

Michael Schudson writes article in Psychology Today that holiday gifts are more than crass commercialism

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It's the holiday season again and once more the cry goes out that "Jingle Bells" refers more appropriately to the sound of the cash register than Santa's sleigh.

But, according to University of California, San Diego sociologist Michael Schudson, there's more to giving gifts than mere Christmas commercialism.

Writing in the December issue of "Psychology Today" Schudson asserts that "giving gifts is a basic way of establishing and strengthening social relationships.

"Christmas is undoubtedly a festival of consumption," he writes. "But it is equally a festival of reunion, of restating and renewing ties of kinship and friendship."

The breakup of traditional families through death or divorce, children going away to college, or families who live in widely separated parts of the country are all factors which Schudson believes contribute to the need to buy gifts.

"People use more goods and services--airplanes, buses, long distance telephone lines--to hold their families together," he says. "Gift giving is part of this social glue."

Gifts have become a socially convenient way of expressing love or affection and replacing time actually spent with loved ones, Schudson asserts.

"What distinguishes an affluent society is not that people are grasping, but that, grasping or giving, they reach for material goods to express themselves. This is not, in itself, evidence of selfishness or shallowness.

"Just as every bought object is a convenience good compared to something homemade," he continues, "So every giving of things rather than sharing of time is a convenience.

"The commercialization of Christmas is a sign that people are choosing to express their social natures and their generous natures through material goods, which are both convenient to buy and often relatively permanent as a social bond."

Schudson is chairman of the UCSD Department of Communication and the author of "Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion," from which the "Psychology Today" article was adapted.

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