Gift giving to children at Christmas and Birthdays

Abstract:

This paper explores gift giving of toys to children at Christmas and Birthdays and their perception of the gift giver. Three areas are discussed; gift giving, the methodological approach and the results and conclusions.

Gift giving is an historical concept relating to exchanges of gifts representing many symbols and meanings. Toys are often given to children at birthdays and Christmas and the perception of the gift giver may be affected by many things. The long-term impact may alter the relationship between the child and parent. Miscommunication is often cited as being an influence on the level of disappointment that may occur.

Four drawing sessions were conducted with preschool children from two nurseries. The aim of these sessions was to identify what the children's favourite toy gift was at Christmas and birthday time, who had given it to them and what they thought of the giver.

The pictorial results were coded and results concluded that almost all the children could identify their favourite toy gifts. A majority were satisfied with their gifts and most surprisingly identified Santa as the gift giver for Birthday toys as well as Christmas. Most children could not represent their feeling of the gift giver pictorially and interestingly enough mum was not mentioned once as a giver of gifts!

Keywords: Children, Artwork, Gift-Giving, Qualitative

Track: Consumer Behaviour

The aim of this paper is to present findings from an exploratory qualitative study with pre school children. The finding's are discussed in the context of the perception children have of the 'gift giver' when they receive toys as gifts at Christmas and Birthdays.

The objectives of this research are to;

- Provide a definition and highlight some of the concepts of gift giving
- Discuss an appropriate research tool for the study based on a suitable research question
- Present research findings and highlight conclusions from the research conducted
- Explore ways to get children to respond to questions

Gift Giving

"Gift giving behaviour is an established subject of study, with many concepts dwelling in the realms of anthropology" (Clark 2005 p.98), sociological and social psychology (Wolfinbarger 1990). Its "roots can be traced to seminal work by Mauss (1954) examining gift giving exchange in primitive societies" (Clarke 2005 p.98), where 'total reciprocity' (Ilmonen 2004 p.3) is central to the original social contract. Lately a majority of research emanates from the USA with authors such as Fischer and Arnold (1990), Cohn and Schiffman (1996), and Belk (1996) contributing to the area.

Defined it is the "process of gift exchanges that takes place between a giver and a recipient" (Cohn and Schiffman 1996 p.13). Furthering this they added that gifts represent more than "everyday purchases as they have a symbolic meaning and are often attached to important events" (Cohn and Schiffman 1996 p.13). Some gifts are also seen as having "special meanings and memories" (Belk 1996). For example, the passing down of a collector's toy, which leads to a passing down of the sense of self and part of the past. Wolfinbarger notes that "gifts are more valuable to the participants for the symbols involved than for the material benefits exchanged" (1990 p.699). However, as Belk noted as many of us do not speak the "symbolic language well and miscommunication, disappointment and failure are frequent" (1996 p.13).

Toys are seen to a certain extent as possessions, by the owners, and children may place great store on the gifts received at rites of passage events, such as Christmas and Birthdays (Belk 1985). Toy giving or purchasing in this instance can be classified into "structural occasions associated with rites of progression" (Arnould et al 2002), otherwise termed 'interpersonal'. Evidence suggests that gift purchasing strategies vary according to the giver/receiver relationship. An opportunity arises for a "gift giver to reveal what he or she thinks of the gift receiver" (Schiffman and Kanuk 2004 p.572). Christmas gifts are then seen to be 'value expressive', serving diverse purposes and possibly the same can be said for birthday presents. On the other hand though do children get the gifts of toys they want? Many factors impact on children's satisfaction with one of the most important being peer pressure (Ross and Harradine 2004).

Models

3 models and theories of gift giving are noted as being central to the discussion. These are;
- Bank's (1979) Interactive Gift Giving Paradigm,
- Belk's (1979) Four Functions of Gift Giving,
- Sherry's (1983) The Process of Gift Giving Behaviour.

Bank's (1979) model of gift giving examines four stages of continuum between gift givers and recipients being; purchase, interaction, consumption and communication. The important point here relates to the communication closure stage whereby feedback is given to the 'gift giver'. Belk's (1979) concurrent research examined four functions of gift giving being; communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socializer where children are "likely to be more susceptible to this sort of influence" (Belk 1979 p.104). Sherry's (1983) process model involved three stages within gift giving, gestation, prestation and reformulation. Sherry's (1983) model, whilst it takes into account Belk's (1979) research, she disputes Bank's (1979) four stages continuum model stating the "effectiveness is limited by the misarticulation of the stages of gift giving behaviour and their respective dynamics" Sherry (1983 p.162). Sherry (1983) insists the communication stages should occur throughout the whole process, and not just at the feedback phase occurring between the giver and receiver as suggested by Bank's (1979). Recently, Clark's (2006) examination of Christmas gift giving "expressing the parent child relationship is a significant activity, where the quality of gift selection is influenced by the perceived significance of the giver-receiver relationship" (cited in Clark 2006 p.284). The act of gift giving therefore has different levels of involvement for some and either strengthens, maintains or perhaps weakens the parent-child relationship. Based on these findings this research relates to identifying what children's perceptions are of toy gifts given to them at Christmas and Birthdays and in particular what their perception of the gift giver is.

Methodology
The research phase consisted of 4 stages, permission, research boundaries, observation/pilot and the actual research. Permission was sought from two nurseries, which were selected by means of a non-probability convenience sampling procedure (Saunders et al 2003) and an informal interview conducted with a Centre Manager to outline two 'artwork' (Cavin 1990) sessions, with children under the age of five years. The research sessions had the following objectives;

1. To identify the favourite gift the child received for their Christmas/Birthday
2. To investigate who gave them the gift for their Christmas/Birthday
3. To identify how the gift made the child feel about the person giving the gift to them for their Christmas/Birthday

The second stage of the research phase, entitled 'research boundaries' involved obtaining Disclosure and ethical consent. Disclosure was obtained through the Disclosure Scotland procedure and ethical compliance was sought through an Ethical Research Committee. Part of this gaining ethical consent involved sending letters, written in consultation with the Centre Manager to all intended participants' parents/guardians to seek permission for their child to take part in the research. This was followed up with a reminder where necessary. This was sent to all parents/guardians of the children in the Pre school rooms (n1 = 28 and n2 = 22), with a reminder follow up about a week later. The only information required on the children participating was limited to gender, age and the drawings.

The observation phase involved making a role decision and completing a pilot artwork session. The complete 'involvement participant role' or least adult role as advocated by Mandell (1988) (who mirrored Waskler 1994) was adopted for the observation role. Mandell (1988) encompassed Waskler (1986) and Goode's (1986) thoughts that all adult aspects can be cast aside except physical differences. The artwork session was bourn from Jenk's (2000) who states that ethnography is a most effective "methodology to be employed in the study of

childhood. Children are able to engage and they can be engaged" (cited in Christensen and James 2000 p.71). This is strengthened by Clark's (in Lewis et al 2004) discussion of the 'Mosaic Approach', where previous research by Morgan et al (2002) identified that focus group work with children had to be supplemented with other data. Additionally, Darbyshire et al (2005) also stated "there are obvious attractions in using multiple methods when attempting to understand children's worlds" (p.428) as research with children demands flexibility and creativity.

The 'artwork session' supported by Cavin's (1990) sociological research (stage 3) was piloted with a pre-school child to iron out any issues with the planned research event. Here coloured paper and pens were provided and the questions (noted above) asked of the child to test if she was able to provide drawings as answers. There were no issues here and drawings were provided willingly and creatively for both the Christmas and birthday sessions. This was 'rolled out' (stage 4) as four separate morning sessions at the two nurseries with children in groups of no more than six. The researcher acted as the session facilitator. Children were excused if they did not wish to participate and upon completion of the task children were rewarded with a sticker. A possible limitation of doing artwork is highlighted by Pahl (1999) is not knowing the meaning behind them, however this is tempered with the fact "that drawings help children externalise a thought and is a first step in creating symbols to represent real objects" Pahl (1999 cited in Coates 2002 p.23). A crude coding based on the work of Chan (2006) was used to formulate discussion.

Results and Findings
The respondent profile for the two nurseries is shown in table 1.

Table 1 Nursery One and Two Respondent Profile

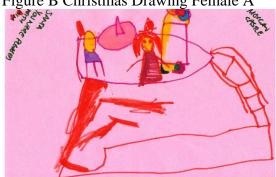| Criteria	Nursery Number 1	Nursery Number 2
	Number	Number
Number of children approached	28	22
Number of yes responses	19 (one special case)	9
Number of no returns/not returned	9	14
Percentage uptake of session	68%	40.1 %
Average age of yes responses	50 months	46.4 months
No of male children allowed to participate	11 (one special case)	4
No of female children allowed to participate	8	5

The respondent numbers for nursery one were higher than two, primarily because of the larger numbers in the first place and availability of the researcher. Additionally, there were problems with children's availability i.e. although permission had been granted they were not in attendance on the day of the session. To facilitate discussion of the results one set of pictures (4) will be discussed fully whilst short comments will be made on the others.

Four drawings are shown (Figure A – D) from one male and one female child for Christmas and Birthdays. For Christmas male A drew a house (A) which turned out to be an Ark, which he said he got it from Santa (when probed Santa was Dad). For drawing B the female child A drew a princess castle (B), very colourful and bright saying it came from Santa and she was pleased with him. Both children were pleased with the gift and the 'gift giver' but neither could indicate this feeling by drawing a face.

Figure A Christmas Drawing Male A

Figure B Christmas Drawing Female A

Turning to birthdays male A drew a boat (Figure C) which he said he got from his Dad making him feel 'smooth!'. This could have been due to misinterpretation of the researcher's question. Here the boat drawing was not as recognizable but upon probing clarity was given. female child A drew a 'My Little Pony' (Brand Figure D) which was semi recognisable and colourful. She said it came from Santa, making her feel happy and full of laughter. In both cases again no faces were drawn to show the feelings they had towards the 'gift giver'.

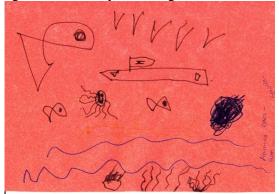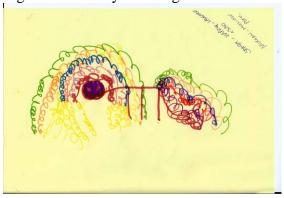Figure A Birthday Drawing Male A

Figure B Birthday Drawing Female A

In summarising the findings from the sessions all of the participating children were able to produce a drawing of some description showing their favoured gifts from Christmas (n=18) and birthdays (n=21). For the Christmas session (n=18) the toys favoured ranged from a bike to a ball for the boys and dollys and a ball for the girls. A majority of children could remember who the gift giver was, being Santa (n=12) with only one boy and three girls (n=4) who could not remember at all and some (n=2) saying the gift was from a relative/friend. The main feeling the children had of the 'gift giver' was of happiness (n=10) with five (n=5) children not being able to express an opinion at all and two (1 male and 1 female) children stating they were grumpy with the 'giver'. Very few children (n=3) could represent the feeling they had of the 'gift giver' pictorially.

For the birthday sessions a similar pattern is identified with boys favoured gifts ranging from a boat to a Power Ranger and for the girls dollys to scooters. Interestingly though, again this time a majority of children cited Santa as the 'gift giver' (n=9), some could not remember (n=7) or some said a relative/friend (n=5) gave them the gift. Of those children remembering who gave them the gift their commonality was their age range being in the 3-4 year old category thus perhaps being able to tell the difference between the celebration and the giver i.e. 'Santa does not give all gifts'. As with the Christmas session many children (n=14) felt happy with the 'gift giver' but five (n=5) could not remember how they felt and two (n=2) felt grumpy with those children either registering their dislike of the gift or the person. Two

female children opted to draw two pictures, whilst a set of twins provided the same type of drawing. As with the Christmas session (n=6) only six children could reflect their feelings towards the gift giver pictorially. In the cases of those stating a relative or friend had given them the gift the gender of both parties was identical but at no time was mum mentioned. (Appendix Tables 2 and 3)

Discussion

In discussing the research findings the following is evident. The research identified a majority of children (Christmas n=10, Birthday n=14) were happy with the gift giver but a small number (Christmas n=2, Birthday n=2) said the gift giver made them grumpy. This has to be tempered with the fact that a majority of children thought Santa was the gift giver in both circumstances, and that children of preschool age may have a perception of the gift giver but do not necessarily know who gave it to them. These findings extend Cohn and Schiffman's (1996), Belk's (1996) and Arnould at al's (2002) research by suggesting these are special events with meanings and memories for the children. As some children felt grumpy with the gift giver it may suggest that some form of miscommunication has occurred leading to recipient dissatisfaction extending both Bank's (1979) and Belk's (1996) findings.

Additionally, as the children could state how the gift made them feel, they have formulated some perception of the gift giver. However, their lack of not being able to disassociate Santa from birthday gifts reinforces Scott's (2000) point that children may lack the capabilities to be good research respondents. Therefore this could add to Schiffman and Kanuk's (2004) work in that as Santa is the assumed gift giver for both Christmas and Birthday's the children's satisfaction levels with the gift giver may be higher than if they knew who really gave them the gift.

In respect of the drawings the main drawback or limitation is the same as that noted by Chan (2006) and Pahl (1999). Using drawings as an exploratory method makes understanding the meaning difficult Pahl (1999) and here a crude form of coding was used. The use of this crude coding adds another dimension to Chan's (2006) findings and certainly did as noted by Pahl (1999) externalise thoughts and created symbols to represent real objects.

Conclusions

This research has examined literature on gift giving, some of the associated models and theories of gift giving, outlined the methodology and discussed the research findings. In conclusion the following is clear

- Gift giving is a complex matter which may bring disappointment to the recipient if the gift is not perceived as intended. In the case of the child-parent relationship this could have a strong impact. Therefore the gift giver may have to take more care in choosing the correct gift.
- Miscommunication between the gift-giver –recipient may be an issue here effecting both Bank's (1979) and Belk's (1979) research. Ratifying this fully is beyond the scope of this research.
- The methodological approach of doing 'artwork' proved to be effective in getting the children to respond to the questions on gift giving and the role adopted by the researcher is of vital importance. This research highlighted the role adopted was appropriate and useful in gaining answers, thus adding to the research conducted.
- A majority of children were satisfied with both Christmas and Birthday gifts based on the assumption Santa was the gift giver. This was not totally clear if this was due to their perception of Santa being nice and he could only give good gifts. Further research with parents would be required to close the communication gap to extend this finding.

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Appendices

Table 2 Nursery One and Two Christmas Session Comments

Xmas					
Male	Drawing	Giver	Made child feel	Face Drawn	Nursery
	House/Ark	Santa (Dad)	Happy	No	1
	Football	Can't remember	Happy	No	1
	Robbers	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	1
	Bendy Bus	Santa	Laughing	No	1
	Ball	Santa	Happy face	Yes	1
Same child 2 drawings	Bouncy Ball	Santa	Nice fun	No	1
	Light Sabre	Santa	Good fun	No	1
	Bike	Santa	Happy	No	2
	House	Can't remember	Don't' know	No	2
	Army House	Santa	Grumpy	No	2
Female	Ball	Santa	Not answered	No	1
	Bratz Pony	Child herself	Happy	No	1
	Princess Castle	Santa	Please	No	1
	Dolly	Santa	Happy	No	2
	Mini Cooper	Santa	Grumpy	Yes	2
	Scooter	Santa	Smiley	Yes	2
	Can't remember	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
	Football Nemo	Grandpa	Can't remember	No	2
Totals	N= 18 10 male and 8 female				

Table 3 Nursery One and Two Birthday Session Comments

			Birthday		
Male	Drawing	Giver	Made child feel	Face Drawn	Nursery
	Boat	Daddy	Smooth	No	1
	Lofty from Bob the Builder	Can't remember	Smile	No	1
	Sword	Dad	Smile	No	1
	Pirate	Santa	Happy	No	1
	Car	Can't remember	Happy	No	1
	Racing car game	Can't remember	Happy	Yes	1
	Castle	Daddy	Round face	Yes	1
	Power Ranger	Santa	Happy	Yes	2
Female	Star	Santa	Fine	No	1
	Dolly	Can't remember	Can't remember	Yes	1
Same child 2 drawings	Sunflower	Can't remember	Felt fine	No	1
	Sunflower	Santa	Grumpy	Yes	1
	Sleeping Beauty	Santa	Smiley	No	1
	Sleeping	Sister	Can't remember	No	1
Same child 2 drawings	Phone	Nursery Friend	Happy	No	1
	My Little pony	Santa	Laughed	No	1
	Scooter	Santa	Happy	Yes	2
	A Flap	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
	Scooter	Santa	Happy	No	2
	Can't remember	Santa	Can't remember	No	2
	Dressing up clothes	Can't remember	Can't remember	No	2
Totals	N= 21 8 male and 13 female				