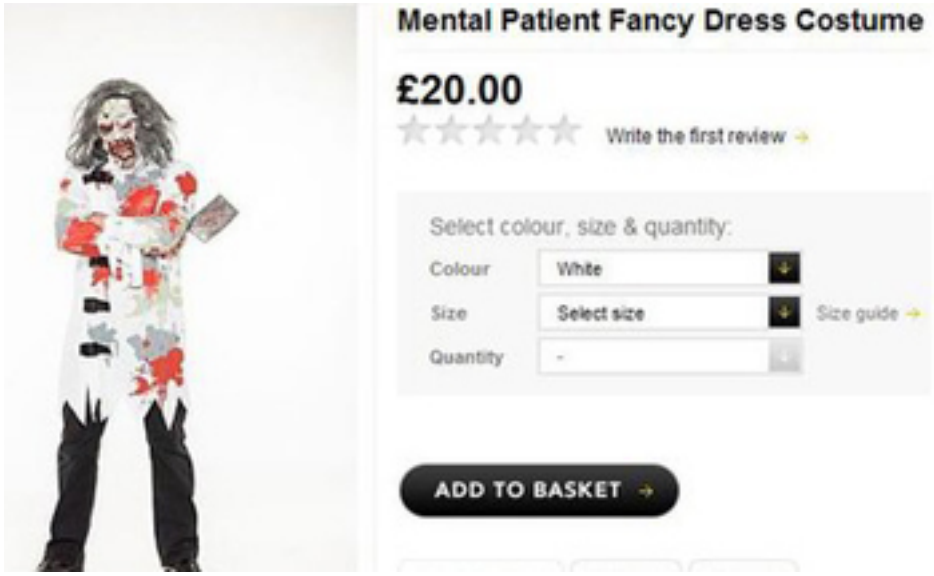

Protecting us from fancy dress

by Simon Belt

The BBC reported:

Supermarket chains Tesco and Asda have withdrawn two Halloween outfits after they were criticised for stigmatising people with mental health issues. Asda dropped its "mental patient fancy dress costume", and Tesco later withdrew its "psycho ward" outfit.
Both stores apologised for any offence caused and agreed to make donations to the mental health charity, Mind.

Last week I thought the world really had ***gone mad*** when there was a news story about a ***fancy dress costume***
being withdrawn from sale from two major supermarkets -
Asda
and
Tesco
. I wondered if it was going to be one of those
freakish
cases of someone putting a button from the outfit behind their eyelid causing blindness through an infection, and a relative campaigning for it never to be allowed again. Given the popularity of campaigns around often quite personalised
victim experiences, I was initially relieved this wasn't yet another victim led campaign which I find rather tiring in the media manipulation of victim experience for the emotional news story.

So the story was that a Halloween outfit tagged as a Zombie outfit by Asda was then described in the detail as portraying a ***mental patient*** that will have everyone running away from the wearer of it - **in fear**. Well isn't that the point of Halloween or what it's become as an event at least - to create an image of someone unusually out of control and likely to do something horrific, in our imagination at least? In fact I've organised a ***Murder Mystery Dinner*** on the Halloween theme at New Mills Golf Club and it was sold out 3 months in advance, partly I think because it allows people to relax and socialise in some
adult space
, with delightful food, great actors presenting the clues of the murder and most people will be dressed up in various ghoulish outfits trying to scare each other. Where's the harm in that?

So if people like dressing up, no-one stuck a button behind their eye lid, what was the big deal that hit the news with Asda's outfit? I tuned into Radio 2 to listen to the Jeremy Vine show with **Alastair Campbell** (ex New Labour spin doctor) offer his reasons why it should be removed from sale and **Dave Bowden** from the Battle of Ideas festival committee offer his reasons why the reaction was overblown. I know I'm not a full shilling, a sandwich short of a picnic and not the brightest button, oh there we go with buttons again, but even I thought there's something not quite right about about the explanation. Apparently, using the word mental patient on the description of this fancy dress costume was going to send society back to the dark ages and cause society to think of people with mental health issues as axe wielding monsters and not to be approached by mere mortals. Well so said Mr Spin.

When I was at school I used to pull funny faces and act like a mentalist like kids do, and yes I may have rose tinted spectacles of old age but I don't think there was the slightest connection between play acting being a nutter and how we would respond to people who actual did have mental health problems. Children are childish and that's unlikely to change. As you grow up you gain wider experience of society in all its richness and variety, and through intelligent and meaningful discussions. The monkey see monkey do behaviour of early childhood is transformed through experience, greater responsibility and control of adult life. What must go through the minds of people who think that the description of a Halloween fancy dress costume depicting a mental patient is going to change how society sees people with mental health problems? It beggars belief.

Clearly the notion that the unfortunate wording of a product is going to encourage society to stigmatise those with mental health problems is not sustained for very long. Well not by anyone who wants to empathise with other humans as they have to explain how they are uniquely able to withstand such messages (like anyone reads the packaging before it goes in the bin) whilst the rest of us fall victim to their powerful spell. And whilst those who spout such condescension may be in awe of the responsible position that Asda and Tesco hold in our society, most other people don't hold any regard for them at all, and see them as the same blood sucking capitalists as we all work for.

What does have some purchase though, and is more tricky to negotiate and respond to is the mediating role played by advocates of victims, not usually victims themselves - who generally don't see themselves as passive victims anyway. The winning argument around this ridiculous news item was that of ***offense*** and the ***impact*** such packaging ***must have*** on people with mental health problems or a history of them.

P

aul Farmer, Chief Executive of Mind was reported as saying "This really went way beyond the line of acceptability" in response to the story. Paul may well be a nice chap, I've never met him, but I think that just because he's a no doubt highly paid advocate on the issue of mental health, the notion that he is an arbiter of what's acceptable and what isn't acceptable for me to consume does expose a seriously inflated sense of his own importance.

The scandal that is worth spending some time thinking through is the inflated position of those that know best what's good for the rest of use and parade the victim voices they like and ignore those they don't like. In response to David Bowden's rejection of the censorship involved in policing this product off the shelf, plenty of people who experienced serious mental health issues including being sectioned phoned in to say that they weren't the slightest bit offended and thought there were far more serious issues for society to focus their energies on. Somehow, those voices are ignored - for their own good no doubt, but more seriously because they jeopardise the advocacy model so treasured by the third sector has has grown without any real criticism in society over the last couple of decades.

The charity MIND, which complained that such costumes "fuel" stigma, will receive £25,000 from Asda. Tesco has not said how much it will donate. The £20 Asda outfit included ragged clothing, fake blood, a mask and a fake meat cleaver while Tesco's orange boiler suit came with a plastic jaw restraint and offered to "complete the look" with a machete.

Online retailer Amazon had also advertised the "psycho ward" outfit, but later said the costume was "not available".