

COMMUNICATION OF FEELINGS AND RELATIONSHIP: GREETING CARD BUYING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

As gifts, greeting cards have no apparent economic or functional value. This study examines empirically greeting card usage and

focuses on the role of greeting cards in building and sustaining relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Interest in the topic of gift giving and the nature and implications of gifts to the giver, the recipient and the functions performed by the gift-giving process has grown in recent times. The present view of gift giving based on the above is one of a multi-dimensional phenomenon that at its core is a manipulation of meaning, and an opportunity for a giver to signal his/her perception of both the giver and the receiver (Wolfenbarger 1990). This viewpoint is consistent with the more general theory of goods as extensions of our personal selves (Belk 1988).

Few industries in the consumer market have seen the growth and diversification as the greeting card business (Roach 1994). While in the past culturally-prescribed events dominated greeting card-giving, there is now an increasing use of non-occasion cards. Hallmark's Just How I Feel line has tripled in the last 10 years and the growth is expected to continue (Roach 1994). Writing about the new segments of greeting cards, Wandycz (1994) points out that "...many happy returns" is out. Solving problems, resolving conflicts is in." (p. 88).

This study attempts to address the following questions: What types of cards do givers select and for whom? How do card givers categorize the cards? How do givers categorize their recipients? Little empirical research or theoretical framework exists to assist in investigating the purchase and giving of greeting cards, especially as it differs from the more general gift giving process (Cacioppo and Andersen 1981; Kunz and Woolcott 1976; Pappson 1986; Roach 1994; Rucker *et al.* 1991;

Wandycz 1994). The contributions of this research therefore are threefold. First we present empirical findings on how the recipients of cards are perceived; outlining the structure of relationships that givers perceive. Second we present findings on the categorization of the message component of cards. Finally, we propose tentative relationships between the type of message and the category of recipient.

GREETING CARDS

Greeting cards primarily serve a single function - personal communication. While cards continue to convey messages of love, affection, remembrance, congratulations, thanks and sympathy, more cards now are purchased and sent on non-occasions to convey a "feeling of the moment." In almost all instances, the content of the message could be conveyed equally effectively by a written note or better still by the spoken word. Yet, as consumers, we continue to use a store-purchased mass-produced card to convey the same message. It is ironic that while the more recent innovations in the card industry (Make Your Own Cards) focus on making the store purchased cards more "personal," there does not seem to be any threat to the card industry from consumers switching to the most personal means of written communication; hand-written notes. It appears that in the moment when we address and sign it, we seem to transform a card (a product of mass-production) to a unique personal statement.

Analogous to the gift-giving process, with the giving of cards the existing relationship is adjusted to incorporate the gift/card given. An important distinction to be drawn between

greeting cards and gifts relates to the intrinsic physical aspects of the two. Gifts, as Belk (1979) and others have suggested, serve multiple purposes. Some of these are served by the physical aspects of the gift, for example, clothes, money, watches etc. as gifts have a strong functional and in many cases an economic attribute to them. Greeting cards on the other hand rarely if ever serve an economic or functional purpose. Instead the card itself is nothing more than a vehicle for a message, a proxy for the act of communication between the giver and the recipient (Cacioppo and Andersen 1981; Kunz and Woolcott 1976; Papson 1986).

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

An intellectual stream that deals with rational human motivations underlying relationships is the work of Coleman (1988) concerning the concept of Social Capital. In Coleman's terms social capital accompanies every relationship. When individuals are related by birth or when they explore, build or maintain a relationship, they accumulate (or deplete) social capital through their pro (or anti) relationship actions. Social relationships however tenuous or trivial serve as a repository for social capital. The parties to the relationship then through their actions accumulate or make withdrawals of social capital. Our first contention in this paper is that all greeting card giving involve the accumulation (or depletion) of social capital in some form. Both the message contained therein as well as the physical act of sending a card affect the social capital. In all of our relationships including social and familial ties greeting cards are sent with a fundamental motive of contributing, maintaining, or negatively influencing the relationship in some form. We group card-giving situations into three opportunities in relationships.

Relationship Advancement taps into the life-cycle of human relationships which has a beginning, a growth, maturity, and in many cases a decline phase. The length of the phases varies within and across individuals as well as the intensity of each phase. Individuals in a relationship can contribute to the social capital within the relationship at any stage and thus signal their intention to advance the relationship. Understanding that a deposit of social capital can be made into a relationship at any

phase including established relationships (in the maturity phase) card makers have provided offerings for use by grandparents, parents, children, spouses, friends etc.

Coleman (1988) notes that **social norms** serve a useful function of generating social capital within networks and greeting cards contribute to social capital by maintaining social norms. These include sending cards during birthdays, religious events, holidays, thank you (acknowledging a social capital deposit by the other party) etc. In so far as these are prescriptive norms, they sometimes create a feeling of obligation on the parties. In many situations it is often the possibility of a strained or broken relationship resulting from not sending a card where one was expected, that provides the impetus for a card purchase, e.g., the use of "Belated Birthday" cards.

Mark Life-Events is the third opportunity. It arises when the parties to a relationship reach or encounter special life events, e.g., positive milestones such as graduation, weddings, birth of a child, or others such as loss of a spouse or parent, illness etc. While this category may easily be subsumed within the earlier two we believe that it provides an out of the ordinary dimension to a relationship. They capture a deep sharing of emotions and often take place in the private domain.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSES

The subjects were students (sample size of 200 comprised of 37% men and 63% women respondents) at a midwestern university situated in a campus town. Respondents appeared to be regular buyers of cards (about 70% of them bought 1-3 cards, 14% bought 4-7 cards, and another 6% bought more than 8 cards per month). Data was collected using a self administered questionnaire administered in a face to face encounter.

Our first task was to understand the underlying structure or constructs behind the card buying behavior for which we used a principal component analyses procedure (Table 1). The occasions captured or message conveyed seem to be determined by four factors. The first factor seems to capture the notion of *relationship advancement* and include messages such as 'missing you, thinking of you, friendship, love, keep in touch, and support'. The second

TABLE 1
Principal Component Analyses: All Respondents Relationship Management
Activity as Reflected by the Type of Cards Bought^a

	Relationship Advancement	Empathy	Social Norm	Relational Achievement
Missing you	0.784			
Thinking of you	0.783			
Friendship	0.746		0.363	
Love	0.688			0.382
Keep in Touch	0.658			
Support	0.575	0.425		
Sympathy		0.710		
New Baby		0.619		0.361
Special occasion		0.590		
Good-bye	0.413	0.536		
Birthday			0.679	
Thank-you			0.628	
Congratulation			0.461	0.582
Get well		0.527	0.574	
Anniversary				0.824
Weddings		0.511		0.557
% Variance Explained:	30.2	13.1	7.7	6.8
Reliability (Alpha):	0.828	0.643	0.662	0.572

^aQ. What type of cards do you purchase most?
Never (0) ----- (10) Most Frequently

factor deals with emotions such as 'sympathy, new baby, special occasions, and good bye'. These seem to capture the notion of *empathy* and emotional support in times of need and important life events. The third factor deals with 'birthdays, thank-you, congratulations, and get well'. These seem to be driven by the notion of *social etiquette or norm*, and is the right thing to do. These activities do not necessarily add significantly to the social capital, however an absence of these activities might result in a reduction of social capital. And finally, the fourth factor captures the notion of *relationship achievement* (anniversaries and weddings) which may be a result of our admiration for people who are able to take the entire process of relationship from its formation to its *final permanence stage*. Our sample respondents appeared to treat this as a separate category different from just another social norm.

Factor structure for the recipients of the cards (based on the frequency of cards bought

for these relations) are presented in [Table 2](#). We find that the relations coalesce into three groups. The first group includes relations such as an aunt/uncle, grand parents, and sister/brother. In addition niece/nephew, and parents also split load on this factor. Clearly, the only thing that is common amongst these relations is that they are all *relations from past* or inherited because of birth. The second factor includes relations such as daughter/son, in-laws, husband/wife, and niece/nephew and seem to be capturing the notion of *future relations*. The third factor includes friend, room mate, parents, and boy/girl friend and encompasses the notion of *present relations*. However, on closer scrutiny and revisiting with a few students we found that boy/girl friend is a more complex relation (in their context) than friend or room mate and is at a different level from parents. It is like nothing else in the present, it holds tentative promise for future, does not have the certainty of a husband/wife relationship, and yet it exists in our here and

TABLE 2
Principal Component Analyses: All Respondents Relative
Importance of a Relationship as Reflected by
Frequency of Communication Through Cards^a

Relationship	from Past	into Future	of Present
Aunt/Uncle	0.771		
Grand Parents	0.737		
Sister/Brother	0.522		0.447
Daughter/Son		0.717	
In-Laws		0.711	
Husband/Wife		0.705	
Niece/Nephew	0.379	0.461	
Friend			0.752
Room Mate		0.630	
Parents	0.447		0.532
Boy/Girl Friend	-0.460		0.507
% Variance Explained:	25.0	16.6	10.8 (52.4)
Reliability (Alpha):	0.624	0.593	0.488/0.595 ^b

^aQ. How often do you buy cards for these ...?

Never (0) ----- (10) Most Frequently

^bwithout Boy/Girl Friend

now. Removing the boy/girl friend from the Relations of the Present improved the alpha score from 0.488 to 0.595. Consequently we decided to treat *boy/girl friend* separately.

We used a structural equation method (Table 3) for examining the relationships between these constructs (relationship advancement, empathy, social etiquette, relational achievement, relation of past, present and future). The λ s are all significant, but the overall fit indices is at best marginal. However, given the exploratory nature of this study we chose to rely on the correlation estimates for understanding the relationship, social capital, and card buying behavior.

DISCUSSION

We first discuss the **categorization of the cards** on message content and giving event to understand underlying motivations. We had implicitly hypothesized that greeting cards would be grouped into three categories. Results supported the three group categorization along with a fourth category that related to marking wedding and other anniversaries. The first category capturing Relationship Advance-

ment explained the greatest amount of variance. This may well be the result of using a student population. In general most college students are spending their first sustained period of time away from home and are passing through a phase of discovering, exploring and building relationships. Relationship management is often uppermost in their minds and accordingly shows up in this study with the strongest effects. The Life Events category deals with those situations that mark life events (births, deaths, separations etc.) and represents a situation that calls for an additional input of social capital from those with whom one has relationships. In as much as they are not routine and repetitive (e.g. birthdays, holidays etc.) and not socially prescribed, they offer an opportunity for sharing in a joy or commiserating in times of trouble and are viewed separately as a group. It captures the notion of deep sharing of emotions. We call it Empathy. The Social Norms card giving situations such as birthdays and holidays represent a routine social capital-deposit event. Indeed these events work both ways. Social norms represent expectations within relationships that on such events a deposit of social capital will be made by the parties and while such cards may

TABLE 3
Relationships and Their Association with
the Type Feeling Communicated

		X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8
Relationship:									
From Past	(X1)	(0.63)							
To Future	(X2)	0.33	(0.59)						
Present	(X3)	0.62	0.10	(0.59)					
Boy/Girl Friend	(X4)	-0.15	-0.22	0.10	(NA)				
Communication:									
Reaching Out	(X5)	0.15	-0.10	0.63	0.36	(0.83)			
Empathy	(X6)	0.35	0.46	0.35	-0.00	0.48	(0.64)		
Social Norm	(X7)	0.48	0.07	0.48	0.01	0.43	0.69	(0.66)	
Relational Achievement	(X8)	0.51	0.48	0.38	-0.01	0.27	0.73	0.72	(0.57)

- * The correlations between the latent constructs were generated by using a eight factor structural equation model (GFI=0.81, AGFI=0.76; Bentler's CFI=0.76, Bentler and Bonnett's NFI=0.65).
- * The RMSR is relatively high and the Chi-square is insignificant due to the larger scale range and sample size (Bollen 1989, pp 257-269).
- * The figures in parentheses are alpha estimates.
- * The figures in bold are the numbers of interest discussed in this study.

* We would like to acknowledge the contribution made by Jeff Post, Jessica Foner, Amy Haas, and Amy Bower who worked on this project as part of their Marketing Research class.

work more towards maintaining relations, the absence of a deposit of social capital at the prescribed time may have a stronger influence on the relationship, in the negative direction.

The fourth category include weddings and anniversaries may seem to be part of social etiquette. However, an alternative reasoning for the two emerging as a separate factor could be the feeling of admiration towards lasting marriages. We feel that this fourth factor captures the notion of Achievement in Relationship. To that extent it marks happy and joyous life events.

Next we address how **recipients (relationships) were categorized and prioritized**. Using the frequency of cards purchased for the recipients as a surrogate for relationship prioritization, the recipients were categorized into three groups. The categorization appears to be based upon the location of the relationship in

the time line of the subjects's lives. We have labeled them as follows:

Relationships from the past included uncles/aunts, grandparents and siblings. These represent in most cases inherited relationships (as opposed to self-chosen) and subjects may have been participating in such relationships for some time now. The participants roles in the relationships are often well-defined and the occasion and opportunities for deposit of social capital from the parties is well-structured. Other than siblings, these relationships in most instances do not represent the primary relationships in our society.

Relationships of the present and near future includes present friends, room mates and parents. These relations represent the present group of individuals with whom subjects are actively involved with in relationships. It is interesting to note that boy/girl friend do not

fall into this group, but form a separate category of their own. We believe this may have to do with the structure, and comfort and involvement level of the participants in these relationships. Friends and parents represent students's first line of relationships where their roles are clear, the relationship is often one of comfort and deposit of social capital is into a well-structured relationship. With boy/girl friends the situation is likely to be different. There is a great deal of uncertainty, the amount, occasion and response to a deposit of social capital is a matter of serious thought and parties in such relationships are operating at a heightened level of sensitivity.

Relationships with a long-term or future perspective includes children, spouses and in-laws. In the case of children and spouses these represent relationships that one potentially sees as extending into the future. With a little introspection it is also possible to see how in-laws fit into this group. While the negative stereotype of an in-laws continues to be prevalent in our society, maintenance of a healthy relationship with in-laws is often an integral part of maintaining a healthy relationship with one's spouse. In other words the deposit of social capital into one's relationship with in-laws provides a bonus deposit of social capital into relation with one's spouse. As in some of the other cases this also works in the reverse direction. A strong negative relationship with in-laws is likely to deplete the social capital built into the relationship with one's spouse.

Finally, we examine the **association between the kinds of cards sent and the relationship with recipients**. The analysis of association between the groups of cards as categorized by subjects and their recipient groups revealed some interesting findings. First it was found that the strongest associations were between use of relationship advancement cards and relationships of the present. The relationships of the present (other than one's parents) represent self-selected acquired relationships that have had only a brief existence thus far. These need nurturing and input. Relationship advancement cards also related positively with boy/girl friend which also require nurturing. However, this correlation is not as strong as with relationship of present. This could be because boy/girl friend relationships tend to be complex and private, and may require a more private display of caring and reaching out.

Both empathy and relational achievement types of cards correlated equally strongly with the three relationships of past, present and future. Special, happy, sad and moving events or experiences do not exclusively fall in the domain of any one relational group. An aunt/uncle is as likely to fall ill or celebrate an anniversary as a friend or an in-law.

Of the three relational groups, the past and the present oriented groups related strongly with social norm types of cards. A plausible explanation could be that these relationships need input which are more maintenance in orientation as against investment in orientation for the other two groups which are more futuristic, especially for our sample respondents.

This exploratory study has raised more questions than provided answers for and we are glad that it is so. For without these we would not be able to pursue this stream of research any further. Future research should examine the associations between cards and the recipient relations from a cause and effect perspective. It would also be interesting to see if other products purchases are also determined by the nature of our relationships. However, the most urgent need is to expand this study to include other types of cards such as Christmas, Easter, etc. and validate the conceptual framework using a non-student sample.

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