

Hosting and the normative presence of Christmas in older people's lives

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Abstract

Despite the economic and cultural significance of Christmas in many nations, there has been relatively little geographical research on how it shapes people's socialities, spatialities, and subjectivities. In this paper, practice theory was used to reflect on the materials, meanings, and competencies associated with older people who host the celebration at home, and thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with 20 individuals aged 65+ explored participants' experiences of doing so. Findings reveal that homes' material forms affect older people's ability to host, while the 'stuff' of Christmas such as decorations, special foods, or gifts shape those homes as festive and welcoming places. Food sourcing and preparation were critical competencies for female participants, and shifting capacities to be a host influenced participants' sense of autonomy and identity. Regardless of the extent to which participants celebrated Christmas, the meanings of hosting centred on social connection, contribution, and shoring up family. Choosing not to host or being unable to contribute in expected ways at Christmas could signify failure, exclusion, or incapability as an older person, parent, or citizen. Examining these issues in the case study, based in Aotearoa/New Zealand, reveals the existence and effects of the social expectations, norms, and obligations that typify Christmas. More broadly, the study highlights the need for geographers to attend to the ways in which celebrations shape and are shaped by diverse practices, places, and peoples and are assembled, reproduced, and resisted.

KEYWORDS

Christmas, home, hosting, New Zealand, older people, practice theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although the association of Christmas with a Christian celebration may be declining for many people, Christmas remains a significant holiday in the annual calendar of many countries. Contemporary Christmas is interpreted in scholarly literature as a celebration of family, abundance, wealth, consumerism, materialism, tradition, and hedonism (Belk, 1987; Klassen &

Scheer, 2019; Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2011; Miller, 2017; Moore, 2014; Pleck, 2000; Storey, 2010; Wenell, 2009).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the end of the academic year falls in the Christmas season, heralding both the start of summer and for many schools, universities, and businesses, the close of operations for summer holidays. News items highlight the importance of retail spending in the local and national economy each year. Christmas configures social calendars, too, with

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charities, clubs, and social groups holding Christmas events. Advertising depicts happy families feasting, playing, and socialising—often alfresco around the BBQ. While the mainstream media will touch on the ‘darker’ side of Christmas (alcohol and domestic abuse, loneliness, and poverty), the dominant narrative is one of family and summer fun.

This paper begins the task of examining “a Kiwi Christmas” to go beyond discursive narratives to examine the experiences, practices, and places that characterise Christmas for New Zealanders. Through thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with 20 New Zealanders, I aim to describe hosting practices and reflect on the norms and expectations that shape the experiences of older people at Christmas time. The research extends the limited amount of geographical work on Christmas celebrations, shedding new light on how material practices and social expectations combine to create and reproduce social norms that influence individuals’ socialities, spatialities, and subjectivities. The use of practice theory highlights the materials, meanings, and competencies that contribute to the creation and resistance of these norms, providing important insights into the material and symbolic manifestation of the Christmas celebration at home and the potential inclusions and exclusions that arise from this study of a small and relatively homogeneous group of older New Zealanders. Consequently, I advocate for further geographical research to examine the normative and material manifestation of Christmas practices in place and to explore how celebrations might be assembled, reproduced and/or resisted by a range of individuals and groups.

Existing geographical scholarship is examined in the following section (Section 2). In it, I highlight the need for research that goes beyond a description of Christmas practice as it varies across places, to consider the social, material, and normative constitution of Christmas and its effects on people in place. Section 3 explores the expression of Christmas in New Zealand, noting its colonial and European heritage and its contemporary focus on festivity, feasting, and family at home. Practice theory is introduced in Section 4 and the qualitative research method and interview analysis procedures are outlined. The theme of ‘hosting at home’ is discussed in Section 5, which examines the materials (5.1), competencies (5.2), and meanings (5.3) of hosting at Christmas time. In Section 6 the social expectations surrounding hosting at Christmas are discussed, highlighting the intersection between subject positions, domestic capabilities, and the social and spatial constitution of ‘home’. Section 7 concludes the paper, reinforcing the need to examine the social and spatial significance of this event for diverse peoples and places, with a view to highlighting the inclusions and exclusions that may result from forms of celebration.

Key insights

The material, meanings, and competencies associated with hosting practice at Christmas time reflect and create powerful social norms that influence socialities, subjectivities, and spatialities. Older participants’ autonomy and identity were influenced by the extent to which competencies and behaviours aligned with normative constructions of sociality, family, and contribution centred on hosting at ‘home’. Hosting practice revealed the malleable nature of home, with the material space influencing an ability to host, and the ‘stuff’ of Christmas (decorations, foods, gifts) reshaping homes as festive and welcoming places. The study highlights the need to examine the reproduction of and resistance to norms associated with celebrations and how these are assembled through diverse practices, places, and peoples.

2 | GEOGRAPHIES OF CHRISTMAS

Scholarly literature has drawn attention to Christmas’s uneven cultural, economic, political, and cultural expression over time and place, highlighting variability in its social and economic constitution and meaning. Miller’s (1993) comparative study of Christmas as it is constructed in different social contexts and Moore’s (2014) research on the history of the celebration of Christmas, for example, have illuminated the religious and secular cultural practices that constitute Christmas in different places (see also Marchetti, 2019). Research on festivals and markets has highlighted the positive and negative impacts of Christmas events in local places (for example, Brida et al., 2017; Brida & Tokarchuk, 2017; Chacko & Schaffer, 1993). Other scholarship has focused on the experiential nature of Christmas consumption in commodified spaces (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Hancock, 2020; Pretes, 1995), emphasising Christmas’s social, symbolic, and economic value. For example, research by Broeckerhoff and Galalae (2022) suggests that Christmas markets operate as spaces of sociality and imagining that configure and elicit positive consumer emotions, making the profane aspects of commercialism less visible.

Nearly three decades ago, Nigel Thrift and Kris Olds (1996) drew attention to the need for geographical research on Christmas. In their *Progress In Human Geography* article, they argued that the social and spatial manifestation of Christmas had accorded little attention in geography despite its cultural and economic significance, including in nations where Christmas was not traditionally celebrated. Earlier geographical research had focused mainly on the spatial

expression of Christmas festivities. Marguerite Uttley (1938) has described cultural and spatial differences in the geographic spread of traditions and rituals such as Christmas trees and foods. Patrick McGreevy (1990) has also emphasised geographical differentiation in the expression of Christmas in America, drawing attention to the centrality of ‘family’ and ‘home’ to festivities. Later work has indicated how people and place identities are shaped through the celebration of Christmas (Hall, 2008). For example, Winchester and Rofe’s (2005) study of the festival of Lights in Lobethal in Adelaide Hills has examined how place identity and constructions of a nostalgic rural Christian Christmas were produced through the festival.

Geographers have also examined how different social and cultural groups experience Christmas. For example, Zolani Ngwane (2003) has explored the struggles of labour migrants in South Africa to manage Christmas’s discursive, material, performative, and gendered norms. Ngwane (2003) notes that women migrants would receive people in their homes, producing and serving food at Christmas time. For migrant families in South Africa, Christmas was also a moment of excessive consumption, a nostalgic reminder of past times and a means of establishing households in a new country (see also Voloder, 2012 on Christmas and belonging for Bosnian Muslim migrants in Australia). Garry and Hall (2015) have also examined cultural flows surrounding migrant experiences of Christmas, noting similarities in material culture and differences in meaning for UK immigrants in New Zealand.

In the United Kingdom, geographers have examined Christmas through the lens of class. Pitts et al.’s (2007) analysis of a British National Food survey has revealed that feasting was an essential part of Christmas regardless of socio-economic status despite significant class-based inequalities in the consumption of healthy food and alcohol. Edensor and Millington’s (2009a, 2009b) study of external lighting decoration of homes at Christmas framed the festival as an event through which class-based subjectivities and socialities were expressed. Working-class illuminations were repudiated by middle-class households for their “excessive” power consumption and “crass showy consumption” (Edensor & Millington, 2009b, p. 108). Yet, lightning displays provided a visible means of generosity, sociality, and enjoyment for working-class citizens who resisted these criticisms (Edensor & Millington, 2009a). A study of Christmas lighting displays outside homes in Halswell, a suburb of Christchurch, New Zealand (Cupples, 2009) has also found that despite their popularity with visitors, many Christchurch residents were critical of the poor taste of such decorations. While the denigration of lighting displays was based on classed construction, Cupples’ research demonstrated that wider spatialities and imaginings were also at stake, with Americanised lighting

seen as a disruption of the assumed Englishness of the city of Christchurch in post-colonial Aotearoa/New Zealand. These studies have revealed that while there may be patterns of similarity in the classed or identity construction of Christmas, these constructions are shaped and inflected differently in different social and spatial contexts.

Other studies of Christmas have focused on the possibilities and limitations of celebrations concerning sustainability. Michael Hall (2008) has investigated the place branding associated with the imaginings of Santa and a cold, snowy Christmas in Finland, revealing that seasonal changes associated with climate change are likely to impact Christmas tourism (see also Hall, 2014; Tervo-Kankare et al., 2013). Farbotko and Head’s (2013) exploration of green consumers found that sustainable practices were often suspended at Christmas. Social, financial, and cultural considerations related to the Christmas gift economy meant that green gifting could be seen as devaluing social relationships with assumptions that gift recipients might not appreciate green gifts from friends or family. Farbotko and Head’s study, in common with earlier work on feasting, display, and gifting, reveals that while cultural preferences shape social practices, the norms and expectations associated with these may be altered at Christmas time, including in relation to expectations of eating healthily, being frugal, or engaging in green behaviours.

Geographical research has highlighted the different constructions of Christmas as it manifests in place, touching on how it is reproduced through the intersections of cultural, social, and economic processes. However, existing research has indicated much more to be discovered about how Christmas is constructed materially and discursively in specific places. Studying the experiences of older New Zealanders provides a means of examining how Christmas has changed over time, how it is made meaningful, reproduced, and resisted in place, and what can be discerned about the kinds of norms and social expectations that configure the socialities, spatialities, and subjectivities of participants.

3 | CHRISTMAS IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

The December flowering of the native Pohutukawa Tree, with its brilliant red flowers, has recently become a visible symbol of Christmas time in Aotearoa. Māori, as tangata whenua—the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa/New Zealand—did not traditionally celebrate Christmas. While the first Christmas in Aotearoa/New Zealand was celebrated in 1642 by Dutch Explorer Abel Tasman, Christian missionaries introduced the Christmas festival during the nineteenth century (Kiwi

Christmas, 2016). Christmas in Aotearoa/New Zealand retains elements of its British colonial origins. It incorporates many European and North American traditions, including visits from Father Christmas/Santa Claus, trees, decorations, lights, stockings, or presents under the tree for children, and feasting centred on a main meal. Despite Christmas occurring in summer, winter iconography on cards and other products of commercial culture still features alongside more recent depictions of Christmas in the sun (beaches, summer fun, beach-clad Santa, and barbecues). Santa parades in towns and cities began in the early twentieth century (initially a vehicle to promote retail sales), and Christmas displays in retail outlets are standard. Father Christmas/Santa Claus regularly appears for photographs with children in shopping malls in the lead-up to Christmas. The Christmas season is a significant financial event in the retail calendar (Shaw, 2022), and Christmas Day and Boxing Day are statutory holidays.

Christmas catalogues indicate the discursive construction of the ideal Christmas as a family-centred celebratory moment based on consuming commodities (Mansvelt & Miller, 2008). Advertising, marketing, and displays of commercial culture at Christmas emphasise socialising, feasting, drinking (alcohol), decorating, and gifting. Alternative narratives in the news media acknowledge family conflict, increased domestic violence (Scoop Media, 2021), and the financial and social pressures poverty can impose on households (Radio New Zealand, 2018; <https://christmasbox.co.nz/>). Expectations of sociality at Christmas are reproduced through news articles on loneliness at Christmas, which centre largely upon the experiences of older people (Leys, 2022).

The practices that comprise a northern hemisphere religious celebration retain a presence in the expression of contemporary Christmas in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Chevalier's (2018) study of Christmas pudding recipes has revealed that New Zealand and Australian cooks adhered to the British traditions despite climate differences, with the hot pudding persisting in the warm Christmas temperatures alongside cold desserts such as Pavlova and fruit salad (see also Leach & Inglis, 2003). Garry and Hall (2015) have examined UK lifestyle migrants' experience of Christmas in New Zealand, noting that though the same symbols of Christmas in the UK were present (for example, trees and decorations), a New Zealand Christmas was seen by UK migrants as more informal and less complex to organise, with fewer social expectations.

Despite a 'relaxed construction' of Christmas in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Cupples's (2009) research on home lighting displays has revealed that norms that inform appropriate social practices at Christmas still exist. Subjectivities and role expectations are also constructed through food practices at Christmas. In one cross-cultural focus group study of older women's experience of food-related activities related to

Christmas in New Zealand and other contexts, it was found that food preparation and sharing provided a way for women to protect and pass on meaning, rituals, and traditions the women valued (Wright-St Clair et al., 2005, 2013). Food production has also been deemed an integral part of New Zealand women's competency and their identities as homemakers and hostesses, with the kitchen becoming a significant site of knowing and doing at Christmas (Hocking et al., 2002).

Recognising a colonial and northern hemisphere heritage exists in the context of changing symbolic, social, and spatial manifestations of people, identity, and practice in Aotearoa, it is essential to examine how Christmas is placed, (re)produced, or resisted in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This study of older New Zealanders is a first step in exploring the varied experiences, practices and spaces of a 'Kiwi Christmas', aiming to reveal the norms, narratives, and expectations underpinning the manifestation of Christmas in this place.

4 | RESEARCHING THE EXPERIENCES OF OLDER NEW ZEALANDERS AT CHRISTMAS

This geographical examination of Christmas takes a relational approach—exploring the varying social and spatial relationships between and among people, things, and places that comprise Christmas as it changes across place and time. Christmas experiences are understood to be connected to broader socio-cultural and material flows, networks and discourses that position people differently, shaping norms and social expectations and producing variability in how Christmas is manifest, expressed, and experienced.

I draw on practice theory to understand the socialities, subjectivities, and spatialities associated with Christmas (Shove et al., 2012). Practice theory emphasises the intersections between places, technologies, infrastructures, bodies, and meanings in the reproduction of everyday life. Practices are understood here as shared behavioural routines concerned with doings and sayings, which endure over time and are linked and dispersed across space (Hui et al., 2017; Schatzki, 1996; Shove, 2007). As routines that can be named—for example, shopping, cooking, and commuting—practices are produced through repeated performances and enactments that comprise assemblages of human and non-human things. Practices emerge, are maintained, change, or disappear due to connections between three elements: materials, meanings, and competencies (Shove et al., 2012).

Materials are 'the stuff' of practices and include objects, technologies, and material components of artefacts, things, and environments. Competencies encompass codified and tacit knowledge, techniques,

and skills. Competencies emerge from the performative relationships between human and non-human entities (Watson, 2008). Meanings include symbolic and social meanings, ideas and aspirations (Shove, 2007), and emotions (Schatzki, 2002). While individuals may articulate and enact knowledge, competencies, and meanings—people are best understood as carriers rather than holders of practice, since agency is distributed through combinations of materials, meanings, and competency. While practice theories have been critiqued for their limitations in attending to broader political and economic processes (Evans, 2019), they do enable geographers to understand how emotion, intelligibility, and materiality come together to create the social fabric of life as it produced in place (Everts et al., 2011). Practice theory provides a valuable conceptual frame to understand the diverse entities that comprise Christmas in specific time and place contexts, shifting the focus of Christmas consumption from commercial culture and consumer behaviour (Evans, 2020) to how it is produced relationally in place.

4.1 | Method

The case study reported below involved 20 participants aged 65 to 91 in the Manawatu and Horowhenua regions of Aotearoa/New Zealand, two provinces containing metropolitan and rural areas located in the south of the North Island, north of the capital city Wellington. Participants were recruited using flyers left in public libraries and snowball sampling.

After ethical discussion with colleagues, a low-risk ethics application was submitted to the Massey Human Ethics Committee, with a variation notified to the Human Ethics Administrator in June 2020 to enable the interviewer to ask questions about whether Covid-19 may have influenced experiences of Christmas.

Interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021, with 13 interviews conducted prior to the first nation-wide Level 4 lockdown (stay at home with no travel except to access necessities) between 25 March and 27 April 2020, and the remainder conducted after that period. While I offered interviews on Zoom during the lockdown periods, all participants preferred to be interviewed face-to-face. Sixteen women and four men were interviewed; 18 were New Zealand citizens identifying as European or Pākehā (Māori word for New Zealanders of European descent), and two were British citizens.

Placing flyers in public libraries had been intended to encourage a diverse range of participants, but the recruitment method did not produce the desired outcome. Leaving pamphlets at a wider variety of sites, advertising through organisations and on a range of social media sites, and not using snowball sampling may have produced a more diverse range of participants. All the participants had been in

heterosexual relationships, with 10 currently married; 10 participants lived alone. All had adult children, with two participants having an adult child in their household. Participants made subjective judgements of their health, with two participants noting their health was poor, seven participants stating theirs was okay, and 11 stating they were in good health. Two participants had significant physical mobility issues, and although all participants had access to a car, five no longer had their driving licences. Subjective assessments of financial status saw four participants identify as very comfortable and two as 'comfortable'. Nine participants said their finances were adequate. Three participants stated they were in some hardship. Those with adequate finances and those in hardship relied on government superannuation (a universal benefit intended to provide safety net welfare provision for those aged 65 and over, with the target level for a married couple based on 65% of the net national average wage from age 65). All participants lived independently (one in a retirement village, three renting, and seventeen in homes they owned).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews of 60 to 90 minutes focused on experiences and practices centred on Christmas. Participants were asked to reflect on how Christmas had changed through their lifetime, on their experiences of the Christmas season, and on the practices, materials, expectations, and emotions that characterised Christmases past and present. Eight of the 20 participants claimed they did not celebrate Christmas, and most indicated that this was because Christmas held no religious significance for them. However, all participants marked the day with special foods and activities such as watching the Queen's message to the Commonwealth, having a Christmas meal, going to church, listening to Christmas music, and connecting with significant others face to face, by phone, or by internet. One participant chose to have Christmas Day alone, leaving home to visit the beach or a park.

Interviews were analysed thematically to look for patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding developed descriptive categories, noting the (changing) significance of family, food, decorations, gifts, mobilities, connection with significant others, celebration forms such as dinner, lunch, outings, or social activities, religious emphasis, and emotions over time. These categories provided a detailed and situated description of Christmas's changing manifestation and significance across the participants' life-times. I then searched for more abstract narrations of conditions, relationships, actions, and feelings (Cope, 2021). A second round of analytic coding centred on identifying critical practices and the materials, meanings, and competencies comprising them. 'Hosting Christmas at home', 'going out' (shopping and/or social activities), 'connecting with family', and 'sourcing and preparing

food' were the four critical practices through which I read how participants shaped their Christmas experiences. This paper focuses on participants' experiences of 'hosting at home' to reveal how this practice illuminates the complex socialities, spatialities, and subjectivities associated with Christmas.

5 | THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTMAS BY HOSTING AT HOME

Analysis of interviews revealed that the celebration of Christmas was strongly associated with home (see also Wright-St Clair et al., 2005). Whether participants had Christmas at their own homes or in others' homes, "hosting Christmas at home"—that is, receiving or entertaining others—established Christmases past and present as meaningful and memorable. For 12 participants, hosting involved having immediate or extended family congregate in their homes for a meal on Christmas day. Close family members hosted seven other participants in their homes, and one participant spent Christmas alone. Many participants talked about the recent transition from hosting Christmas Day festivities in their homes to being a recipients of the hosting practices of others. Regardless of whether a Christmas Day celebration was held at their home, participants commented on the Christmas period as a significant time for hosting, involving invited visitors and family, and people 'popping in' unexpectedly.

5.1 | The affect of things: materials of hosting at home

Materials were strongly implicated in producing sociality, spatialities, and subjectivities, which shaped hosting Christmas. The materiality of homes as built environments enabled and constrained practices associated with Christmas. All but one participant had previously hosted their own or extended family and friends at home. Several participants had moved to smaller, lower maintenance dwellings in recent years, and a few commented that their homes were no longer practicable spaces to host family at Christmas. Distance from significant others, changing family structures (adult children with young families), and an inability to accommodate visitors overnight also meant that hosting family at Christmas, even if preferred, was not always possible. In Nelly's (P5) case, her tiny home and physical immobility resulted in her relinquishing the hosting of the Christmas Day meal:

Well, because I am ... virtually immobile, and I cannot do things for myself, my daughter organises Christmas. So, whatever they do, I am involved.

Nelly's narrative situates her as an essential participant in the family celebration even though she can no longer host.

Material culture played a significant role in creating a suitable atmosphere in the home during the Christmas season. Participants highlighted cards, trees, decorations, stockings, gifts, and foods as significant objects. Thirteen participants said they put up some Christmas decorations, although most had significantly reduced their efforts at decoration. Participants did not comment on the aesthetic display of Christmas décor (see Edensor & Millington, 2009a) but rather on the affectual qualities of their decorations. The placement and display of a few select objects—a small, lit artificial tree or a decoration in the window—signified the participant's recognition of the hospitality and celebration associated with Christmas. Although Nelly (P5) no longer hosted the Christmas Day meal in her home, she still hosted visitors over Christmas. The physical effort of putting up decorations was significant, but she felt it was critical to contribute to the celebration of the season:

And I put fewer and fewer decorations up, [but] I have decorations! This year, I put one up. I have got a Father Christmas that sits on the mantelpiece with his legs dangling. Thus, that was easy. Oh yes, I've got a wreath I put out somewhere.

Christmas decorations exerted a kind of 'thing power' (Bennett, 2010), with objects generating and offering vibrancy to Christmas at home, enchanting participants' home places in small ways which symbolised a break from the mundane and every day. Arwen (P13) explained how she had family coming to visit, so she went to the effort of putting up a Christmas tree, decorating, and buying treat foods—a means of making her home festive for the arrival of her family on Christmas Day:

But we still put up the Christmas tree, and they came over Christmas morning, so I had the table spread with ... mince pies and black cherries. Oh, I love black cherries. Bits and pieces. Nibbles. So, it looks sort of festive. And did decorations. I didn't do all the decorations because I thought, 'I've got to put them away again!' [laughs]

Foods were powerful materials implicated in the practice of hosting Christmas at home—many participants reminisced over favourite foods such as cakes, trifles, fruit salads, chocolates, or fruits and the rituals surrounding them such as 'Dad preparing the fruit salad', or 'Mum making the Christmas cake for the

family', or having cherries only at Christmas time. Abundance and a cornucopia of food were associated with the festivity of Christmas, and participant talk centred on the midday roast meal, signalling its British colonial origins (Pitts et al., 2007). Although many participants did not buy themselves or their adult family members' presents at Christmas, treat foods were often anticipated and purchased as part of the Christmas Day celebration and across the Christmas season, with several participants having 'on hand' home-made or bought foods such as chocolate, fresh cherries, or fruit mince pies, signalling their readiness to host visitors. In response to a question about whether she bought herself treat foods at Christmas, (Cindy P12) responded by noting her preparedness as a host:

Oh yes, I always make sure I have chocolates around for whoever calls in. And I tend to do that for ... anybody who's been helpful ... And I don't mind a drop of wine here and there. So I always have a drink ready for anybody who comes as well.

While changes in the Christmas meal did represent elements of a globalised food culture with a wide variety of ingredients, recipes, and food practices, conversations centred largely on meat-based roast meals (often with salads and steamed vegetables) and eating indoors (just two participants mentioned BBQs or eating alfresco). Despite literature indicating that a hot Christmas pudding persists in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Chevalier, 2018), pavlova (a cold meringue dessert) and fruit salad were more common. For older women, Christmas food preparation provided a means of self-affirmation, caring contribution, and keeping memories alive (Wright-St Clair et al., 2013). Several female participants continued to make celebration foods desired by their families, providing material evidence of the out-working and centrality of their parental role in the provision and the making of a familial Christmas, even when they could no longer host Christmas themselves, as Cindy (P12) notes:

It has become a tradition. And wherever we share Christmas, with whoever of my family, it's always, 'Mum, you'll make the pav' won't you?' That's all right, too; I don't mind.

Providing treat foods and hosting at Christmas was legitimate and expected means by which care and generosity to others could be exhibited, as Hugh (P4) suggests:

And I've had to go without and [have] seen people. Christmas is a time when you shouldn't have to go without, if you can

really help it. So, that's why I like to ... bless others.

Although gifts are objects of love and generosity (Farbotko & Head, 2013), several participants found the practicality of acquiring gifts that family members would appreciate and doing so equitably and transparently across extended family was challenging. Despite this challenge, memories of receiving favourite gifts as a child, the excitement of discovering gifts in stockings or under the tree, or watching grandchildren opening gifts were essential to framing an ideal and happy Christmas at home in participants' narratives.

5.2 | Hosting and place: adjusting to changing competencies

Participants situated their changing bodily competencies as a part of framing their subjectivities as contributing parents and community members. Several participants mentioned social and spatial challenges of leaving home such as driving at night or negotiating busy shopping centres for gifting and provisioning at Christmas time. As a consequence, some participants felt there were fewer social activities available to them than had previously been the case. One resident noted how Christmas now was a lonely time, with organisations closed for the summer break and friends and family away on holiday. For a minority, diminishing social and spatial networks placed greater emphasis on hosting at home as a means of sociality during the Christmas season. Loss of mobility and ill health significantly affected subjectivities for several participants, influencing the exercise of autonomy, capability, and personal and social sense of self. Alison (P9), for example, still hosted Christmas at home but lamented that her health and mobility meant she could no longer shop for Christmas presents in physical stores:

Well I have to rely on my husband for travel, and he won't go to the [shopping mall], so I don't get to go there, I would love to go and be part of the hustle and bustle. But he won't take me. So, I really do most of my shopping online. And hope it turns out alright!

For Alison, the spatialities of hosting in all its fullness extended beyond the physical space of her household, and her experience of Christmas was significantly altered by her inability to be in retail spaces.

One participant noted that their most recent Christmas meal was at a restaurant, but in all other cases, meals were prepared and consumed at home. In common with findings reported by Wright-St Clair et al. (2005), the labour involved in sourcing, preparing, and serving food could be a source of pleasure and pain for

the women involved. Food preparation was highly gendered, with only one of the male participants noting he did any cooking or food shopping at Christmas. Only two participants (one male and one female) questioned women's role in hosting in terms of purchasing food and gifts, decorating, or cooking. While food preparation was assumed for women, separation of obligation and preference was most evident in conversation with Sian (P19), where she talked at length about her food preparation for others over the Christmas season for events within and outside the home, suggesting her ideal Christmas would be "Buy a good book, shut the door and put 'Gone'! [laughs]".

Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the labour or obligation involved, female participants who hosted talked with pride about their ability to cater the Christmas meal, feed the family, host visitors, and make Christmas an enjoyable family celebration. For many, the skill and competency of cooking a meal or providing components of it for other family members was a critical part of domestic competency, of 'caring for' family and of still being 'mother' (Mansvelt et al., 2017). Delwyn (P18) explained how she goes to extra effort to produce a turkey roast meal, which is appreciated by her 'boys' when they come home for Christmas:

And, certainly, when the boys are there, we do all the business and the trimmings. The boys enjoy it.

In contrast, Mary (P14) expressed a sense of loss at not being able to host the family on Christmas day, something she was still 'itching' to do:

Not me, no. My daughter. This year they said, "Mum, you've done it every time, you're not doing it this time."

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Weird [laughs]. I was itching! [laughs]

For Mary, the ability to contribute and the appreciation of her caring labour was part of her competency as a good mother and host, an element of practice linked strongly to shaping her subjective and social role in the family.

5.3 | Meaning: shoring up family through hosting

For all but one participant, Christmas was centred on family. Cindy's (P12) response to a question on what an enjoyable Christmas is like was typical:

Interviewer: What would an enjoyable Christmas be like?

Just getting together with all my family. Absolutely, yes. Family and friends.

Some participants described how the excitement and magic of Christmas had diminished over their life course, with pleasurable Christmases as young children and with their own small children providing a barometer for successive celebrations. The narrative of Christmas as happy family time at home was powerful. Christmas was narrated as abnormal for those who did not have family members present, could not travel to be with family, or chose not to be with family. Sally (P9) sought to spend each Christmas alone, away from her adult family, friends, and home. When she contacted me for an interview, she stated she was 'selfish' because she wanted to spend Christmas alone. She struggled with the expected socialisation of Christmas and its focus on family, to the extent that she felt accepting invites to others' Christmas was a reminder of her exclusion from its normative familial construction:

Everybody invites you to Christmas, being on my own, everybody invites you to Christmas, and they expect you to come because you're on your own, okay, and you've got to join. And I went to quite a few Christmases, with people, but I just didn't feel comfortable. (Sally, P9)

For those who enjoyed hosting at Christmas—the day and the season—the practice was centred on caring, generosity, sociality, sharing, and enjoyment. For both women and men, Christmas Day was a critical moment in shaping the cultural politics of family. Hannah (P1) described how important her annual hosting of Christmas was to keep her large blended and spatially dispersed family connected:

Because I feel that, that's our responsibility, as the older ones, to make sure that to keep the family tradition of a happy Christmas. And that is, I think, the most important thing. And I think it's important for family to feel connected and stay together, but Christmas, is keeping family ties together, and keep them bind together. And if we just said, 'Oh well, what the heck, we won't bother [to host], it falls apart.

Past Christmases were recounted concerning norms of family celebration and positive emotions. Alistair (P20) described how his childhood Christmases were not pleasurable, noting alcohol consumption was the primary focus in his family as a child, stating:

It was always roasts. It was a Christmas dinner. If ... my parents were not inebriated, it would occur. Alcohol and alcohol abuse was very strong in the family.

Alistair's determination that this would not be the case in his household meant that abstinence was essential to making a home (and Christmas) with his own children. At the time of the interview, the meanings of the home were reconfigured with the death of his wife. Alistair decided to go to his sister for Christmas. Alistair's and Sally's narration of experiences of Christmas demonstrated the normative power inherent in expectations that centre on Christmas hosting and sociality, revealing the affective atmospheres, and the sense of exclusion and deficiency that can result from experiences that are not seen as typical.

6 | DISCUSSION

'Hosting at home' was central to the subject positions participants occupied as they aged; to their socialities—the relationships formed with family and significant others in their lives; and to their spatialities—the spatial networks in which dwelling, mobility, and flows of people, communication, and commodities were embedded. Social expectations and obligations associated with hosting provided opportunities and challenges for older people through expectations about provisioning and gifting as families become more fragmented and dispersed. Interrogating 'hosting' and its connections to home revealed the normative expectations associated with sociality, family (shoring up family, being a good parent), and being a contributing, participating older citizen.

The research has highlighted the malleable nature of home as it is changed through material practice and imaginings. Baxter and Brickell (2014) advocate the necessity of critical geographies of the home that attend to the connections between the sensory and the temporal. Recognising the material, affective, and social-spatial nature of hosting practice at Christmas has demonstrated how home's making and unmaking (Baxter & Brickell, 2014) occurs through ephemeral moments, events, and experiences and the kinds of spatial, material, and social choreographies (Yusuf et al., 2023) necessary to create hospitality. For example, for some participants, putting up Christmas decorations created a means of reordering, and reimagining their homes as open, welcoming, and more public spaces for family and friends. For other participants who were alone, separated from family, or recently widowed being home at Christmas no longer had pleasurable connotations, with the empty materiality of place an affective reminder of what 'home' used to (and should) be like at Christmas. Knaus's (2020) discussion of hosting in an Airbnb home

highlights how domestic labour is both a responsibility and a skill, but also points to the fact that visitors change how hosts feel about their home space. The insights from this paper suggest there may be further value in examining how hosting at Christmas contributes to the reshaping of home and the meanings of dwelling.

Given that all participants were parents of adult children, it is perhaps not surprising that narratives of hosting centred on both the social and spatial reproduction of family. For many participants, Christmas was a means of maintaining familial stability and sociality in the context of the busy and/or spatially dispersed lives of family members. Knowing the family and attending to their needs, preferences, desires, and differences was necessary for many participants in shoring up the family by hosting Christmas at home. Hosting Christmas was often seen in terms of keeping family together in place, with the sense that hosting a collective gathering in a central place—one's own home or, failing that, an adult child's home—rather than multiple family gatherings across spatially dispersed households was critical to maintaining family connection and stability. To facilitate the gathering of participants' families, adult children's gathering with partners and in-laws' families was often accommodated and negotiated by settling on various times of day, having Christmas events on other days, and 'taking turns' for adult children to be present. The temporal and material re-ordering of homes as places to host Christmas with decorations, moving furniture, 'making room' to sleep, eat, and socialise can be a crucial part of 'making family' in a way that differs from the daily thrown togetherness of family homes (Luzia, 2011). Consequently, Christmas was an important event in the temporal and spatial reconfiguration of family, with specific Christmas practices and materials such as foods and gifts stabilising family roles, and traditions, and creating memories which are a legacy for younger generations.

A focus on capabilities at Christmas has highlighted the ways in which notions of self may be subservient to the collective identities of households and families through social practices. While many participants derived pleasure from decorating, cooking, and gifting, one's identity as a contributing person was rarely framed in terms of individual identity. Instead, it was configured through one's role, position, and capability in familial or social networks as parents and grandparents, mothers, friends, and hosts. At times, conversations about the work and practice reflect the tension between the shaping of personal and collective identities in the space of the home (Reimer & Leslie, 2004) with individual preferences—particularly for women—subsumed under expectations and obligations surrounding hosting at Christmas. A post-feminist sensibility (Gill, 2017) emphasises the social construction of ideas about femininity, embodiment and empowerment of women (Riley et al., 2017) and the ways in which identities are shaped

intersectionally, particularly in media discourse. Further studies of Christmas might investigate the extent to which household members share emotions, identities, and practices. Given the predominance of women and older mothers as participants, this research highlights the gendered nature of the work and practice of hosting and its assumed connection to notions of 'home' as the space and foci of hospitality (Diprose, 2009). The predominance of normative and affective connections between women, mothering, domestic capability, and making family in the home at Christmas time is something which might be interrogated through research with more diverse households.

Post-feminist sensibilities also attune the researcher to the complex and contradictory ways in which roles, bodies, capabilities, and practices might be performed and assembled and can illuminate the possibilities and limitations of new subjectivities (Fullagar et al., 2019). Despite the general acceptance of a hegemonic public narrative of mothering—which saw hosting, cooking, or gifting as normal and natural (Mansvelt, 2012)—some participants questioned expected social roles. A few of the women noted their preference for a 'meal out' and even though this might be constrained by finance or acquiescence to the weight of family expectation, the work and 'weight' of hosting Christmas was acknowledged. Tensions in the performance of domestic and mothering roles were also evident. While many female participants had welcomed the relief from the expectations and burden of domestic work associated with hosting as it passed to younger generations, many found it difficult to relinquish their central role as parents in the organisation, preparation, and celebration of Christmas. Contributing to Christmas decision-making, family traditions, or providing desired foods provided a sense of continuity, agency, and identity for a number of the older women in this study, enabling them to 'still be mother' (Mansvelt et al., 2017). In addition, despite the recognition of 'magical' and 'exciting' Christmases being built around young children and one's own family, there was little acknowledgement of establishing new traditions, places, and forms of meaning-making by younger generations. Nor was there explicit recognition of aspects of intersectionality, which meant family members might approach Christmas celebrations from different life stages, subject positions, and sociohistorical time points. Although the participants in the study may solidify the concept of the white woman as the assumed subject for feminist expression (McRobbie, 2004), a post-feminist approach recognises the need for more nuanced, diverse constructions of gender and sexuality, something that should be explored in future studies of hosting and its intersectional production.

While research has demonstrated the significance of food preparation in the social reproduction of the family at Christmas (Wright-St Clair et al., 2005), this study highlights the significance of context to the

celebration of Christmas. Where Christmas is held and how homes form relational social spaces that are "laboured on" at Christmas (Lefebvre, 1991, p.76) are important to the social signification of hosting, and also to the shaping of older identities and familial relations. Identities as good and caring parents continue to be shaped spatially through familial relationships that extend across multiple households. Where Christmas was held mattered to practices of hosting and to the bricolage of meanings, material, and competences that could be deployed. As mentioned earlier, adjusting to Christmas hosted elsewhere by adult children was not always easy for participants, even when participants recognised they were often no longer able to host as the materialities of their dwellings, personal circumstances, and/or bodily competencies changed. The legitimacy of hosting as a performative act was absolutely bound by the acceptability of the taken-for-grantedness of home as spaces where this would occur. The rationality of home (Lefebvre, 1991) as the social space for the Christmas celebration was established intergenerationally for the majority of participants who recounted stories of pleasant Christmases at home (as children and/or with their own young family) established family traditions and expectations about home and Christmas's centrality as a meaning-making event in solidifying kinship relations.

Materials mattered to how homes were made at Christmas. Marking the presence of Christmas was important with small gestures such as cards on a mantelpiece, creating a 'festive' atmosphere and a visible acknowledgement of the season for oneself and others. The analysis of interviews indicated decoration (however minimal) may also change the privateness of homes during the Christmas season—remaking homes as spaces of display and reception for extended family and significant others. Decorations in/on windows extended notions of publicness highlighted in external lighting displays (Cupples, 2009) to the interior of homes, reinforcing the contingent and temporal nature of publicness as it is enacted in place (Tyndall, 2010). Creating positive festive atmospheres at Christmas was important to hosting, but also in signalling one's contribution to the wider societal celebration of Christmas. Even a small effort at decoration helped shape a sense of being in the world for people at Christmas time. A future avenue for exploration for those who celebrate Christmas as a religious festival might be to focus on the ways in the materiality of decoration (including religious iconography and nativities) listening to music, religious traditions, and watching religious services on TV—bringing the sacred home, creating hybrid spaces that extend and renegotiate the spaces between the secular and profane (Bryson et al., 2020).

Although food is a site of multifaceted constructions of national identity, home, and ethnic identity (Chevalier, 2018) for these Pākeha New Zealanders,

foods remained primarily associated with a British colonial legacy (heavy fruit cakes, fruit mince pies, roast dinner). Cooking and offering such foods help shape a sense of tradition and inform the subject position of the good, capable, and generous host. Hosting family and friends at home during the Christmas season was also seen as a social obligation. Having treat foods available in the house at Christmas time signalled not only abundance (Pitts et al., 2007) but a readiness to host, with obligations to do so potentially formed in the context of social, economic and cultural capital as it is manifest in place (Patterson, 2008).

While gifting was not always central to hosting, gifts in whatever material form remained representations of familial love and care (Carrier, 1993). Gifting was connected to available finances, changing (auto)mobilities, and how retail technologies and physical consumer spaces accommodated older bodies. Few participants made purchases online, so options for gifting and shopping often depended on wider spatial networks and flows—including public transportation, taxis, friends, and families. Although practice theory does not emphasise the broader context of social-historical and political-economic change, the globalisation of food products and tastes, infrastructural and technological and communicative shifts, automobility, and the changing nature of urban environments (including dwelling in a more diverse post-colonial context) did appear to influence how hosting was manifest over time.

Such is the moral ascription of sociality at Christmas for this group of older New Zealanders, that the one participant who chose not to celebrate Christmas with others or engage in the material provisioning of the celebration (other than to buy herself a gift) described herself as 'selfish'. Homes at Christmas were temporarily unmade (Baxter & Brickell, 2014) by those who had experienced family disruption through violence, alcohol, separation, alienation from family members, and death. These biographical disruptions changed the kinds and forms of material practices that were engaged in—for example, the nature of a family meal, shopping together, and family traditions—and altered the affective dimensions of hosting Christmas at home. Participants who had experienced grief, loss, or separation described homes as feeling different and Christmases not being the same. In those moments when participants recounted stories of pain, hurt, violence, or disappointment surrounding Christmas, the normative expectations associated with Christmas became most visible. Past Christmases were remembered and recounted with respect to how they complied with broader societal norms of family, festivity, and fun.

Examining the materials, meanings, and competencies associated with hosting for this relatively homogeneous group of Pākeha New Zealanders has revealed how subjectivities, spatialities, and socialities are connected at Christmas. This research has also

demonstrated the inseparability of materials, meanings, and competencies. The provision, preparation, and sharing of food, for example, is caught up in materialities (finances, access to commodities and retail sites, adequacy of homes, automobility); competencies (knowledge and skills of food acquisition and preparation, family rituals and hosting abilities); and the meanings derived from abilities to host appropriately at Christmas through skills and foods provided and their capacity to produce affective atmospheres.

This research also highlights the contradictions associated with practices of hosting Christmas, for example, between continuing to do what one has always done and accommodating new traditions, expectations, and places. Tensions between holding on and relinquishing elements of hosting reveal the centrality of subjectivities as caring, generous, and contributing parents and independent, productive older (neo-liberal) citizens (Mansvelt et al., 2017). Reflection on Christmases past highlights the formative role of establishing tradition and family through Christmases experienced as young children and with young families; yet for many of the participants, enabling the labour and traditions of Christmas to pass to adult children can be challenging. Narrative representations and memories of home are necessarily a 'remaking' (Findlay, 2009). In this study, the remaking of the home was highly gendered, reflecting construction of home space as domestic, feminine, and family-based. At Christmas time, homes are spaces of both work and consumption (Cox, 2013), with women's domestic labour a critical part of producing a pleasurable Christmas and atmosphere. However, while domestic, mothering, and hosting roles might be accepted by the participants, social obligations to host at Christmas time (or to be poised to have visitors) can create tensions with respect to one's embodiment, finances, homes, mobility, and ability to access commodities. Accordingly, personal preferences and resources don't always align with normative obligations. Pressures to be ready to host, to contribute, to spend time with friends and family, and to experience Christmas as a social or pleasurable time can make those older people who cannot, or who choose not to engage in expected ways, feel excluded and or lonely.

7 | CONCLUSION

This analysis of older New Zealanders' experiences of the practice of hosting at Christmas reveals the value of studying everyday and private practices (Back, 2015) for understanding the relational geographies that frame normative constructions of identity, family, and home. The research involving a small group of Pākeha, heterosexual, and predominantly female parents has made visible expected subject positions available for older people at Christmas time: as sociable

adults, caring parents shaping families, domestically skilled mothers, and contributing productive citizens.

The Christmas season punctuated participants' lives and life courses, with material, meanings, and competencies changing over time and place. Christmas implied significant social expectations and obligations that extended beyond a celebration on the 25th of December. Examining the socialities, spatialities, and subjectivities that centre on the practice of hosting reveals how identity, memory, sociality, atmosphere, mobilities, human-object relations, and material and social reproduction are constituted through practices that centre on material and social constructions of home.

The capacity to host, to provide materially for friends and family, to shore up the family, to do so at home, and to mark Christmas day in ways that are pleasurable and social creates significant social expectations for older people, expectations that may not easily be met in the context of financial insecurity or everyday austerity (Hall, 2019), changing physical or cognitive capability, unsuitable homes, family conflict or alienation, distance from significant others. Tensions surrounding handing down elements of practice, managing familial and societal change, shoring up of family, contributing, and maintaining independence are shaped in the context of expectations to consume as responsible citizens (Mansvelt et al., 2020), to meet place-based constructions of Christmas (Ngwane, 2003; Winchester & Rofe, 2005) to gift appropriately (Farbotko & Head, 2013), and to meet gendered, class, or race-based expectations of practice (Cupples, 2009; Edensor & Millington, 2009b; Wright-St Clair et al., 2013).

Choosing not to or being unable to participate or contribute in expected ways can signify a relative failure, exclusion, or incapability as an older person, parent, or citizen. Notions of sociality (particularly with family) were strong in the participants' narratives, and the loci of hosting talk were centred on domestic competency, display, and the material and affective construction of home. Studying the practice associated with hosting at home can reveal the norms and expectations that position older people in different ways; it also highlights the need to examine the inclusions and exclusions that shape Christmas and other forms of celebration. Given that the study was centred on the experiences of white, female, heterosexual, older parents, with few in economic hardship, it is perhaps no surprise that narratives of Christmas centred on home, parenting, making family, and a Christian and colonial legacy of celebrating the event. Yet despite this relatively homogeneous group of older New Zealanders, the research has highlighted differences in material contexts, mobility, and wellbeing; material resources can alter practices and experiences of Christmas.

Cultural and religious norms such as those associated with Christmas, can persist intergenerationally and it is important to understand how and why these are

reproduced in place (see for example, Burnley, 2005, 2010 on how cultural practice is manifest through family, religion and place identity supported by public and private institutions). The power of normative expectations and conventions surrounding the expression of Christmas requires research on more diverse people and places to understand how it and other forms of celebration are reproduced and resisted. Such research must be expanded beyond the small number of Pākeha older New Zealanders. The experiences of Māori and new settlers to Aotearoa were absent from this study, as were those who celebrate Christmas in luxury or severe hardship. The centrality of the home can be troubled; accordingly examining the experiences of Christmas for those who are without 'homes', those who may be in situations where homes are unmade, the incarcerated, those who are mobile or in transient spaces, and those in varying household situations (including those who are without 'family' or children), and dwelling compositions matters. The practices, subject positions, and spatialities of those who cannot or choose not to celebrate Christmas for religious, cultural, or other reasons and for those who experience Christmas alone or as work in paid and unpaid capacities also need to be explored. Intersectional attributes of identity also influence practice, so research on how people might be differently and multiply positioned with respect to age, health status (including those with food allergies), ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, and socio-economic status is also likely to reveal the power that is inherent in the normative production of Christmas.

This study of a group of older New Zealanders has revealed the interrelationship between and among materials, meanings, and competencies with respect to the practice of hosting at home. Regardless of the extent to which Christmas is celebrated, Christmas matters to older people's socialities, subjectivities, and spatialities. Attention to the normative framings of practices such as 'hosting at home' can illuminate the social expectations and potential geographies of inclusion and exclusion that are manifest through this event—a good reason for considering not just the presents but the presence of Christmas for diverse peoples and places.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

A low risk ethics application was submitted to the Massey Human Ethics committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Participants did not consent to have their data shared. Consequently, data for this paper are not available due to ethical and privacy considerations.

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