The Corporate Masquerade: Branding Masculinity Through Halloween Costumes

This paper argues that men’s Halloween costumes do not offer insight on versions of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculine performativity as much as Halloween costumes tell us about the colonization of masculinity by commercial interests, thus creating yet another version of branded masculinity. The data, from a content analysis of 100 images of men’s Halloween costumes, demonstrates the considerable power commercial culture has today in constructing and limiting ideas of American masculinity through licensed/branded costumes. Men’s Halloween costumes are not a mere masquerade, an impersonation; rather commercially produced costumes masquerade as consumer “choice” while simultaneously masking the continued transformation of American masculinity into specific brand products.

Keywords: masculinity, Halloween costumes, masquerade, commercialization, branded masculinity

Ideas of masculinity occur within historically specific contexts, thus masculinity carries multiple meanings depending upon context and audience. Horrocks (1995) analyzes several myths of masculinity found in popular culture sites such as the western, the horror film, rock music, and pornography; he concludes that such myths communicate conflicting messages about masculinity. These conflicting myths of masculinity arguably influence concrete performances by men within specific historical and cultural contexts, such as Kimmel’s (2006) discussion of the development of the “cowboy” mythology in America as a reaction to the processes of urbanization and industrialization. The figure of a lone cowboy riding the open plains symbolizes individualism and freedom in landscape populated by wild animals and hostile “others” on the edge of encroaching civilization.
Each particular myth of masculinity necessitates particular gendered behavioral practices; e.g., the cowboy myth implies riding a horse, wrangling cattle, and surviving in the wilderness. Such behavioral practices may require specialized material practices—the distinct objects needed to successfully complete the behavioral practice; e.g., being a cowboy requires specialized equipment from pointed-toe boots that slide easily into stirrups to a heavy-duty rope for lassoing stray cattle. Specialized equipment is a visual marker of a particular form of masculinity (e.g., working “cowboy”). Men wishing to express their individualism and desire for freedom can emulate the material practices of the cowboy (see Bourdieu’s [1984] concept of symbolic capital), thus creating “urban cowboys” wearing Stetson hats, Tony Lama boots, and embroidered “Western” shirts with Wrangler jeans while two-stepping in the simulacrum of country-western bars located in urban areas from Dallas to London.

In a consumer-based culture like the United States, the signification of “cowboy”—the material practice—is more important in performing one’s version of masculinity than the behavioral practices of being a cowboy or the cultural myth associated with the idea of cowboy. The signification of masculinities comprises owning/wearing particular products, which are commercially produced today—a “branded” masculinity (Alexander, 2003). While cowboys of the past marked their property/cattle with a brand burned into the flesh, Alexander (2003) argues that today men brand themselves though the masquerade/wearing of brand(ed) clothing; hence marking their masculinity as a particular style associated with particular manufacturers.

The emphasis on a branded masculinity reveals masculinity to be a masquerade, a purposeful impersonation of a person, an animal, or an object to signals one’s belief in a particular cultural myth. Holmlund’s (1993) analysis of masculinity in the films Locked Up and Tango and Cash, for example, argues that Stallone established a “tough guy image, built on muscles as a masquerade of proletarian masculinity” (p. 214). The masquerades of masculinities can be seen in a variety of men’s costumes such as team jerseys worn by male fans longing to associate themselves with the athleticism of star players to the weekend warriors who dress in camouflaged fatigues to emulate heroic soldiers while playing at war in the local paint-ball arena. In each case, the costume is a commercially produced commodity signifying a particular form of masculinity. The costume of cowboy boots, athletic jerseys, or camouflage links the wearer to a known brand—a branded masculinity—rather than displaying the wearer’s presumed, and perhaps contested, intentional presentation of a cultural myth (e.g., freedom) associated with a particular form of masculinity.

The distinction between the intentional presentation of a cultural myth and the unintentional display of a branded masculinity raises several research questions when considering cultural rituals designed as purposeful masquerade, such as Halloween. What kinds of costumes are available for men? Who produces these costumes? And what do men’s Halloween costumes tells us about masculinity?

Halloween costumes disguise the male wearer while simultaneously communicating an intentional and symbolic message about a desired self-identity (e.g., superhero) or, at times, to cross the boundaries into a marginalized status (e.g., man dressing as “ugly woman”). Costumes may reveal cultural myths and beliefs; e.g., a generic cowboy costume may communicate cultural ideas about individualism or freedom that continues to resonate for men. However, rather than symbolizing cultural myths about masculinity, this paper argues that
men’s Halloween costumes embody the considerable power commercial culture has today in constructing images of masculinity in American culture. Halloween costumes are not mere masquerade, an impersonation; rather, commercially produced costumes masquerade as consumer “choice” while simultaneously masking the continued transformation of American masculinity into specific brand products. An analysis of Halloween costumes exposes the corporate masquerade in which companies simulate consumer choice about masculine performativity when, in reality, the products embody branded masculinity.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Origins of the Masquerade**

The contemporary Halloween practice of dressing in costume can be traced to medieval cultural practices associated with the harvest celebration of Samhain. Santino (1983) describes the Samhain practices of lighting bonfires and sacrificing fruits and vegetables in order to do penance for the sins of those who died in the previous year, thus allowing the souls of the recently dead to pass to the “land of the just” (p. 6). James (1961) reports that during the Gaelic observance of Samhain the skins of slaughtered animals were worn as protection from the wandering spirits of the newly released dead.

As Christianity grew in prominence in medieval Europe, Gaelic harvest festivals were modified to satisfy religious concerns. The creation of “Allhallow’s,” or the feast of All Saints, on November 1, is traced to Pope Gregory III (731–741) who sought to supplant the pagan celebration of Samhain with a Christian holiday (Feldman, 2001). Allhallow’s Day parades featured participants masquerading as their favorite saint (Myers, 1972).

The traditions associated with Samhain continued in Europe over the centuries; however, Allhallow’s was not generally celebrated in the United States until after the 1840s when the Allhallow’s evening celebration became known as ‘hallow’s eve, and eventually Halloween. Santino (1983) attributes the spread of rituals across the United States to Irish immigrants fleeing the 1820s famine who brought their European traditions to the new world. Feldman (2001) observes that these Irish immigrants cast off their All Saints Day costumes of Catholic saints to don the secular costumes of Allhallow’s eve. The Irish also brought the tradition of Allhallow’s mischief and minor vandalism, once believed instigated by the “little folks”/fairies but now caused by masquerading individuals (Feldman, 2001).

One significant factor in taming the Allhallow’s vandalism and simultaneously creating collective Halloween practices in the United States occurred in 1872 when Godey’s Lady’s Book published one of the first articles about Halloween. As more articles describing Halloween activities appeared in print, Feldman observes that Halloween “became a proper Victorian lady—safe, sinless, and romantically inclined” (p. 63). During the Victorian Era, Halloween moved from the public square, with bonfires and vandalism, to the parlor as a social gathering with adults in costume playing games.

In the United States, the ritual of costumed children going door to door for a “trick-or-treat” did not start until the 1920s, and one factor in establishing this new children’s ritual was an article in a 1920 issue of Ladies’ Home Journal describing this new activity (Feldman, 2001). By the 1950s, the ritual of costumed children trick or treating was established and Halloween was largely viewed as an event for children.
During the 1970s, Halloween practices shifted again to include a greater variety of adult festivities—research in the late 1970s found that Halloween activities had expanded to college campuses as 75% of students on two northeastern campuses participated in Halloween activities and, of those, 85% wore costumes (Hill & Relethford, 1982). The expansion of Halloween to college campuses is attributed to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, released in 1975. According to Samuels (1983), the film was shown at various midnight screenings on college campuses during the fall of 1975. By Halloween, students were attending the midnight shows dressed as the film’s protagonist, transvestite Dr. Frank-N-Furter, in black panties, camisole, and thigh high fishnet stockings. In 1983, Demarest remarks, “Halloween has become an escapist extravaganza for adults, a trickless treat that more closely resembles Mardi Gras than the candy-and-apple surfeits of yesteryear” (p. 110).

**Gender Differences in Halloween Costumes**

Previous research on the types of Halloween costumes worn by girls/women and boys/men reveals significant gender differences. Using data from participant observations and interviews with children and adults in a large Midwestern city in 1988-89, Belk’s (1990) found that girls were more likely to be dressed as a witch, an inanimate object (e.g., Pumpkin), as stereotypical female character (e.g., Snow White), or in a stereotypical female role (e.g., nurse). By contrast, boys were more likely to be dressed as a superhero (e.g., Superman), a monster (e.g., zombie), a scary animal (e.g., lion), a stereotype male character (e.g., cowboy), or in a stereotypical male role (e.g., sports star). Adults of both sexes, Belk found, donned costumes such as inanimate objects or as minority ethnic group members (e.g., Gypsy or Chinese “cooky”). Similarly, Ogletree, Denton, and Williams (1993) found age and gender differences in children’s Halloween costumes. From interviews with children ages 4-7, they found that younger girls’ costumes were more feminine than older girls’ costumes and younger boy’s costumes were more masculine than older boys, thus suggesting an increase in gender role flexibility with age.

Nelson’s (2000) study of 469 ready-made Halloween costumes and sewing patterns also reveals gender stereotyping; only 8.7% of the costumes were gender neutral. Costumes that Nelson categorized as feminine, such as princess, beauty queen, and animal, were the three most popular girl costumes. For masculine costumes, the most popular were “symbols of death” such as a grim reaper, warrior, and superhero. Nelson concludes that children’s Halloween costumes reinforce the dichotomy between the masculine/active and the feminine/passive.

A trend found in girl’s and women’s Halloween costumes during the past decade is hypersexualization, costumes from “sexy” pirate or nurse to Little Red Riding Hood in thigh high boots and a red mini-skirt. Rosenbloom (2006) interviewed Christa Getz, the purchasing director for BuyCostumes.com, one of the largest on-line suppliers of commercial costumes. Getz estimates that 90-95% of female costumes have a “flirty edge.” Heather Siegal, vice-president of HalloweenMart.com, told Rosenbloom that the “sexy category” is her company’s most popular costume. Dobrian (2009) reports that the fifth most popular category of Halloween costume is the “wench/tart/vixen.” Dobrian (2010) notes that “Industry insiders agree that suggestive, although not necessarily revealing, costumes will be the top sellers to women in 2010. Men are more likely to choose historical or period costumes if they’re not portraying a licensed character.”
As girl’s and women’s costumes become a parade of skin-hugging spandex and sexualized characters, men’s costumes are designed to highlight traditional male power. Christopher Guzman, senior vice president of sales for California Costume Collections stated, “Our strategy on men’s costumes is to base our designs on more traditionally masculine characters” (quoted in Creamer, 2012). On-line website Selling Halloween (2011) notes that men prefer licensed characters and historical male figures. Alan Beckerman, president of Peter Alan, a wholesale costume company, states, “I might bring out a new line of costumes based on the old trade outfits of 18th-century England, where you could identify a carpenter, a glazier, a tanner and so on” (quoted in Dobrian, 2010, n.p.).

While the purpose of this paper is to examine men’s Halloween costumes, it must be noted that previous research on Halloween costumes have found not only gender differences, race and ethnic based costumes have also been a part of the history of Halloween (Mueller, Dirks, & Picca, 2007). Indeed, costumes may reflect the racist attitudes of the wearers. For example, at the University of Illinois in 2007, four white male students posted photos on Facebook of themselves wearing racially derogatory Halloween costumes, including being garbed as “blackface” Jamaican bobsledders (Neville, Huntt, & Chapa, eds., 2010). One of the pictures showed a student pointing to his crotch with a caption reading, “I’m supposed to be black.” This particular costume was handmade and, thus, reflects the racist ideology of these particular students. As disturbing as this incident is, what is notable for this paper is that these racist costumes were handmade rather than commercially produced.

The Commercialization of Halloween Costumes

Belk (1990) summarizes various functions that Halloween has served: an anti-festival “that burlesques Easter by replacing the resurrection with ghosts and skeletons;” a rite of reversal when “the weak become the powerful;” a rite of passage for marginalized people; to explore one’s sexuality; to express collective anxieties; to transcend rules of priority through drunkenness, debauchery, and transvestism; to relieve the tensions of rigid social order; and as consumer socialization to the value of acquisition (pp. 5-9). This article primarily addresses the last of these functions; Halloween as a consumer practice that links forms of masculinity to specific material practices.

Santino’s (1983) interviews with Halloween participants finds that most respondents consider Halloween to be the least commercial and most participatory of the holidays. However, Santino contends that this tradition has become increasingly commercialized as costume manufacturers produce more licensed characters such as E.T. and Spider Man.

Commercially produced Halloween costumes are big business. According to the National Retail Federation (2011), “Americans are expected to spend $2.5 billion on Halloween costumes this year, forking over $1 billion on children’s costumes, $1.2 billion on adult costumes, and $310 million on pet costumes.” The business of Halloween costumes is noted by Nelson (2000) who comments that contemporary Halloween costumes are “the aftermath of a series of decisions made by commercial firms that market ready-made costumes and sewing patterns” (p. 138).

The first commercially produced Halloween costumes appeared in the 1930s (Galembo, 2002). While many of these commercially manufactured costumes were generic creatures
such as ghosts and witches, Galembo (2002) points out that costumes based upon popular culture characters were introduced at the time; comic book, radio, and film characters such as Little Orphan Annie, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, and Popeye were among commercially produced costumes during the 1930s. These early product placements in the form of well-known characters were manufactured by licensed costumes companies. By the 1950s, Galembo observes that several companies (e.g., Ben Cooper, Halco, Collegeville, and Rubies Costumes) were producing Halloween costumes based upon licensed characters. In the 1960s, the variety of Halloween costumes characters expanded to include political figures such as John F. Kennedy, musicians such as the Beatles, and inspirational figures such as the Apollo astronauts.

One of the largest licensed Halloween costume manufacturers, Ben Cooper, exemplifies the growing commercialization of this practice. In 1937, the firm Ben Cooper assumed control of A. S. Fishbach, Inc., which held the license to produced costumes based on characters owned by The Walt Disney Company, such as Snow White (Shapiro, 1979). According to Fendelman (2007), by the late 1940s, Ben Cooper, Inc. became one of the largest and most prominent Halloween costume manufacturers in the United States by selling costumes through prominent retailers such as J. C. Penney, Sears, and Woolworth’s. In the 1950s, Ben Cooper costumes expanded to include licensed characters, such as Superman, Zorro, and Davy Crockett, draw from popular television programs and films (Shapiro, 1979).

The commercialization of Halloween is discussed by scholars as early as the 1950s when, describing the practice of trick or treat, Stone (1959) writes, “The householder is greeted by a masked and costumed urchin with a bag—significantly, a shopping bag” (p. 373). For Stone, the Halloween ritual shifted from a production practice, a trick or prank performed by the child, to a consumption practice imitating shopping. Stone’s pilot study of children who participated in the 1950s trick or treat practices finds that 83.3% of the children had no idea what “trick” to perform if not handed a treat; rather, the children anticipated “shopping” the neighborhood for a treat. Moreover, Stone finds that two-thirds of the costumes were commercially made, adding yet another layer of consumption material practice to this ritual.

Levinson et al. (1992) observational study of children in retail stores and festival sites associated with Halloween exposes children’s emphasis on consumption practices. For example, while trick or treating in a neighborhood, the children rated houses based upon the size and quantity of candy they received. The “good houses” had unique treats such as a juice box, while a “bad house” offered smaller or more common treats. Levinson et al. note that when asked what he wanted as a treat, a boy in a pirate costume “jumped wildly around waving his arms and exclaimed, ‘MONEY! MONEY! MONEY!’” (p. 226). For Levinson et al., the children’s desire for treats of money or gift certificates would allow a child the autonomy, the buying power, to obtain what he truly desired.

By the 1970s, Halloween was unquestionably moving from a community ritual to a big business. Feldman (2001) reports that in 1973, in Greenwich Village, New York, a Halloween parade grew into a celebration of gay life that attracted thousands of participants, millions of spectators, and added $60 million dollars to the local community (p. 5). The popularity and commercial success of this Halloween parade spread to other urban areas with a large gay population where participants spent many hours and dollars to create extravagant costumes. Halloween was emerging as a carnivalesque party for masquerading
adults. Rogers (1996) theorizes that Halloween is a “postmodern festival whose motifs and symbols continually engage mass-produced culture, particularly the Hollywoodesque” (p. 463). Indeed, the feedback loop between images of Halloween presented in media and local practices of people engaged in Halloween festivities intensifies as individuals detail their various Halloween activities by posting “selfies” (self photos) on social networking sites.

The commercialization of Halloween is further exemplified by the production of licensed Halloween costumes designed specifically for adults. Creamer (2012) reports that characters in Hollywood blockbusters—such as Spider-Man, The Avengers, Dark Shadows, The Lorax, and The Hobbit—are expected to be top selling adult Halloween costumes for 2012. Additionally, well-known brands like Crayola and food products like Tootsie Roll, M&Ms Candy, Coca Cola, Campbell’s, Nestle, Laffy Taffy, Nerds and Wonka candy will license costumes in 2012 (Creamer, 2011). Selling Halloween (2011), an on-line website marketing to Halloween stores, also points to the growing market of adult themed licensed Halloween costumes such as Old Milwaukee, Schlitz, and Colt 45 beers; Heinz Ketchup, Mustard, and Relish; and Trojan Brand Condoms. According to Dave DiPietro of Museum Replicas, “If you can choose a successful license, it’s almost a license to print money” (quoted in Selling Halloween, 2011).

Halloween has changed over time from a pagan celebration of the harvest to a commercialized ritual of consumption. While costumes express gendered behavioral practices, the ritual of dressing in costume today is significantly influenced by corporations seeking profit. This study examines how corporations impact ideas of masculinity through the types of commercially produced costumes available for male consumers.

**Methodology**

Data for this study was obtained using a content analysis of images of 100 men’s Halloween costumes obtained through a Google image search using the term “men’s Halloween costume.” This methodology was used because, unlike some other cultural products such as films or books, there is no comprehensive list of the “best-selling” or “highest revenue generating” costumes that encompasses all manufacturers. Additionally, the data would include non-commercial products, the photographs of handcrafted costumes.

Without the availability of a comprehensive list of best-selling costumes, a decision was made to use a Google search of images. According to Wills (2006), Google is the top search engine used in 46% of all search requests; hence a man looking on-line for a costume would likely use a Google search. The top ranked Google images for each day were included in the sample; therefore, a brief review of how Google rank orders images is useful.

Google is a “crawler-based” search engine, which means Google “crawls” websites and uses a mathematical algorithm to rank images. People then search the data base of images that Google has constructed. According to Sullivan (2002), the “the main rules in a ranking algorithm involves the location and frequency of keywords on a web page. Pages with the search terms appearing in the HTML title tag are often assumed to be more relevant than others to the topic” (p. 1). The location of the key word near the top of the page is ranked as more relevant, and the frequency of the key word’s appearance on the page is also considered relevant in the ranking. Because some search engines index more pages and more often than other search engines, search engine results can vary.
According to Wills (2006), the PageRank algorithm used by Google assigns a rank to each of the more than 25 billion web pages available. Since the data here consisted of a Google image search rather than a text search, it should be noted that the process of rank ordering image is the same as for text. Jing and Baluja (2008) note, “Commercial search-engines often solely rely on the text clues of the pages in which images are embedded to rank images, and often entirely ignore the content of the images themselves as a ranking signal” (p. 1). Thus any potential images included here must have been tagged in the text with the words “men’s Halloween costume.”

Data was collected between November 1 and December 1, 2011. The timeframe was purposely selected to directly follow the 2011 Halloween festivities, thus increasing the possibility of finding the most recent images posted by individuals or corporations on the Internet. The 100 costumes included were found on 51 different websites including commercial websites selling Halloween costumes such as The Horror Dome, Spirit of Halloween, and Halloween Costumes.com; discount websites that sold a variety of discounted products such as American Sales, Kaboodle.com, and buycheappowertools.com; fashion websites that include a variety of clothing and fashion accessories such as Style Hive, Summit Fashions, and Photosoffashion.com; men’s informational websites such as AskMen.com, The Ronin Mensch, and Men’s Fancy Dress; and informational websites that offered party ideas or homemade costume suggestions such as Halloween Costume Ideas, Halloween Kids Costumes Ideas.com, and Craft Costumes.

Each image was coded for the following: website name and address, type of costume, character name, commercially produced or handmade, product placement, weapons, and sexualization. Duplicate images were not coded. The type of costume was categorized according to one of the following: Product Placement (contained brand name product or was a licensed commercial product from a film, television program, or other popular culture product), Fantasy (based upon fictional characters, place, and/or time period such as Star Wars characters), Monster (based upon a recognized monster character such as vampire, zombie, or werewolf), Gruesome (based upon a recognized monster character such as vampire, zombie, or werewolf), Gruesome (based upon a recognized monster character such as vampire, zombie, or werewolf), Historical (based on a historical figure or timeframe such as Elvis Presley or ’50s guy in duck-tail), Role Playing (based upon a real-life job or activity such as business man or referee), Humorous (based upon a cartoon or comical character such as “buzzed” beer can), or Fairy Tale (based upon known fairy tale character such as Prince Charming). Costumes that were product placements were always coded as such, while other images might be double-coded. Note, of the 100 images, only two costumes were coded in more than one non-product placement categories bringing the total to 102.

**FINDINGS**

Historical trends indicate an increase in the wearing of commercially produced Halloween costumes, and the data here supports this trend finding that the majority (92.2%) of men’s Halloween costumes found in Google images were commercially produced rather than handmade (7.8%). Given that most Halloween costumes are commercially produced, what messages about masculinity are conveyed by these men’s costumes produced by corporations?

One historical trend regarding the gender portrayal of Halloween costumes is an increase in women’s Halloween costumes which are intentionally sexualized; however, in this study
only 4% of the men’s costumes were explicitly sexual. Sexualized men’s costumes featured models in skimpy outfits that highlighted male muscularity; e.g., a “sexy football player” costume was a football jersey cut to reveal the model’s six-pack abdominal muscles.

While few male costumes were sexualized, 23% of the men’s costumes included weapons, thus linking masculinity to potential violence. As shown in Table 1, the most frequently displayed weapons were a sword (34.5%), followed by gun (21.7%), human/weapon hybrid (13%), and a knife (13%).

Swords accompanied historically based costumes such as gladiator, pirate, and Viking. Guns accompanied costumes associated with role playing such as policeman, soldier, and cowboy. The human/weapon hybrid was central to costumes based upon fictional film characters such as Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, Edward Scissorhands from the movie of the same name, and Freddy Kruger from *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Costumes that included a knife were more varied in the source of the character from a generic “bloody zombie surgeon” to the character Ezio from the video game Assassin’s Creed II. Overall, the men’s costumes featuring an accompanying weapon depict an image of masculinity that draws upon a gender stereotype of men as individualistic warriors, and potentially torturers, who use violence or have the potential to use violence against others.

While many of the men’s costumes were generic characters such as a vampire or a cowboy, Table 2 shows that that product placement costumes occurred most frequently (33%). These costumes were usually brand licensed characters that also serve as a direct product placement if worn to a private or public Halloween activity such as a party. Product placement was followed in popularity by fantasy (21.6%), historical (14.7%), role-playing (10.8%), monster (8.8%), humorous (7.8%), gruesome (2.9%), and fairy tale (1.0%).

### Table 1
**Types of Weapons Displayed with Men’s Halloween Costumes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>F (%)</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sword</td>
<td>8 (34.8)</td>
<td>200 Spartans Gladiator; 300 Movie Spartan; High Seas Buccaneer; Pirate Captain; Roman Gladiator; Shipwrecked Stud; Union Soldier; Viking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>5 (21.7)</td>
<td>1930s Gangster; Cop; Cowboy; Gunslinger; Plastic army men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid (human/weapon)</td>
<td>3 (13.0)</td>
<td>Captain Hook; Edward Scissorhands; Freddy Kruger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>3 (13.0)</td>
<td>Assassin’s Creed II Ezio; Bloody Surgeon; Ventriloquist demented dummy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bow &amp; Arrows</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
<td>Robin Hood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Club</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
<td>Keystone Kop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cane</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
<td>Skeleton groom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost trapping devise</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
<td>Ghostbuster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23 (100%)</td>
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</table>
Brand licensing occurs when a company, like The Walt Disney Company, leases an intangible asset, such as a character (e.g., Mickey Mouse), a song (e.g., “Some Day My Prince Will Come” from the 1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*), or a brand (e.g., Baby Einstein, which is a division of the Walt Disney Company). Costumes coded here as product placement typically had a direct link to a licensed commercial product from a film or TV program, often this link was found in the title of the costume itself. For example, a handmade costume was advertised as a “Mad Men Executive” (an AMC television program) rather than simply an executive, and a lifeguard costume was labeled as a “Bay Watch Lifeguard” (a NBC television program) rather than a generic lifeguard.

Table 3 shows the most frequently occurring licensed character in men’s Halloween costumes was a film character (78.4%), such as Shrek from the movie of the same name, the Witch Lord from the film *Lord of the Rings*, and The Joker from the Batman movie *The
Dark Night. The remaining types of brand licensed product placement in men’s Halloween costumes include TV characters (13.5%), video game characters (5.4%), and musicians (2.7%). Three of the product placement costumes traced their origin to two types of media as the film character was derived from a TV character.

Table 4 identifies the companies whose licensed characters occur most frequently. The four top companies, comprising 54% of the product placement, includes Disney/Pixar (18.9%), New Line Cinema/Warner Brothers (13.5%), 20th Century Fox (10.8%), and Paramount Pictures (10.8%). The remaining 46% of product placement costumes were licensed by 13 different companies.

Given the significant number of brand licensed costumes that also serve as product placements during Halloween activities, arguably Halloween today has “commercials” embedded within the festivities whether these festivities occur in public spaces such as bars or private spaces such as house parties.

DISCUSSION

Changes in Halloween practices over time reveal a shift in the meaning of Halloween; first as a collective ritual celebrating the harvest, to a religious day to commemorate the lives of
Catholic saints, to a children’s activity highlighting the significant role of the 1950s nuclear family, to a consumer activity with product placements embedded within an adult costume party. Each shift in practice reflects a broader transformation of the culture regarding the power holders in society from farmer/producers, to Church authorities, to individual family units, and finally to corporations. The data here suggests that Halloween costumes today expose the growing power of corporations to transform cultural meanings and cultural practices of masculinity from an ideal to a commodified spectacle of branded masculinities.

The data shows that men’s Halloween costumes reflect a variety of versions of masculinity to be found in popular culture, from hegemonic masculinity—men as strong, muscular warriors—to the comic relief of over-the-top bro-culture in the guise of a “buzzed” beer can costume. But to analyze costumes solely by the incidences of hegemonic or non-hegemonic gender performance ignores the most important issue, namely the power of corporations to regulate and limit the range of gender performances available through commercially produced costumes. As the majority of images of men’s costumes on the Internet are for commercially produced costumes, the “choice” of one’s male masquerade is limited by the items/ideas made available by corporations.

The selection of a commercially produced Halloween costume is not an act of creative identity performativity for men; it is not an imaginative masquerade where men select from an infinite range of possibilities. Rather, the masquerade is a ruse by the corporations to deceive the wearer into believing he is participating in a democratic ritual of identity construction which is, in reality, simply another venue to generate corporate profit by branding masculinity.

The expansion of consumerism into all aspects of social life has been noted by many previous scholars, including the corporate takeover of “public expression” in places like museums (Schiller, 1989), schools (Molnar, 1996), religion (Einstein, 2007), and community celebrations like parades (Souther, 2006). What makes the commercialization of Halloween costumes more problematic is that while most studies focus on the corporate takeover of public space, Halloween costumes represent a corporate invasion of private spaces including individual imagination and expression.

Commercially produced and licensed costumes have appear in public spaces such as trick or treating in one’s neighborhood or Halloween parades, for decades; what is more significant today is how licensed costumes penetrate private spaces during social gatherings in people’s houses, creating an evening-long commercial for multiple corporate products. When a man in a licensed Halloween costume joins a party at a private residence, the conversation may turn to the product—“Hey, I saw Shrek. What a great family film.” Corporations benefit from the free product placement of the costume at the party and also through the subsequent reiteration of product placement through photographs posted on social networking sites like Facebook, which then may reappear in an endless feedback loop of future Google searches of men’s Halloween costumes.

The private Halloween party of the past with children in handmade costumes portraying a generic witch or ghost is vanishing under the weight of commercialization. Today, the Halloween party may include the Walt Disney character Shrek celebrating with the Witch Lord character from Warner Brother’s film *Lord of the Rings*, a Mad Man executive from AMC’s TV series, and a man dressed as his favorite “Heineken” beer. Corporations profit from the licensing of the characters, the sales of costumes, and through the free product placements in our personal spaces.
Halloween no longer represents a cultural story about a season of life and approaching death/winter, as found in the Samhain fall festivals; today Halloween is simply another site for commercial culture to brand the participants. The guises of masculinity are reduced to a set of brand name products. In the end, men’s costumes do not offer insight on versions of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculine performativity as much as Halloween costumes tell us about the colonization of masculinity by commercial interests leaving us with yet another version of branded masculinity.

REFERENCES


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