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# Santa's little helper and star of Instagram, Elf on the Shelf: Gendered labour, normalising surveillance and digitising a childhood phenomenon

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## Abstract

The Elf on the Shelf (EotS) has become – as well as being a best-selling book and toy of the same name – a cultural phenomenon. As a Christmas tradition, the EotS only dates back to 2005, but has quickly gained hold in homes across the world. For the marketers of EotS, it's also a huge money-spinner, earning millions worldwide. Originally self-published as a book by a retired teacher in 2005, the EotS book now sells with an EotS toy who sits on the shelf and, according to its story, reports back to Santa any 'naughty or nice' behaviour of the resident children. The EotS resides in many homes and schools pre-Christmas, giving parents and teachers leverage in the lead up to Christmas with the ostensible aim of moderating children's behaviour (making them 'nice'). EotS can also be viewed as a more sinister societal surveillance tool, normalising the 'panopticon' and making parents complicit with the concept of omnipresent spying (Foucault, 1979). While 'magical' rather than technological, EotS can nevertheless be seen as normalising and promoting a parentally-endorsed surveillance (and consumer) culture. Simultaneously, the EotS also has become both a chore and a source of fun for parents of Santa believers globally, as parents (mostly mothers) each night change the Elf's location and position.

## Introduction

The EotS, described in all its marketing material as a Christmas tradition, despite being developed and marketed from only 2005, has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon, toy and 'interactive' Christmas decoration. According to a recent UK industry news article, 13 million of The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition box sets have been sold worldwide since 2005, and the brand has an estimated 2.5 million followers on social media (Hutchins, 2019). Indeed,

the same report suggests that 2019 would be 'the biggest year in the UK market' for the brand. The toy's basic premise is that the Elf sits on a family's home shelf and then each night reports magically back to Santa whether the children in the household have been 'naughty or nice'. On the official company website, in 2019, the Elf's powers are described thus: "The magical Scout Elves help Santa manage his nice list by taking note of a family's Christmas adventures and reporting back to Santa at the North Pole nightly. Each morning, the Scout Elf returns to its family and perches in a new spot, waiting for someone to spot them. Children love to wake up and race around the house looking for their Scout Elf." While the EotS and its associated brand extension products have clearly been bestsellers, the media coverage of the toy has been ambivalent. Online news sites, including major mainstream news outlets such as the Wall Street Journal, and Australia's ABC News, suggest the Elf may be doing kids more harm than good, with his hyper-surveillance inside the home alongside the tyranny of parents having to be creative each night with the elf's positions, creating a possible love-hate relationship with the toy. Headlines include 'Elf on the Shelf trend mirrors loss of privacy' (Baranyai, 2015) and 'The Tyranny of the Elf on the Shelf: Where to Put Him Tonight?' (Bindley, 2018) alongside other articles that offer 'helpful' ideas on how/where to position the Elf for maximum effect for the kids.

This chapter explores the way parental Instagrammers have approached this toy, with some seeing it as a way to garner followers and likes and present their 'ideal', creative parenting style. Others on Instagram have chosen to use humour to subvert the toy, deriding it as a waste of time or tapping into its inherent creepiness factor, with extremely adult poses and captions. The representations of the toy show the approaches parents now take in the social media age – presenting a carefully curated image and staging of their parenting style and identity. These social media traces simultaneously reinforce or subvert the inherent surveillance normalisation of this new Christmas phenomenon. In the era of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015) it is argued that the Elf is reflective of our times. According to Holloway (2019: 22) children themselves are "clearly embedded actors within surveillance capitalism" – their data is of value to large organisations as is their worth as consumers.

The EotS is now a toy that has become part of many families' (and therefore young children's) Christmas rituals. The Elf has also become a digitised social media identity, with numerous 'Elfie selfies' uploaded in the lead-up to Christmas. To situate the EotS on social media, we begin with a literature review examining the rise of Instagram and selfies, the role of some

mothers as first bloggers and now prominent parental Instagrammers or influencers, and the commercialisation and gendered nature of Christmas in social media and domestic labour terms. We proceed outlining our methodological approach using Instagram as a space of cultural visibility and proceed to analyse the visual presentation of EotS via the most popular images and hashtags. We then conclude by positioning the EotS not only as an avatar of Christmas commercialisation but also as an icon of the normalisation of parental 'intimate surveillance' (Leaver, 2017).

## When Instagram selfies, Christmas, children and mums collide within a marketised society

### Instagram and Selfies

Instagram is a photo and video sharing platform  social media application (app), launched in 2010 and purchased by Facebook in 2012 (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020). In Australia, as in many parts of the world, Instagram is a hugely popular, and fast-growing social media app, with a recent survey stating that 46 per cent of internet users in Australia used the platform (Danno, 2019). Users take a photo or video through their phone, then edit it to their liking, and post it on the app's newsfeed or Stories with or without comments. Their 'followers' can then like and comment on the post. One of the key elements of Instagram is the use of the # (hashtag) to allow users to create an intentional public display for sharing by deliberate choice. The hashtag is then searchable and marked for public consumption, and intentional public discourse (Ridgway and Clayton, 2016). Instagram is "at the heart of global digital culture, having made selfies, filters and square frames an inescapable part of everyday life since it was launched in 2010" (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020, p. 268).

As a social phenomenon Instagram has attracted academic research, not only within social media and communication fields, but also in areas of psychology, cyberpsychology and health, (see, for example, Frison and Eggermont, 2017; Lup, Trub and Rosenthal, 2015; Slater, Varsani and Diedrichs, 2017) with reports in the popular media centring on its use by and effect on young women and girls, on body image, potential narcissism, bullying and mood.  The platform, initially a photo-sharing service, is now also an extremely important avenue for brands, not-for-profits and for-profit organisations to use as a marketing tool and tactic, including through 'influencer marketing', sponsored posts, and direct-to-consumer posts (Bergström and

Bäckman, 2013; Blount, 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Individuals have used the platform to promote their own 'personal brand', and social media influencers have arisen who market themselves as arbiters of taste and co-creators of brand value, primarily through the platform (Abidin 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Marwick, 2015). The issues surrounding Instagram's increasing commercialisation and unregulated marketing practice saw Instagram introduce bans on advertising on the platform of plastic surgery and questionable weight loss products aimed at under 18s in 2019 (McCormack, 2019). Instagram also hid 'likes' for users, in some countries in 2019, including Australia, ostensibly to combat 'mental health issues' (Levett, 2019).

Social media and communication scholars have examined the relatively recent 'mass phenomenon' of the selfie, as simultaneously objects but also cultural practices (Senft and Baym, 2015; Iqani, and Schroeder, 2016). The rise of the selfie is deeply connected to Instagram and 'personal branding' (Marwick, 2015; Eagar and Dann, 2015). While selfies were originally thought of as having to be photos, shared on social media, of people's own face or bodies/body parts, Tiidenberg and Whelan (2017, p 146) suggested it was important to go beyond thinking of selfies as having the mandatory presence of a human face/body, "thus taking on visual self-representation beyond the dynamics of good/bad, empowering/objectifying that that selfie debate has tended to emphasise." The concept of self-presentation through visual images (and through objects/possessions) also has resonance with consumer culture/marketing academic Belk's original concept of the extended self (through what we possess) and his later discussion of the digital extended self (1988, 2013). Depiction of EotS on Instagram could be seen as a form of selfie, as it is intended to be performative in the Goffman (1959) sense, simultaneously a staging but also a window into the 'backstage' of home life and the labour required by (mostly) mothers to make Christmas 'magical' for children.

#### Mothers and Children as Social Media Influencers

The visibility of women's labour as mothers has increased as women have embraced social media, with mum (or 'mommy') bloggers becoming important influencers of women's mothering practice (Lupton, Pedersen and Thomas, 2016; Leaver 2017; Archer 2019a). As eyeballs have shifted from mainstream media, social media has filled the gap for both mothers as consumers and the advertisers seeking to influence mothers and children (Lopez, 2009). The mum blogger trend began more than 10 years ago and, for some bloggers, the practice has resulted

in brands paying large sums to feature in ‘advertorial’ style posts (Hopkins, 2019). Mothers, originally motivated by the community and connection that social media offered, have, in some cases, seen the potential to earn money from their ‘playbour’ (Archer 2019b). Blogging for social media influencers has now been complemented and in many cases superseded by posting shorter-forms and image-based material on popular platforms, including Facebook and Instagram (Tiidenberg and Baym 2017; Pinjamaa and Cheshire 2016). With the rise of mum blogging and the uptake of social media by parents, the practice of ‘sharenting’ (parents sharing images of children on social media) has also developed (Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2017; Chalklen and Anderson 2017; Choi and Lewallen 2018; Leaver 2017). Many mum bloggers and everyday mums now share images of their children. In the case of the mum bloggers/social media influencers, children are now often seen as ‘brand extensions’ of their own personal brand (Archer, 2019c). In some cases, mothers (sidestepping developing their own personal brand) are going straight to market with images of their babies and children on social media, hoping to garner sponsorship and payment and fashioning their children as ‘micro-microcelebrities’ (Abidin, 2015; Choi and Lewallen 2018).

Those social media influencers with children regularly use family/children’s milestones and celebrations to create consumable content for their intended audiences on Instagram and other platforms (Abidin, 2017). Often these milestones and celebrations feature sponsored and/or paid content. As a major cultural event, Christmas offers plenty of opportunities for social media (and branded content) sharing. Christmas is a gendered activity and an important ‘enculturation’ process for children (Belk 1989; Batinga, de Rezende Pinto and Resende 2017; Brewis and Warren 2011; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Freeman and Bell 2013; Vachhani and Pullen 2011). With the rise of ‘sharenting’ practices, concerns have been raised regarding the rights of the child relating to their data.

#### The impact of Christmas on Mothers and Children

Mothers and women more generally are seen as the primary labourers in mainstream media when it comes to Christmas, fulfilling societal and family (and their own) expectations, performing myriad tasks in the lead up to and during Christmas day (Brewis and Warre 2011; Freeman and Bell 2013; Fischer and Arnold 1990). These tasks include planning for, buying and wrapping presents for children and other family/friends, planning the Christmas meal/s,

buying the ingredients, overseeing any children's craft and baking activities relevant to Christmas, cooking much of the food and, often, cleaning up afterwards. Decorating the house and table for Christmas are also mostly seen as activities in the women's domain (Freeman and Bell 2013).

Some scholars have noted the impact of mainstream media, including women's magazines, as a cultural 'guide' for women on what is appropriate and, in some cases, aspirational for the 'perfect family Christmas'. Content analysis of women's magazines show the emphasis placed on the perfectly staged Christmas, with only some acknowledgement of women's dual roles as earners outside the home who may have limited time to stage a Christmas fit for a magazine photo shoot (Brewis and Waren; Freeman and Bell 2013). Women, as the primary caregivers and purchasers of gifts for children, as well as other commodities relevant to Christmas, are the primary 'target market' for most brands. Christmas plays a large part in the process of enculturation of gender and consumption behaviour expectations in children (Belk 1989; Batinga, de Rezende Pinto and Resende 2017).

This chapter investigates the EotS phenomenon with an aim to view contemporary attitudes to the child and broader society, including women as gendered consumers. Children are viewed by marketers and mainstream media as one of the most important end 'consumers', even if they don't buy the products (Cook 2008; Jenkins 1998) and their role as important market actors cannot be overstated. Indeed, the EotS has been so deeply tied to commercialism and Christmas that in 2019 EotS partnered with Kellogg's to feature Elf giveaways with the purchase of popular breakfast cereals including Corn Flakes and Sultana Bran (see Figure 1). The impact of Christmas on women has been investigated by some. Others have looked at the meaning of Christmas through children's eyes, including conducting analysis of children's letters to Santa.


[Figure 1. Elf of the Shelf Competitions on Sultana Bran Kellogg's cereal. Photo by authors, taken 30 November 2019.]

The paradox of Christmas as a secular commercial extravaganza and religious Holy period has been researched and discussed for many years, with Belk and Bryce describing it as "the distilled essence of contemporary consumption" (Belk and Bryce 1993:277). Importantly, as the most impactful of all cultural seasonal traditions in Australia, England, most of Europe, the USA, Canada, New Zealand and many other Western nations, the festival and its hyper-commercial nature (as a frenzied spending spree for many) has a profound influence on families and children in particular. In recent times that impact (in particular its commercial significance) has also been felt in other, predominantly non-Christian nations, including, but not limited to, the UAE and other parts of the Middle East, Singapore and Japan (to name some countries that have embraced it as a festival that is good for commerce even if not relevant to the dominant religion). Belk's investigation of the 'modern' US Christmas in 1989 explored mass media treatments of the meaning of Christmas and argued that Santa had many similarities to the Christ figure and was 'sacred' to America's Christmas commerce. However, unlike Christ, "Santa is a god of materialism and hedonism, of modern consumer culture," Belk argued (1989, n.p.).

We argue that the child is at the heart of consumer culture at Christmas and the EotS is a manifestation of this trend towards commodification and surveillance. Children, once valued

by society for their use as labourers in the fields and factories (Holloway 2019), are now, it could be argued, valued for their data, imagined futures, and worth as consumers under the new normal of 'surveillance capitalism'. Parents, too, may use and value children as a form of self/personal brand extension. As Henry Jenkins (1998, p.22) argued "Children's culture is shaped at the global level through powerful institutions and at the local level through individual families. Through these everyday practices the myth of the innocent child gives way to the reality of children's experiences." The 'powerful institutions' of today, of course, include social media companies and major brands (including toy marketers). We explore below the extent to which EotS on Instagram reveals the convergence of social media platforms, Christmas commercialisation, gendered labour and the normalisation of cultural expectations and practices of intimate surveillance.

## Method

While analysis of Instagram is important, given its popularity as a social media site, it is also problematic, given the issues with downloading data, ethical privacy concerns and the challenges of investigating a mainly visual medium (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). Data for #elfontheshelf2018 were collected following a seven year (2012-2019) ethnographic study of mum/mom bloggers, (some of whom are now using Instagram) by one of the authors. One of the Australian mum bloggers, interviewed in 2012, posted #elfontheshelf images to Instagram in 2018 and that piqued our interest in the phenomenon.

Analysis of this data is done with reference to visual narrative analysis (see, for example, Riessmann, 2008; Rose, 2001) following Tiidenberg and Whelan's (2017) approach. Initially the content was thematically analysed for what the elf pictures were mainly used to communicate; this was followed with visual narrative analysis of specific posts to explain the layered and intertextual aspects of meaning making. The main posts for analysis were the top nine posts downloaded from Instagram that came up after searching #elfontheshelf2018 in June 2019. Image downloads, online news articles and field notes documenting routine and extensive situated immersion are also drawn upon here to describe the practices conducted by those posting with the #elfontheshelf2018 hashtag on Instagram. Nine of the top posts featuring #elfonthefuckingshelf hashtag were also downloaded for analysis, clearly emphasising a different approach to the toy.

Using Instagram's desktop client, any search of a hashtag will yield nine "top" posts followed by the "most recent" posts (which are presented as separate tabs in the mobile app). It should be noted that we are aware that, because of algorithms, the "top" nine posts seen when one person searches may well be different than for other researchers. This is the 'black box' of Instagram that so frustrates many researchers of the platform. Nevertheless, the top nine posts represent a sample of some of the 'types' of posts and individuals posting using this hashtag. Our research has been informed by popular discourse on the EotS, discovered through Google searches of recent 'news' articles. We also referenced social semiotics because of the techniques it offers for the analysis of images (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Adopting social semiotic analysis, the analyst identifies graphical elements of the visual image – such as lines, shapes and colour. Social semiotic analysis has been used in the past to analyse magazine articles and television. The social semiotics analyst also examines the layout of the page/post in terms of how it may "present, realise or [. . .] contextualise social positions and relations" (Kress, 2009, p. 139).

## Results and discussion

Of the top nine posts downloaded with the #elfontheshelf2018 hashtag, only one was by a male, with one by a commercial (children's organic baby food in squeezable pouches) brand. The remaining posts were from women (all mothers) and one other was presented as a child/toddler influencer, presumably posted on their behalf by a parent. All of the mothers who posted had links to other social media channels, including some to blogs and others to YouTube, and clearly were posting in order to create a following, with branded content included. The following themes were noted: Elf projecting the perfect parenthood performance (and the Instagrammer as helpful guide towards this aspirational goal), Elf projecting creepy horror/adult themes, Elf projecting playfulness, Elf projecting the trials of 'work' around staging Christmas for children, and Elf as a way of staging children as objects of the gaze. These themes will be discussed in turn.

The Elf as projecting the 'performance of perfect parenting' was evident in the post of the Elf dressed in a spaceman/astronaut's clothes, fashioned from foil and strung as a decoration, and described as being presented because the Instagrammer/'s boys "love space". The poster references her special EoTS Facebook page that clearly has ideas for parents on how to display EoTS. The Elf's silver foil suit also ties into the colour scheme of silver and blue baubles,

echoing women's magazine features that offer 'helpful' decorating tips for women at Christmas. The post has the hashtag #vlogger to foreground the mum as a video producer. Other EotS posts on Instagram project images that are creative and carefully staged by mothers in this same vein. One of the other top nine posts shows the Elf with two 'elf babies'. The post is by a mum/craft/sewing blogger who also promotes that the patterns for the babies are available on her blog, again using the Instagram post in the 'attention economy' to direct people's eyes to her blogpost.

In complete contrast, of the nine #elfontheshelf2018 posts analysed in detail, the post projecting the Elf as a creepy horror character was the only one by a man, and the Instagrammer presented himself as a make-up artist specialising in clowns/horror. The post was of the Elf strung up, upside down, mouth covered in black tape and with a clown figure about to chainsaw him between his legs. Hashtags such as #torture and #scaryclown accompanied the more benign #elfontheshelf2018 hashtag meaning children could easily stumble on this post while scrolling through their parents' phones. The 'adult' version of the Elf was also evident in other (sexualised) posts viewed outside the top nine posts for example with the Elf in a staged 'hot tub' with Barbie.

Given EotS is marketed as a toy for children's consumption, it is not surprising that many of the posts are devoted to 'playful' staging. For example, in the top nine posts, one is of the Elf contained in a jar with a note saying "I farted in here, wanna smell?" Other posts viewed outside the top nine reference the Elf 'pooing' chocolate drops or 'peeing' lemonade. One post in the top nine pictures a small 'sign' stating 'free reindeer poop' next to the Elf and chocolate drops. This post is also commercial in nature as it is by an American mum blogger offering her 'members' access to the downloadable signs, again directing eyeballs to her own blog.

Another commercial post of the top nine, from a brand for organic baby food, has a pouch of the baby food brand held by the Elf with a sign saying "That moment when you are almost asleep and realise you forgot to move the Elf." This shows a brand clearly using the EotS's relatability for parents, and cultural significance, to promote its product through Instagram. The post taps into the projection of the Elf as a chore for parents (specifically mothers).

Finally, two of the top nine posts analysed portray toddlers and babies as 'elves', dressed up as cute subjects of the adult gaze. In one post a toddler is on a toyshop shelf next to toys, dressed

as an Elf. For this post, the Instagrammer uses the hashtag #Walmart and investigation of her Instagram feed shows she regularly posts content related to the large North American discount department store, Walmart. It is likely that the Instagrammer was paid by Walmart to post these images of their child in Walmart, although no #sponsored or #ad posts hashtags are evident. This account is portrayed as being of and by the toddler, rather than of the mother, showing the trend towards parents using children as social media influencers and the continued trend of (often undisclosed) advertorials.

The #elfonthefuckingshelf hashtag was a surprise find, given the EotS is supposedly a children's toy. These posts are irreverent and more 'adult' in nature. The now 'classic' and viral post from English cartoonist, blogging mum Katie Kirby's "Hurrah for Gin" is at the top of these posts. The following exchange in cartoon form is shown:

> **Child stick figure:** Mummy, why don't we have an elf that moves around like everyone else?
>
> **Mother stick figure:** Because Mummy's got enough on her fucking plate, sweetie.

The post taps into the cultural phenomenon of Elf on the Shelf, and (some) mothers' recognition that it is 'just one more chore' to perform to make the perfect children's Christmas.

Revisiting the #elfontheshelf hashtag search on Instagram in November 2019 also reveals the size of that hashtag, and the cluster of related tags that Instagram suggests when undertaking the basic search. At this time, there were over 3.5 million #elfontheshelf images on Instagram. The number of #elfonthefuckingshelf images was only 269, which suggests a number of images using this tag have been removed or deleted since it is smaller than the number of images a year earlier. Comparatively large, #elfontheshelfideas returned just over 133,000, most of which appear to, again, be posted by mothers and caregivers making helpful suggestions to others about reducing the imaginative labour required in posing the Elf each day. In contrast, the #naughtyelfontheshelf hashtag search returned just over 27,000 images, many of which were clearly adult in nature, with the top nine posts including four that featured young women wearing elf costumes in sexually suggestive poses. The range of intentions evident from these four hashtags shows the broad cultural impact of EotS as well as cementing the connection of gendered labour and the Elf on one hand and the broad use of EotS in a wide range of cultural settings on the other.

Finally, the huge presence of EotS on Instagram reveals the central place this relatively new story and toy have in the experience of Christmas. Taking the notion that Santa Claus is 'watching' the behaviour of children to determine whether they deserve toys, the Elf takes that surveillance a step further, making the Elves part of the performance of Christmas whilst also normalising the idea of surveillance, even within the home. As Pinto and Nemorin (2014) argue "The Elf on the Shelf essentially teaches the child to accept an external form of non-familial surveillance in the home when the elf becomes the source of power and judgment" and, moreover, more broadly this leads to the idea of accepting authority, even domestically, in the form of surveillance. In a cultural context where internet-enabled toys can also be undertaking a form of surveillance of children (Holloway & Green, 2016), the normalisation of surveillance can be troubling. In contrast, the subversive and overtly playful images of the EotS on Instagram point to clear limits on this surveillance which is neither always enacted, nor necessarily conceptually clear if children and families focus on the creativity of the EotS rather than the logics of being watched.

## Conclusion

The Elf on the Shelf is a large and growing cultural phenomenon attached to the ever-increasing commercialisation of Christmas. The millions of EotS images on Instagram show the breadth of EotS in countries across the globe. Posts by Instagramming mothers clearly demonstrate and, at times, lament the gendered labour that places the burden of posing the Elf each night mostly on mothers. So, too, does this show the significant impact of the EotS narrative which, at the most basic level, normalises a form of surveillance in the domestic family space. Yet the cultural impact of EotS is by no means limited to the official commercial narrative developed by the owners of EotS. Indeed, there are many subversive, playful, adult and naughty Instagram images of EotS as well, showing that the Elf is not always faithful to its owners or the sanitised commercial message of good behaviour and banal surveillance.

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