

# Rituals In Children's Cultures Of Consumption

Rituals in Children's Cultures of Consumption: An ethnographic Study.

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## Abstract

Consumption in children's cultures is a much debated topic. Yet, few attempts have been made to understand consumer culture from children's own perspective, to investigate the positive aspects of children's relationships with consumer goods, and/or to examine how the meanings attached to goods are negotiated, played out and shaped in children's diverse cultures. This paper addresses this gap by employing data from informal interviews and participant observation to discuss children's experiences of consumer cultures. The paper is based on data from a year-long ethnographic study of children (aged 3-5, 6-8 and 10-11) from two contrasting areas in one region of Scotland (one relatively affluent area and one relatively deprived area).

The ethnographic data highlights the importance of consumption in children's cultures. The paper examines consumption rituals, artefacts and symbols within the context of the different values, beliefs and concerns that children produce and share with others. It concludes that cultures of consumption impact on children in both divisive and integrative ways and that more efforts should be made by those that work with and for children to harness their integrative potential.

## Introduction

Considering the amount of time children in the Western world spend consuming i.e. choosing, shopping, exchanging, using, watching adverts and discussing consumer goods it is highly surprising that within childhood studies only a handful of authors have directed attention towards this important issue. Some have argued that for adults generally, market values and childhood sit uncomfortably together (Cook, 2005; Seiter, 1993), resulting in this field of research frequently being overlooked or even avoided. However, such evasions fail to recognize that life today, for adults and children alike, is always already inextricably embedded in consumption. Therefore, although consumption may not *wholly* define children it powerfully frames their everyday lives (Humphrey, 1998) and consequently, to ignore this ubiquitous aspect of childhood presents significant gaps in our understanding of children.

Consumption rituals has become an increasingly important area of research in consumer behaviour (e.g. Belk, 1979; McKenchie & Tynan, 2005; McCracken, 1986; Otnes & Scott, 1996; Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Rook, 1984; Tetreault & Kleine, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), however, to date there remains little understanding of ritual consumer behaviour generally and in children's cultures of consumption specifically. This paper explores the utility of the concept of consumption rituals for understanding children's consumer behaviour. It begins with a discussion of the term 'ritual' prior to a review of the marketing and consumer behaviour literature pertaining to rituals in children's cultures. It concludes that cultures of consumption impact on children in both divisive and integrative ways and that more efforts should be made by those that work with and for children to harness their integrative potential.

## What is a ritual?

Traditionally, rituals have been closely associated with religion and similar fields of study (Collins, 1998). This has led to a rather narrow perspective when considering the variety of rituals that are observable in everyday life. Only recently have authors outside religion and anthropology acknowledged the importance of rituals in other spheres of life. According to Douglas and Isherwood (2002: 43) rituals "...serve to contain the drift of meanings. Rituals are conventions that set up visible public definitions". This means that for consumers generally and children specifically, rituals can function as important scripts in understanding, interpreting and constructing cultures of consumption. This view is confirmed by Tetreault and Kleine (1990: 31) who argued:

*"Ritual as construct offers great potential for interpreting many aspects of consumption phenomena...[and]...offers rich insights into the real, experiential lives of consumers and the types of symbolic meanings that they invest in the use of consumer products"*

In other words, by examining rituals in children's cultures of consumption researchers can gain further understanding of children as consumers. It is difficult to establish the specific meaning of the term 'ritual' because it has a range of uses (Collins, 1998). However, one definition is provided by Rook (1985: 282) who suggested that ritual is:

*"...a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behaviour is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness<sup>1</sup> and inner intensity".*

One of the key characteristics Rook draws attention to in this definition is of rituals as being constructed of numerous behaviours and fixed sequences, which are adhered to with varying degree depending on the event. For instance the sequence of a funeral is likely to be relatively fixed and more rigidly scripted than that of a child's birthday party (Rook, 1985). This raises issues about the extent to which rituals are formalized and made public (Gainer, 1995). For example, rituals are commonly associated with an audience i.e. acted-out in public. However, increasing attention has been paid to so-called private rituals i.e. those performed privately without the presence of others. One example of a private ritual is that of personal grooming (McCracken, 1986).

There is disagreement in the literature as to what constitutes a ritual. Hendry (1999) suggested that in order to determine if behaviour is ritualized we have to observe people's reaction when other actors neglect to follow certain scripts. For example, if a child refuses to accept a gift the giver will in all likelihood find this rude, unusual or odd. Whilst this may be a simple method of determining what ritual behaviour is, and what it is not, it fails to provide an in-depth explanation of what rituals really are.

Whilst it is common to see the terms ritual and routine used almost interchangeably some authors have gone to great lengths to explain the difference between rituals and routines/habits (e.g. Denham, 2003; Rook, 1985; Tetreault & Kleine, 1990). Denham (2003) argued that routines are more modifiable types of behaviour. Furthermore, the deep level of involvement and

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<sup>1</sup> Seriousness is here taken to mean that ritual performance is important *rather* than without humour.

communicative function of rituals has been pointed out by others (Tetreault & Kleine, 1990). The problem with this is that it is very difficult to determine when behaviour transcends the boundary from being routine to ritual. Furthermore, certain acts may be ritualized to some people and for others merely routine. Whilst a distinction between ritual and routine is valuable it may be less useful to talk of behaviour as being *either* ritual or *not*, but more important to define rituals along a spectrum. In other words, behaviour can be conceptualised as being to a greater or lesser extent ritualized. This is precisely the point made by Grimes (2004: 27) who has offered a significant contribution to the study of rituals. Grimes defined ritual as:

*“the general idea of actions characterized by a certain “family” of qualities, for instance, that they are performed, formalized, patterned, condensed, and so on. No one or two of these qualifies is definitive. Therefore, ritual is not “digital,” that is on or off. Rather, all behaviour is ritualized – some of it more, some of it less. The degree of ritualization increases as the number and intensity of these and other behavioural qualities increase.”*

The most interesting element offered by Grimes (2004) in the above passage is the idea that behaviour is not as such a matter of being either ritual or not, but rather a question of degree. However, some behaviour is more ritualized than other<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, for this study it is expected that a range of rituals will be identified – although the intensity with which the ritual is performed, the scripted nature of the ritual, its formality, the extent to which it is performed publicly and the type of symbolic behaviour involved is likely to differ.

Some authors distinguish between public and private rituals (McCracken, 1986; Rook, 1985). This work tends to depict rituals as universal. However, the performance of large-scale public rituals has been found to vary. Wallendorf (1991) found that the ritual scripts that various families followed e.g. Thanksgiving Day celebrations were in fact not the same. Therefore, even mass-celebrated rituals which are seen to represent some type of cultural universal are, in reality, performed very differently. This suggests that research on consumption rituals should aim to broaden our conceptualization of ritual behaviour (Rook 2004).

## **Defining Consumption Rituals**

In the context of consumption, rituals are highly significant and often taken-for-granted aspects of children’s everyday lives. Therefore, it is argued that ritual behaviour becomes most observable when scripts are broken. The manner in which consumer goods are used, the meaning attributed to these and the participation in consumption events are all features of consumer behaviour that are highly ritualised (Rook, 1985). Rituals are commonly considered to have an artefactual element i.e. some type of material good (Rook, 1985). However, verbal rituals (e.g. greetings) are an important form of ritual as well (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Hendry, 1999). McCracken (1986) used the term ‘symbolic action’ interchangeably with that of ritual to emphasise the importance of symbolism in these acts. This is of great significance for consumer behaviour as goods frequently play an integral part in rituals. Examples of goods used in rituals include dressing up, greeting

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<sup>2</sup> Some behavioural qualities which Grimes (1990) referred to are rituals as performed, formalized, repetitive, collective, patterned, traditional, highly valued or deeply felt, symbolic, dramatic, mystical and so on. However, as Grimes him noted the list is not exhaustive and neither need all these qualities be present to consider behaviour as ritualized. See Grimes (1990) for a further discussion.

cards, gifts, food and so on. The implications for children's cultures of consumption cannot be understated when considering important ritualistic events in the Western World such as holidays, birthdays and Christmas. Rituals are manifested in various forms and serve different purposes, yet a distinction can be made between two families of rituals. These are:

- 'Consumption Rituals', which are a *form* of consumption
- "Other Rituals", which have *implications* for consumption

Consumption rituals are centred around activities such as gift-giving. In this case the ritual *itself* is some form of consumption. However, there are a range of rituals which have strong consumption implications, where consumer goods are used as essential ingredients when acting out the ritual. For instance, for a graduation ceremony the graduating student may wear a gown and a hat to symbolise their achievement. Both these families of rituals are considered to be equally significant when exploring children's cultures of consumption. Turning specifically to consumption rituals McCracken (1986) identified four types which he named: grooming rituals, divestment rituals, exchange rituals and possession rituals. These rituals, he argued, are vehicles for transferring cultural meaning from consumer goods to individuals. In other words, people engage in consumption rituals to extract meaning from consumer goods.

### ***Grooming rituals***

The act of grooming may be considered habitual; however, grooming rituals have been conceived as being highly ritualised (Hope, 1980; Rook, 1985; Rook & Levy, 1999). In many cultures the consumption of grooming products plays an important role in how the body is displayed, maintained and used as a social communicator (Rook, 1985; Rook & Levy, 1999). It is conceivable that when children start to become aware of the social communication surrounding the body personal grooming becomes significant.

Grooming is frequently associated with everyday personal grooming; however, the grooming ritual can be extended to encompass the grooming of possessions (McCracken, 1986). Toys and other favourite possessions can be cared for in a ritualistic manner in order to continuously transfer meaning from the good to the individual (McCracken, 1986).

### ***Divestment rituals***

Divestment rituals are associated with extracting personal meaning from the good. This may occur when an individual is passing on, selling or giving away an important item. It is essentially a process of emptying the good of its personal meaning. Another type of divestment ritual takes place upon acquiring an item which has had a previous owner. The item is ritually emptied of its meanings associated with the previous owner. This may involve cleaning the item or in some way changing the item to endow it with new meanings. Once imbued with personal meanings associated with the new owner this can be recognised by others.

### ***Possession rituals***

Possession rituals involve "...cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and even photographing many of their new possessions" (McCracken, 1988: 85). Children are very keen to talk about their favourite things (Kline, 1993) and one can imagine that possession rituals are highly

significant in children's cultures. In their cultures children "...creatively appropriate, use, and infuse..." (Corsaro, 1997: 110) material objects with meaning. Therefore, when receiving e.g. a new toy a child may explore "what it can do", compare it to other toys, take it to school to show others, discuss its qualities with peers and let others try out the new item.

### ***Exchange rituals***

One of the main types of exchange rituals is that of gift giving which serves an important role in most societies (Hendry, 1999). Gift exchange can involve giving to others and may furthermore, encompass self-gifts (Solomon et. al., 1999) such as treating oneself. In children's lives the main gift-giving events are likely to be Christmas and birthdays. Christmas in particular, is considered to be a vigorous ritual occasion. Rook (1985) assessed the ritual vitality of various ritual occasions such as Christmas, graduation, Halloween etc. The assessment was based on an examination of the ritual artefacts, ritual scripts, ritual roles and the ritual audiences associated with each of these occasions. Rook's (1985) conclusion of the assessment was that for Christmas there were well-defined and robust rituals.

Belk (1979) distinguished between four functions of gift giving. Firstly, gift giving is a form of communication. As a form of symbolic communication, gift giving carries important messages from the giver to the recipient concerning the nature of their relationship. Dittmar (1992: 98) likened gift giving to the "*imposition of an identity*" (italics as in original). In this sense, people announce how they feel about somebody and how they want to be viewed by others. In other words, it is a medium for expressing the givers self-perception (e.g. creative, generous) and how the giver views the recipient. Secondly, gift giving is a form of social exchange, which can establish, nurture and define relationships. The notion of gift giving as an exchange relationship is important as e.g. a child would normally expect to receive a Christmas present from others they have given Christmas presents to. Therefore, although gift giving may essentially be considered a non-reciprocal action Belk (1979) argued that in reality it is.

Thirdly, gift-giving can be seen as a form of economic exchange, which is linked to the idea of gift giving as being a reciprocal activity. Lastly, gift giving can function as a socializer. In this sense gift giving to children is seen as having an important impact on children's socialization. Belk (1979) argued that gifts can serve as powerful influencers for how children construct their identities and the development of values surrounding materialism, gift giving, education, ownership and so on. Ritual behaviour as part of socialization is similar to a limited number of studies that have included children in the study of family rituals (Denham, 2003; Grieshaber, 1997; Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and rituals as compulsive behaviour in children i.e. abnormal development (Evans et. al., 2002).

## **Consumption Rituals and Childhood Studies**

Our review of literature on consumption and rituals suggests that there are a number of gaps with regard to research with children. For example, socialization perspectives are particularly dated in relation to literature from the new sociology of childhood<sup>3</sup> that considers children to be capable of agency and of resisting/influencing those who seek to socialize them.

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<sup>3</sup> Here also referred to as childhood studies

In the field of childhood studies rituals are directly addressed in studies that investigate children's play (e.g. Corsaro, 1997; Opie & Opie, 1994; Thorne, 1993). One particular example of rituals in children's cultures is the so-called ritual of pollution, which has been observed in many areas of the world (Corsaro, 1997). Rituals of pollution are rituals where certain individuals/groups are considered to be polluted or contagious. This kind of behaviour is commonly associated with gender conflict and boys may treat female possessions as being polluted since these can feel threatening towards their male gender identity (Corsaro, 1997). Such rituals can therefore, be seen as rejecting/being disgusted with the meaning that girls have invested in their possessions. In the school setting Thorne (1993) observed a type of ritual in children's cultures she termed "the underground economy" (Thorne, 1993: 20) where children regularly swapped personal items creating their own bartering economy. These studies recognise children's agency and ability to develop their own cultures out with adult control. However, there is a tendency for work in this field to put forward simplistic generalisations concerning the macro-social causes (e.g. gender, social class etc) of children's 'unique' ritual behaviour and to overlook the diverse ways that children with similar back grounds develop diverse rituals (e.g. Opie & Opie 1994).

In general, few attempts have been made to understand consumer culture from children's own perspective. Indeed, it is unclear whether the meanings attached to goods by children are universal or if they are negotiated, played out and shaped in diverse ways. For example, there are surprisingly few studies pertaining to Christmas as ritual in consumer behaviour studies, and those who have conducted studies have failed to include the experiences and perspectives of children (e.g. McKechnie and Tynan 2005).

There are few studies that investigate the positive aspects of children's relationships with consumer goods and there is an assumption that consumption and brand awareness has a negative effect on parents and children (Cook, 1995; Seiter, 1993). For example, some studies have examined the myth surrounding Santa Claus and children's gift requests (e.g. O'Cass & Clarke, 2001; Otnes et. al., 1994). Otnes et. al. (1994) analysed several hundred Christmas letters to Santa Claus, which confirmed the dominance of brands in children's cultures of consumption. The findings indicated that over fifty percent of requests for gifts were for specific brands.

One of the few areas where children's creativity has been celebrated is that of 'ritualizing'. Grimes (1990: 3) referred to ritualizing as, "...the activity of deliberately cultivating rites". This perspective promotes the idea that people are essentially free to construct their own rituals (Collins 1998). This means that individuals/groups may engage in activities that they have themselves ritualized. Otnes and Scott (1996) conducted a study of the manner in which advertising can influence ritual behaviour. They found that the tradition of giving a diamond ring upon the request for marriage was in fact a ritual created through advertising by DeBeers - a company that sells diamond rings. However, as Otnes and Scott (1996: 35) emphasise meaning creation through advertising (and other cultural institutions) is not a one-way process. Rather the process is bidirectional where people are active participants in the construction of meaning. In other words: "...advertising is just one of the message systems that can shape rituals in postmodern cultures". These findings are similar to those of Ritson and Elliott (1999) who conducted a study on the social uses of advertising amongst teenagers. They found that meaning was extracted from adverts and formed the basis for ritual interactions amongst the teenagers in the playground.

From a childhood studies perspective there have not been enough studies of this type. The remainder of this paper discusses one such study that attempted to more fully explore children's

consumption from their own perspective. The study was underpinned by the notion that what is ritual to one person may not necessarily be ritual to another and that the children themselves through their language, behaviour, or values should define what is a ritual.

## Methodology

The study adopted an ethnographic methodology to grasp what consumption means to children. It employed these methods because ethnography enables a prolonged and sustained engagement in the field and thus provides opportunities to build trust, establish positive interaction and negotiate power relationships (Davis 1998, Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Gaining access to groups of children in their everyday lives can be difficult and therefore, schools are frequently used when conducting research with children (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). For example, Ritson and Elliott (1999) successfully explored the social uses of advertising in the context of schools. Although much consumption takes place out with schools, it was decided that schools represented an opportunity to gather valuable data and therefore, it was decided that it represented an appropriate setting for the study. The research was carried out (by Erika Hayfield as part of a PhD thesis) in one nursery and two primary schools, which were drawn from the community in which she lived. This is a form of convenience sampling, which is appropriate in exploratory research:

*“Studies of adolescent behavior in general, for example, could be undertaken in the high school nearest to the researcher’s office – with the usual cautions that such populations may not be representative of **all** adolescents in a given society” (Schensul, 1999: 233).*

The study was carried out in a nursery and two separate schools in two areas in central Scotland. Sunny Nursery (hereafter SN) is a privately owned nursery with children from mixed backgrounds (government vouchers were accepted by the nursery). Northern Primary School (hereafter NPS) is located in a relatively deprived area and has 320 pupils. Waterside Primary school (hereafter WPS) has 220 pupils and is a slightly smaller village. However, both schools have a comparable distance to the large city. When comparing census data and the “Carstairs Deprivation Categories” (McLoone, 2000) with fieldwork data it was clear that the two areas represent children with relatively different socioeconomic backgrounds. The nursery on the other hand, represented children from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds – although skewed slightly towards affluence.

Consent by adults is normally required when studying children (Ireland & Holoway, 1996). Gaining access to the field, and therefore children, goes hand in hand with obtaining initial consent from gatekeepers. Whether or not it is ethically correct that adults provide consent without involving children is a matter of debate (Alderson, 1995). From the childhood studies perspective children are considered competent social actors and have the right to be consulted and heard on matters that affect them (UN Convention on the rights of the child, Article 12). In this sense consent is more than the agreement of gatekeepers to conduct research with children but about respecting children and their rights as human beings to say no (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988; Miller, 2000). In this study consent was granted on behalf of parents by education authorities and schools/nursery although parents were informed about the research. Other researchers (e.g. Holmes, 1998) have found access to children in school settings to function in a similar manner. However, most importantly informed consent was sought from the children themselves. This involved children at the outset agreeing to

participate and crucially *ongoing* consent was obtained. Therefore, the researcher was acutely aware and sensitive to the fact that children may withdraw their consent at any time. For instance, when sensing that a child did not wish to talk or answer questions this was respected and the researcher withdrew from the conversation or alternatively, the child was given space and opportunity to move on and engage in some other activity.

When exploring the meanings children attribute to consumption chronological age may be less important than experience (Belk et. al., 1984; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Despite this each of the three groups of children were of the same age. This is due to the structure of the education system in the United Kingdom, which clusters children according to age. It was decided to concentrate on pre-adolescent children since these have largely been ignored (Hill et. al., 1996), furthermore, it has been argued that particularly the middle years (from four to ten years of age) of childhood seem to have passed unnoticed (James et. al., 2001). Therefore, the age groups for this study were pre-school (ages 3-5), primary two/three (ages 6-8)<sup>4</sup> and primary six (ages 10-11).

The role adopted in the field was that of friend as advocated by others (Corsaro, 1997; James et. al., 2001). The main methods used throughout the year-long ethnographic study were observation, taped semi-structured interviews with children, parents and teachers, informal chats, gathering artefacts e.g. children's weekly diaries, going shopping, attending outings, events, classes, break and lunchtime activities and home visits to name a few. However, studying children of different ages presented the researcher with some challenges concerning the suitability of various methods for each age group. For instance, the youngest children were most interested in expressing themselves when it was centred round some activity such as drawing or playing – as other authors have also found (Hill et. al., 1996). The oldest group (primary six) on the other hand, could sustain longer interview conversations. Therefore, it was evident that although the literature had been consulted on each of the age groups prior to field entry the researcher was presented with a learning process concerning which particular methods the individual children and different age groups responded best to. In this sense, the longitudinal nature of ethnography provided optimum possibilities for fine-tuning the methods employed.

## Findings

The types of rituals identified in children's lives vary in intensity and frequency. Some rituals are performed frequently e.g. daily or weekly, (here termed *common rituals*) whilst others take place more seldom. These less frequent rituals (termed here *celebrated rituals*) are commonly surrounded by associated rituals and activities. One obvious example is Christmas which is, in reality, not confined to Christmas day but a range of events over a period of time. The following sections discuss two celebrated rituals and four common rituals relating to children's cultures of consumption. This discussion examines the different meanings of these rituals to children.

### *Celebrated rituals*

The enactment of celebrated rituals frequently spans a period of time and therefore, elements of the rituals are performed in different contexts e.g. home and school. As the ethnographic study was predominantly conducted in nursery and primary school setting it was not possible to capture by

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<sup>4</sup> In the second school the primary three teacher was new and the school therefore, decided to grant access to primary two children instead.



way of observation the entire process of children's celebrated ritual enactment. However, the data collected gave important insight into what these rituals mean to children. Two of the most significant celebrated rituals were birthdays and Christmas.

### Birthdays

Birthdays were very special events for children from all three age groups. Contrary to collective rituals, birthdays are essentially individual rituals that are celebrated *by* and *with* others. However, birthdays are performed collectively since their significance is recognised on a large-scale. Children spoke extensively of their birthdays and the surrounding events. The importance of birthdays is evident in the following extracts.

*I: So how important are these events (birthdays and Christmas) to the kids?*

*Gemma: Oh absolutely huge, especially at this age, it really is. They are on count down to their birthday and when they're going to be and who's older than who and who's younger than who and when their birthday is and what month it's in. You know, it's absolutely huge.*

Interview, P2 teacher, WPS, 16/6/03

*I: Peter, go on tell me about our birthday.*

*Peter: We went to Happy Castle (leisure complex)*

*I: Was it fun?*

*Peter: Yeah. And last year we went bowling.*

*I: What about presents?*

*Peter: I got a new Beyblade and ..(lists around 10-12 things, which I did not catch)...*

*I: Oh, I see.*

*James had been to the party too and was standing next to us.*

*I: So what do you like best about birthdays?*

*James: You get presents.*

Fieldnotes, P2, WPS, 1/4/03

*Florence was telling me she wanted to have a tea party as her birthday party*

*I: When you have a tea party for your birthday do your friends bring presents?*

*Florence: Yes*

*I: So what do you do at your tea party?*

*Florence explained that her mum has a tea set in the loft. She brings it down and sets it up and puts cookies out etc.*

Fieldnotes, P3, NPS, 15/11/02

Whilst not all birthdays are performed equally the general approach is similar. There is a general consensus of what is considered appropriate action to mark such events (e.g. children have parties, go on special outings, eat out, receive presents, have a birthday cake, etc). Whilst gift exchange is a consumption ritual in itself, it is evident that birthdays generally, have strong consumption implications with all the associated trimmings.

The symbolic aspect of birthdays can be understood in two ways. Firstly, the actual ritual is in some way symbolic i.e. in the first instance birthdays refer to the changing of age. This change can influence the local power relations within children's every day social contexts. Some children will

employ their change of age to differentiate themselves from their peer group or other children. This has implications for the hierarchy in the class which can become visible within social interactions:

*James: I'm seven. I'm the third oldest in the class. Even though Aimee's got a double birthday with me. But she was born at three o'clock in the afternoon I was born at three o'clock in the morning.*

Interview, P2, 2/6/03

This example demonstrates the way that that celebrated rituals are connected to the everyday less celebrated processes of children's lives and that they can have long term significance beyond the excitement of the actual event.

A second interpretation of birthdays suggests that material symbols or artefacts are used to intensify, communicate and give meaning to the ritual (Rook, 1985). For this purpose a range of consumption objects are used as references to a new age. Getting older or "being bigger" is meaningful to children and signifies a gradual increase in autonomy or control over their world; furthermore, changing age signifies a new and older identity. With the exception of special ages (e.g. 18, 21 or 40), birthday cards that highlight a persons age are much more prevalent for children than adults. Furthermore, lighting a certain amount of candles on a cake or having a candle shaped in a number is common for children's birthdays. The following extract highlights age as significant.

*I: So what do you like best about birthdays?*

*James: You get presents.*

*I: So what would happen if somebody didn't get any presents?*

*James: Well it's also about people changing their age. Last October I was six.*

Fieldnotes, P2, WPS, 1/4/03

*Sarah received a new bike for her birthday. Here her mother is talking of the importance of this bike.*

*Hilary: Ehmm because the wee girl along the road, she's a year younger got a new bike too, two or three weeks after Sarah did. She really wanted her bike to be bigger than the other girl's but it isn't. It's exactly the same size.*

*I: I see.*

*Hilary: And I think that was a disappointment because she felt that the six year old (Sarah is seven) should not have had as big a bike as she had.*

Interview with parents of P2 girl, WPS, 17/6/03

Therefore, a central aspect of birthdays is gift-giving and of great importance to the children. The study revealed that gifts were highly significant symbols that mark the occasion. Receiving presents allowed children to have a wish list for things they might want. Furthermore, it was evident they regarded birthdays as a source of obtaining a range of consumption items such as toys, CDs and clothes (depending on their age).

Various authors (e.g. Belk, 1979; McCracken, 1986; Sherry, 1983) have examined gift-giving behaviour as an exchange ritual. Writings on gift-giving as a consumption ritual has highlighted the meaning attached to the gift itself, it's appropriateness, it's value and the symbolic messages communicated between the giver and receiver (Belk, 1979). Despite being important for the

children the findings indicated that, in many cases gift-giving as an exchange ritual had less ritual behavioural qualities than for adults. Children were likely to have some input into gifts purchased for family members. However, they did not necessarily have much, if any, input into the purchased gifts in general. There are two explanations for this. Firstly, these children – especially at WPS, were geographically far away from shopping areas. Therefore, it was common for parents (without the child) to purchase a gift on the way home from work for instance. Secondly, children do not have economic power and therefore, had less control over the chosen gift. The lack of economic power, therefore, has implications for the exchange ritual between children and adults. The general idea of gift-giving as economic exchange (Belk, 1979) means that it is accepted that children generally do not give their parents (or other adults) gifts to the same value as they receive.

The data further revealed possession rituals in the context of birthdays as children frequently brought presents they had received to school to show others – even items that could not as such be used within the school setting. For instance CDs or computer games might be brought in to show friends despite not having access to a CD player or computers in the school setting (with the exception of curriculum use).

*In the playground I joined Caroline and Ann in the queue.*

*Caroline: Look what I got Ann for her birthday.*

*(Shows me Ann's necklace of gold) I look at it. It says best friend. They were proud to demonstrate to others they are best friends.*

Fieldnotes, P3, NPS, 15/1/03

*Avril: Me and Paula are best friends now.*

*I: Are you? What did you get for your birthday Paula?*

*Avril: Show her the necklace I got you.*

*(Paula shows me a silver dolphin).*

*I: That's lovely*

*Avril: I would have got her a Best Friends necklace...but we weren't best friends at the time.*

*This display of friendship will be upsetting for Susanna who is distraught that Avril has taken her place as Paula's best friend. As the girls in the class see it, Avril has decided to move in on the friendship and try and become Paula's best friend. One day when we went swimming – as we were entering the bus I noticed Susanna was crying. I asked what was wrong. Leslie told me not to say anything but she was upset because Avril was taking Paula away from her. Joanne told me Avril had split up other friendship pairs.*

Fieldnotes, P6, NPS, 21/1/03

The above examples demonstrate children's capacity to utilise artefacts associated with a specific ritual in a more everyday context. They also demonstrate that the meaning of these artefacts is not static; rather it is dependant on the social context and social actors within the everyday setting. Any artefact can have both positive and negative meanings.

### Christmas

Although the vastness of Christmas is evident in UK society the fieldwork revealed the extent of Christmas as a significant ritual for children. Through conversations in class (in teacher-directed

activities) and social interaction outside the classroom it was clear that Christmas was a very special time. The children spoke extensively of Christmas and the many events associated with Christmas made the ritual a much discussed topic. Even in schools where fieldwork took place outside the Christmas season it was still referred to – frequently, but not exclusively, in the context of receiving gifts. The data revealed that in all age groups and settings one of the predominant associations with Christmas was that of it being a source of material goods.

The fieldwork was spread over three research settings at different times of the year, consequently, insight into the rituals surrounding Christmas were most obvious in NPS (since the researcher was based there in the period up to and past Christmas).

As an annual festivity it soon became obvious that for the children there was a massive build-up to Christmas which filtered through into every aspect of life (in school, in social settings, at home, during leisure activities and so on). The surrounding rituals leading up to Christmas were of great importance to the children. They frequently had a heavy consumption involvement. The Christmas theme was present in many dimensions of school life. For instance in art classes the subject matter was mostly Christmas-related. The children attended pantomimes, had Christmas lunch, nativity play, attended church and the school Christmas party. Furthermore, there were Christmas decorations throughout the school and mailboxes to enable children to “send” Christmas cards to one another. It was evident that Christmas was in the air and therefore, a much discussed topic. Additionally, discussions and interactions about Christmas activities that took place *outside* the school setting were evident. Children talked of going to Santa’s Wonderland (leisure complex), anticipated Christmas dinner, going to church, going Christmas shopping and getting new clothes to wear for Christmas.

*Mary comes from a very deprived background. Therefore, when in the classroom Mary was so pleased to come over and tell me that she was wearing new trousers. They had a diamante butterfly at the bottom. There was also a top to match, which Mary told me she was not wearing.*

*Mary: They’re for Christmas parties.*

*I: They’re lovely. Where did you get them?*

*Mary: From my nana.*

Fieldnotes, P3, NPS, 11/12/02

*Joanne was talking to others at her table during art class.*

*Joanne: I can’t wait till Friday*

*Heather: Why*

*Joanne: Cause I’m going (Christmas) shopping with my gran. She spoils me rotten. Then I’m going back to her bit and we’ll wrap the presents.*

Fieldnotes, P6, NPS, 3/12/02

*John: Yeah and when we go at Christmas, the package is the experience. You know, we go and have our lunch and/*

*...*

*Hilary: We’ve had as a tradition, well as much as you can have a tradition of seven years, the day after my last day at work and when she’s stopped school (we go for a family lunch somewhere in town). There is a sense of occasion in it for me and I think*

*that that's something that she shares. And Ailie's started to do that with us now and I think it's something that she looks forward to.*

...

*Hilary: All the thing about the Christmas lights being on and everything, you know the whole place in Edinburgh looking Christmassy, she likes that sense of occasion.*

Interview with parents P2 girl, WPS, 17/6/03

These examples demonstrate the variable meanings of Christmas for different children. It is important to note that these meanings have both short and long term significance. Furthermore, some children describe gifts in a way that highlights their family connections. They demonstrate the integrative and relational nature of gift giving. This discourse contrasts with the discourse that associates gift giving and especially gift choosing with the powerlessness of adults and the power of big business. The power of large companies that target children directly is considered to be so vast that there are many booklets and web pages designed to advise parents of how to fight the pressure (Schor, 2004). However, the positive aspects of Christmas are demonstrated in the next example:

*I: Do you think birthdays are important to kids?*

*Elsa: Well, yes cause like everyone says that their favourite things between either birthdays or Christmas, it's probably Christmas because they say that you get more presents. And I just said, well I like both cause I get time to spend with my family and my friends all together instead of just one by one.*

Interview, P6, WPS, 18/6/03

In the example above Elsa's perception is that most of her friends prefer Christmas to birthdays due to receiving more gifts - although she herself acknowledges others elements that are important with these two special infrequent rituals. This highlights the fact that not all children interpret the significance of a consumption ritual in the same way. It also suggests that it is possible to challenge negative discourses about children which promote the idea that they all interpret Christmas as an opportunity to pressure their parents for artefacts.

### ***Common rituals***

In the following section common rituals, which are generally performed more frequently, are examined. These rituals are integrated into everyday life, therefore, the build-up to these rituals may be less visible, less intense and they do not carry the same amount of surrounding rituals as in the case of some celebrated rituals. However, these rituals proved to be highly significant in children's everyday lives. Due to space limitations four different common rituals have been selected.

#### **Sharing time**

Sharing, a possession ritual, was mainly restricted to the nursery. However, some data examples were collected from schools – these will be discussed later. Sharing or *sharing time* as it was called at the nursery was a highly significant daily event. On a weekly basis children could bring a possession from home to nursery – otherwise not normally permitted. Therefore, each day of the week 2-3 children in the pre-school room brought in items for sharing time.

As children arrived in the morning the item for sharing was placed in the “sharing box” and had to remain there at all times – except during sharing time. The activity was structured so that the

children first had an opportunity to answer questions about their toy/possession. Other children were encouraged to ask questions and typical questions were: Where did you get it? Have you got any more at home? What can it do? Is it your favourite toy? Once a few questions had been asked the item had to be shared with one or more children. The type of possessions children brought in for sharing time varied greatly but ranged from books, dolls (Barbie's, baby dolls and so on), action style dolls (Action Men, Power Rangers and so on), soft toys, animals, dressing-up clothes, videos, bags, jigsaws, umbrellas, gifts from McDonalds and Burger King and many more.

It soon became evident that this was a highly significant time of the day for children. The children were extremely proud and happy to present their possession the others. The following extracts draw attention to the significance of the ritual to children.

*I: But how important sharing time is...?*

*Liz: Very important. She's always asking: "What day is it today, is it my sharing day today?" and she likes to choose something.*

*I: Umhmm.*

*Liz: And actually yesterday, she didn't get to share because she's going through a phase of not listening just now.*

*I: Ahh right.*

*Liz: So she didn't get sharing time. She was very upset.*

*I: Yeah.*

*Liz: It's very important. They like to take something in and do they're little talk.*

*I: Yeah.*

*Liz: Show off, this is mine.*

Interview, parent of nursery child, SN, 12/10/02

*I: Yeah...so, we briefly mentioned sharing time but do you think the sharing time is quite important to the children?*

*Joan: Very, very important, really. I don't know why, I don't know why they like it so much, but there's always tears if you forget a sharing time. If the parent comes to pick them up and we haven't done sharing they're, it doesn't matter who the child is, there's always tears.*

Interview, nursery supervisor, SN, 27/9/02

The importance of sharing time to the children can be attributed to their chance to express their self-identity and the opportunity to show others who they are through possessions. Sharing time was a positive moment when they were in focus and could potentially gain some status. However, the example above also demonstrates the negative potential of sharing time when a child is denied the opportunity to share because 'she's going through phase of not listening just now'. These examples demonstrate how adults utilise their knowledge of children's attachment to common rituals when enacting regimes of punishment and discipline. Similarly, sharing time is also a time when conflict can develop between children and their peer group, for example others could even be envious of them, their experiences or of what they owned.

*During sharing time the children demonstrate very clearly which items of sharing they are interested in and which they are not. It came to sharing time and Alice had brought in a doll, Marion had her bride's maid dress and Haemish had his blue Power Ranger. The boys kept asking Haemish questions about his PR and he*

*explained about his blue power ranger as well as the green and red one he had at home. Joan (the teacher) kept stopping him saying that the rules were that he only had his blue one there and should therefore, only talk about it.*

Fieldnotes, SN, 13/8/02

*When it was Tim's turn to present his sharing item he explained it was an Action Man in a car.*

*Edward remarked that Tim's Action Man was not a proper one.*

*I: Why is this so Edward?*

*Edward: Because it can't pull the clothes off (Tim's AM was wearing a racing outfit)*

*I: So can yours then?*

*Edward: Yes. It's a proper one.*

Fieldnotes, SN, 4/6/02

This suggests that common rituals (and the consumption artefacts/practices associated with them) can be as integrative and divisive as celebrated rituals. However, in NPS bringing in personal possessions to school was not encouraged and not observed nearly as much as in WPS. However, it was actively encouraged at WPS with children in P1 partly as a *show and tell* (very similar to sharing time at the nursery) and partly as a comfort during their first year of school. The differences between the schools suggest that some schools may be overlooking the opportunity to promote the positive aspects of common possession rituals such as show and tell.

*It was Sally's birthday today. She is a very shy girl who does not find it so easy to establish friendships. Sally was so proud today as she had a Gareth Gates CD lying on her table. She told me she'd got it from her mummy and daddy for her birthday. It was clear that Sally had a specific item she was proud of that she could present to others.*

Fieldnotes, WPS, P2, 14/5/03

Furthermore, it may be the case that this rule is restricting the opportunity for children to contribute to the content of the curriculum; such a restriction may have consequences for the extent to which specific children feel at home with in their schools. Indeed, this may be a lost opportunity for the school to demonstrate that they value the diverse cultures of their pupils.

### Swapping

*Swapping*, as the children themselves called this activity was a common exchange ritual. Essentially, swapping was an activity or process where children exchanged food items, pens, toys and so on. Although children at WPS were seen exchanging, the ritual seemed to be more evident at NPS – especially in the P6 class.

Swapping was most notable at lunch time as children could exchange items in packed lunches or on school dinner trays. The purpose was to obtain something more desirable, to the individual, such as a packet of crisps for a chocolate bar. These findings are similar Thorne's ethnographic study in schools where she found evidence of swapping rituals, which she called the "the underground economy of food and objects" (Thorne, 1993: 20).

The researcher frequently witnessed children negotiating with each other in what appeared to become mini market-places. They were functioning as well-informed consumers and furthermore,

the negotiation strategies were at times most sophisticated. The relative value of the desired item was weighed-up and children would offer something in return. If the offer was rejected a new offer was frequently made and so on until a deal was agreed upon or the negotiation ceased. It became evident that although this ritual involved less ritual behavioural qualities, it was an important process where children could exert some control over their possessions. The children were relatively removed from adults in the food hall and able to conduct swapping without interference from adults. They could exchange what they had been given for lunch and were free to choose something else. An example of swapping is presented below.

*Heather came over to our table and was desperate to swap her Fudge for Rachel's chocolate crispy bar.*

*Heather begged: Please, please, please!*

*Rachel stuck to her guns.*

*Ester (had a chocolate crispy bar too): Well you're not getting mine.*

*Heather went back to her table. A while later Heather walked past our table again, this time with her Fudge and a packet of skips.*

*Rachel (noticed this): Skips! Skips! Skips!*

*So the trade was made. The skips for the chocolate crispy.*

Fieldnotes, NPS, 27/11/02

Interviews with parents indicated that some parents were not aware their children swapped food unless they brought home empty wrappings – different to the items they had been given. One mother, however, indicated that her daughter brought crisps to school she did not like in anticipation of swapping the crisps for another flavour. Therefore, swapping was not necessary spontaneous but a planned event as the following extract shows.

*Naomi and Tina had got to dinner hall first. After a while Naomi said that she was waiting for Joanne.*

*Naomi: I wish Joanne would come soon. She's meant to be swapping me for this (Naomi had an orange jelly dessert).*

*Me: Do you swap a lot?*

*Naomi: All the time*

Fieldnotes, NPS, 3/12/02

These examples demonstrate the ability of children to subvert adult practices and to develop their own processes of negotiation and barter. This ability is both liberating when a preferred item is received and frustrating when exchange is delayed or promises are not kept. Once again, this demonstrates the positives and negatives to be found within any specific consumption ritual. It also hints at the way that children can subvert adult attempts to control what they eat. This ability is also evident during lunch and snack breaks.

### Lunch breaks and snack breaks

Lunch and snack breaks were identified as important rituals for the children. The nursery had a different structure to the schools and these types of breaks, where children have time away from adults were not evident in the nursery due to closer supervision at this level. Lunch breaks and snack breaks may, originally, have been implemented by adults as a routine; however, for the children they were ritualized. They proved to be highly important times for the children. It was a time when they sat down together – in a less supervised atmosphere and ate together. They spent



much time discussing who was to sit next to whom, the food that was in their packed lunch, swapping and discussing generally issues/concerns they had. This highlights the importance of understanding events from the point of view of the actor. The following extract is an example of the importance of morning break to children.

*Today musicians from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra were visiting the school and conducting a workshop. The workshop continued through break time and once the musicians left there was lots of talk amongst the kids as to whether they would get a break. Indeed if they did would they then be able to buy crisps/fruit from the tuck shop? One girl was saying she would be very hungry were she not to get a break. Several of the kids were murmuring about how unfair it would be should they not get break.*

Fieldnotes, 3/6/03, WPS

Lunch breaks and snack breaks were highly valued by the children and they were always happy when the time came. Furthermore, the physical desire for something to eat meant that children frequently started anticipating lunch in advance. Lunch breaks and snack breaks have important consumption implications. Firstly, during morning snack breaks the overwhelming majority of children from both NPS and WPS brought in snacks on a daily basis. Additionally, in WPS the P7 children were responsible for the tuck shop, which sold crisps and fruit.

Interestingly, there was a marked difference between the two schools in the type of snacks that children brought in – partly attributed to the policy at WPS that no sweets were permitted. At NPS the researcher cannot recall having seen a child bring in fruit to school whereas this was common at WPS. However, this may be due to socioeconomic differences between the schools. At WPS the school had a much stricter policy on what snack items could and could not be brought to school. This was a result of parental requests. Furthermore, the school was more active in arranging health weeks and similar events. NPS, on the other hand, was a much more deprived area and the head teacher there was much more wary of putting any pressures on children that would involve increased costs to their parents. In the following extract the health issues are raised when the P6 children at WPS were getting ready for a day trip and are discussing what they have brought for snack.

*The p6s were told they could have their play piece before they left (for the trip). There was amazement because Richard had brought six packets of crisps and had subsequently been given another two by Thomas and Mark.*

*Juliet: He's got six packets of crisps. How can you stay that thin?*

*Richard: Because I didn't have breakfast that's why.*

*There was talk backwards and forwards about this and then I heard:*

*Paul: How many have you got now?*

*Richard: Eight....and water which is healthy for me (I later asked and Richard said he also had sandwiches)*

*Thomas: He's got eight, look what I've got.*

*I: An apple!*

*Thomas: This is healthy for me. A Mars a day keeps the dentist away...from his house!*

Fieldnotes, WPS, 27/3/03

In this conversation where the children are talking amongst themselves there is a clear awareness of health issues i.e. becoming overweight and the impact of sugar on the teeth. Thomas uses a famous slogan from Mars adverts and adapts it to fit with what he considers to be more appropriate for Mars chocolate. The advertising discourse is appropriated into the children's cultures of consumption and reproduced to fit with their beliefs. This confirms that children (Ritson and Elliot 1999) extract meaning from adverts and use it as a basis for ritual interaction. It also suggests that the original meanings can be subverted and renegotiated. Another example of this is evident in the following extract.

*Allison: It's really funny, have you seen the salmon ad where the salmon keeps on trying to swim up the fish ladder and then it says "Don't be a salmon. Take a break have a Kit Kat". So my sister's friend loves that ad and is always saying "Don't be a salmon". And it was her birthday last week so we bought her like a toy salmon.*

Fieldnotes, P6, WPS, 24/4/03

This brings into question the role of censorship in advertising. Traditionally, all efforts have focused on children's understanding and knowledge of advertising persuasion intent (Buckingham, 2000). However, as the above data highlights children have appropriated advertising discourses into their cultures and changed the original meanings. Therefore, children's cognitive abilities in terms of advertising may be less important than what children do with advertising. Censorship may be a useful tool for protecting parents and children. However, it should not be assumed that children are cultural dopes who are continually brain washed by adverts.

### Sleepovers

During fieldwork it soon became apparent that sleepovers were considered to be exciting events – most particularly for the school children. They were mysterious, rebellious and exciting. Sleepovers often involved more than one child staying the night, going to sleep very late, having “mid-night feasts” or even having what the children called “all-nighters” – i.e. staying awake all night. Sleepovers in themselves cannot be described as consumption rituals; however, as this section will show they have clear consumption implications.

Children increasingly gain control on various issues as they grow older. This point can serve as a mediating factor of how ritual change can come about. For instance for younger children (P2/P3), a mid-night feast was considered an important element in the ritual script and caused great excitement. However, P6 were not observed speaking of such feasts and whilst they would favour something nice to eat for sleepovers, a mid-night feast did not invoke much excitement. This may be due to the increased freedom older children possess rendering a mid-night feast less antiauthoritarian than for the younger children. The children looked forward to sleepovers and spoke extensively about such events, prior to and afterwards.

*During milk time children are given opportunities to share news – as the teacher calls it. Naomi was excited to tell that Ester, Tina and Kristie had stayed the night at her house. Her mum was drinking with some friends and the girls ended up having a crisp fight with Naomi's mum involved.*

*Ester and Naomi had then stayed up all night, had no breakfast and then gone swimming in the morning.*

Fieldnotes, P6, NPS, 3/12/02

*I: Celene, why do people have sleepovers?*

*Celene: Because they want people to sleepover and they want to have parties and have midnight feasts when their parents don't know about it.*

Fieldnotes, P2, WPS, 12/5/03

Since parents found such events labour-intensive, especially when more than one child stayed over, they were occasional events. Frequently, children would ask for a sleepover for their birthday instead of a birthday party. In the following extract Mrs Hanson attributes sleepover's to American television programmes.

*Mrs Hanson: Yeah. This sleepover's an American thing. They've got that from the television, definitely.*

*I: Ahh.*

*Mrs Hanson: We never talked about sleepovers. We never did that when we were younger. There had to be a crisis in the family before you stayed at somebody else's house.*

Interview, parent of P6 girl, NPS, 25/1/03

The media, in the above extract, have according to Mrs Hanson, given new meaning to the event of staying over at someone's house. This process has been termed ritual constellations (Otnes and Scott, 1996) who argued that "Ads can attempt to shape readers' ritual experience by portraying combinations of artefacts as belonging together in ritual contexts" (38) – an argument that could be extended to the media generally. Furthermore, the extract describes sleepovers as a relatively new phenomenon. One of the most symbolic aspects of sleepovers is that they are a form of rebellion - children take control, stay up all night and so on. Furthermore, there is no doubt the sleepover ritual has consumption implications as an important aspect of the ritual was eating – whether it be pizza, mid-night feasts or sweets. At NPS one girl reported having received "Sleepover games" as a Christmas gift. There is some suggestion in the data that successful marketing should not aim to brain wash children into buying or encouraging others to buy their products. Children are more likely to require a product that fits in with or connects with existing rituals, values and processes. The data also suggests that those who seek to protect children from marketing practices need to spend more time considering this issue if they are to move beyond simplistic and futile attempts to control children's consumption. For example, despite attempts to control what children ate in school time (e.g. sweets) the consumption of unhealthy items was a central component of sleepovers.

## **Discussion**

This section will discuss the findings on rituals and compare and contrast these findings to previous work on children's cultures of consumption and in the field of rituals specifically. The section has been structured into a number of subsections which present the most important aspects of the findings.

### ***Children as active constructors of rituals***

The findings shed important light on the significance of rituals in children's cultures of consumption. However, it was clear from the data that the meanings associated with celebrated and common rituals are not necessarily the same between children themselves or compared to adults.

These varied with age, gender, school, culture and context. Not only, are rituals (or elements of rituals) *enacted* differently by children – children construct their *own* rituals.

Children are not passive recipients of rituals passed between generations. Rather, rituals are in part adopted, worked on, interpreted and in some cases created by the children. Common rituals are frequently ritualized by children themselves and the intensity with which rituals are performed and the meanings children attributed to them are not necessarily the same as for adults. Celebrated and common rituals provide opportunities for two way socialization (e.g. the child socializes the parent about children's consumer identity or the teacher, during show and tell, about their own identity or facts related to the artefact on show). This finding reinforces the suggestion that children are active constructors in the socialization process (Waksler, 1994).

### ***Short and Long Term Implications of Consumption Rituals and Artefacts***

The study not only found that the meanings of rituals could be renegotiated by children but that the meanings could change over time and that both common and celebrated rituals could be performed with great intensity and seriousness. This finding is consistent with Rook's (1985) description of rituals. As has been mentioned earlier some authors (e.g. Denham, 2003; Tetreault & Kleine, 1990) have attempted to define the boundaries between rituals and other behaviours such as routines and habits. For instance, Denham (2003) stated that routines are stable behaviour but one aspect which distinguishes them from rituals is that they are more open to modification.

However, since some rituals clearly were less ritualized than others, we find that Grimes (1990) has presented a somewhat more helpful conceptualization of rituals. Rather than behaviour being a ritual or not, he suggested rituals are a matter of degree. For instance, lunch/snack breaks were more ritualized than sleepovers. In other words, variations in lunch/snack breaks were far less tolerated than in sleepovers. This finding demonstrates the latent power of children and suggests that there is constant negotiation between children and adults in institutions such as schools in the way time and rituals are structured. Similarly, the meanings of gifts associated with celebrated rituals were not static. They were utilised in school settings in a range of ways: to illustrate aspects of children's own identities; to develop/demonstrate relationships between pupils and as signifiers of status. This finding brings into question the simplistic assumption that fashionable consumer items cause conflict amongst children. Indeed, this study suggests that consumer items do not in themselves cause conflict but are often utilised as a weapon during conflict between different children.

### ***Age***

Age was one of the overriding factors characterising children's ritual behaviour. Children of different ages had different rituals or different ritual scripts. In several cases the diversity between children in ritual performance and indeed between children and adults was most easily observed through the intensity and seriousness involved in actual ritual performance or verbal interactions about rituals. This finding is consistent with other authors who identified great variations in the way that collective rituals were performed (McKechnie & Tynan, 2005 and Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

For instance among McCracken's consumption rituals (grooming, divestment, exchange and possession), not unexpectedly, grooming rituals associated with the body became more important with age – also amongst the boys. Consistent with the findings of this study Kline (1993) claimed

that children take great pleasure in talking about their possessions. However, possession rituals such as showing friends newly acquired or special objects appeared to change with age. For the youngest children at nursery and the P2/P3 age group bringing items to nursery/school for display or sharing was important to the children. Later though (P6), this practice was not so readily observed. There may be several reasons for this. Firstly, children are likely to rely more on conversation abilities as they grow older and can *tell* their friends about possessions. Furthermore, the change with age may be due to the increased focus on grooming rituals and associated symbols (e.g. clothes, hairstyling) as they grow older. Another reason may be children's increased freedom at this age; they are more likely to frequent each other at home where they can show off prized possessions that do not make it to school.

This variation brings into question the impact of advertising. The way the media influences children's consumption may at first glance appear to be similar to Otnes and Scott's (1996) findings of the ritualization of diamond engagement rings through advertising. Yet in reality, the media and big business marketing strategies both influence and are influenced by children. This study suggests that successful products need to fit in with existing celebrated and common rituals and that their shelf life varies because children's rituals vary with time and age. It should also be noted that differences relating to age does not suggest that young children are somehow less sophisticated consumers than other children. Processes of ritualising were just as evident in the nursery as the primary school.

### ***Formal and informal worlds of the school***

Valentine (2000) distinguished between two worlds at schools - the formal world of the institution, which is overwhelmingly adult controlled and the informal world of the children where children are freer to interact in peer cultures. Therefore, it is suggested here that the importance of certain rituals (e.g. lunch/snack break rituals) is rooted in the need for children to have moments where they are less rigidly controlled by adults i.e. getting away from the formal world of the institution. This is consistent with Lee (2000) who studied the morning tea break ritual amongst nurses. Lee found that the tea break ritual was paramount in gaining support from colleagues, ventilating feelings and relaxing. A definite parallel can be drawn to children who can escape the formal world of the institution from time to time. Again this demonstrates that though rituals vary over age and time - they can be just as important for adults as for children. This finding suggests that more consideration should be given to how we encourage adults who work with children to recognise the positive nature of children's rituals. It also brings into questions the action of adults who cancel ritual activities as a way of punishing children. For example, the data revealed that children were clearly agitated on occasions when confronted with the possibility of not getting a snack break or not being able to take part in sharing time activities. Such arbitrary behaviour is condemned as poor industrial practice when adults are deprived of their break time within the work place or when they are excluded from participating in team meetings - we can see little reason to justify using this punishment in schools or nurseries.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to understand consumer culture from children's own perspective, to investigate the positive aspects of children's relationships with consumer goods and to examine how the meanings attached to goods are negotiated, played out and shaped in children's diverse everyday cultures. It suggests that cultures of consumption impact on children in both divisive and

integrative ways and that more efforts should be made by those that work with and for children to harness their integrative potential. The paper has argued that rather than causing conflict between children, consumption rituals are utilised in both positive and negative ways during everyday social interactions. This means that where children are in conflict with teachers or other children consumer items may be utilised to reinforce divisions. Yet, it also means where children and adults are not involved in conflict, consumption rituals become important processes for developing and reinforcing positive relationships whether it be going on shopping trips with parents, carrying out show and tell activities in the nursery or marvelling each others bartering skills within the primary school.

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