ is an excellent consumer researcher, sincere ethnographer, and, personally, a precious *tomodachi* (friend) to me. His past achievements, from the selection of research questions when inquiring about consumer culture to inter-disciplinary theoretical framework, methodology, data collection, and interpretation, have set high standards and formed the yardstick for researchers like myself who came after him. Russ's works compiled here are an excellent window on the several aspects of Russ's approach that have truly influenced me: his approach to the research informants, the framework of social constructionism and materialism, and the videography method.

It is a mission of consumer culture theory researchers to clarify mundane reason (Pollner 1987) of the informants. Russ has taught me that in order to accomplish this goal, I must be respectful and sincere when facing my informants.

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