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Authors	West, Emily
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Understanding Authenticity in Commercial Sentiment: The Greeting Card as Emotional Commodity

Emily West

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There's something very insincere about these greeting cards we send back and forth to each other all the time. They're like these little one-dollar folded paper emotional prostitutes, aren't they? "I don't know what my feelings are, so I'll just pay some total stranger a buck to make up this little Hallmark hooker to do the job for me. So I can go, 'Yeah, I didn't write this, but whatever they wrote, I think the same thing.'" Wouldn't it be better if we just had one card that covered every occasion for everybody in one shot? Just "Happy Birthday, Merry Christmas, Happy Anniversary, Congratulations, It's a Boy and Our Deepest Sympathies. Signed, the whole office."

(Opening Monologue from Seinfeld episode, "The Pledge Drive," Gammill and Pross 1994)

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Jerry Seinfeld's rant about greeting cards puts a little more baldly what many of us may have thought or said about greeting cards. Paying money for a mass-produced expression of sentiment that is supposed to represent our feelings makes many people uncomfortable, and attracts plenty of flak in the entertainment media and popular press. Whether on sitcoms, in standup routines,

comic strips, TV commercials, or the obligatory lifestyle features and opinion pieces that appear in newspapers and magazines before every major card-sending holiday, there is a good deal of cultural uncertainty expressed about the authenticity of the greeting card as a form of communication. It's telling that Seinfeld compares buying a greeting card with paying for sex, as it is the intrusion of commerce into intimacy that bothers many of us about greeting cards. At least in American culture, the authenticity of greeting cards remains uncertain, as they so clearly lie on or near the "commodity frontier" that Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003:30) described, one of the "activities [that] seem...too personal to pay for."

What could be a more quintessential emotional commodity, or "emodity" as coined by Illouz, than the greeting card? Perhaps no other brand, at least in the United States, is as associated with emotion than Hallmark, estimated to control 44% of the greeting card market, including both paper and e-cards (Turk 2014). The core promise of Hallmark's brand is to deliver reliable and effective emotional products to use in interpersonal communication, most often for people with whom we are already close. And yet, the propriety of relying on the market to communicate personal emotions is in question. When we use a greeting card to communicate emotion, are we taking a shortcut, an easy way out? Are we becoming deskilled in the practice of connecting with others, or expressing our feelings with words? Are we allowing the market to intrude ever more into a "sacred sphere" of personality and intimate life? In other words, are greeting cards – or commodified sentiment - a threat to the authenticity of emotion?

These questions prompted me to undertake a project about authenticity in greeting card communication, as understood by both consumers and producers of cards. As an "ethnography of

authenticity” (Illouz, Introduction to this volume: 9), this mostly interview-based research produced insights into the space where emotion and the market meet, producing commodities. To be sure, understanding and opinion about the authenticity of greeting cards vary, particularly, I and others have found, depending on the cultural capital of consumers (Illouz 1997; Spaulding 1981/1958; West 2010a, 2010b). The notion that greeting cards are inauthentic because they are a form of communication mediated by an item produced for the mass market, thereby encumbering the expression of an individual’s interiority, is not a universally-held view, and indeed, much more likely to be found amongst people with more formal education. In contrast, from my interviews a logic emerged that makes some sense of why so many people look to the market to help them express emotions to loved ones. Communicating emotion involves personal risk: how to do it and whether it will be well received or reciprocated is always at least somewhat uncertain. While contemporary ideologies of personal authenticity would suggest that in such a situation we should ‘look down deep into ourselves’ in order to decide how to connect emotionally, in practice people look outside of themselves, to the symbolic resources of the public sphere. How do other people express emotion? What has worked in the past? What will be socially recognized as an expression of caring and connection? In this view, authenticity is a “social virtue,” focused on effective connection and understanding between self and other (Guignon 2004, p.151). Today, and for some time now, when we look to the world around us for such guidance, that world is infused with brands, marketing, and consumer products. The market is now a major, if not the primary, source of advice, resources, and certainty-producing strategies for social connection, including goods covered in this volume, such as music (Schwarz, this volume) and self-help and coaching services provided by the positive psychology industries (Shachak, this volume and Cabanas, this volume).

The virtue of greeting cards in particular, for this risk and uncertainty-management scenario, is their status as consumer objects (Illouz, Introduction to this volume). Their tangibility brings concreteness and ambiguity-reduction to communicative exchange that reinforces the declarative quality of greeting card sentiment. Greeting cards are a paradigmatic case for considering what happens when commodities promise to “fix” emotions, both in the sense of presenting a solution to a communication problem, and in the sense of capturing a feeling in a tangible object.

The way people use greeting cards to navigate uncertain emotional waters speaks to another theme of this volume: the relationship between emotion and rationality. The emotions expressed in and through cards are not generally of the hedonistic variety. They are part and parcel of relationship work – usually relationship maintenance, and more rarely, transformation. Most often, they invoke a declaration and therefore renewal of existing emotional connections. The leading card-sending occasions in the United States are Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, and Birthdays, with the dominant emotions expressed being love, friendship, and appreciation (Greeting Card Association 2014). The most emotional of these occasions are Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day, and both are big business according to industry sources. About 132 million valentines are purchased overall in the US for Valentine’s Day, not including boxed valentines designed for children (Greeting Card Association 2014b; Hallmark 2015a). Similarly, for Mother’s Day, 122 million cards are typically purchased in the US (Hallmark 2015b). For Valentine’s Day, this means sales of about a billion dollars just on cards, compared to total spending of about 19 billion dollars for the holiday (Greeting Card Association 2014b).

Broadly speaking, greeting card sentiments signal recognition of the specialness of the recipient, and the importance of the recipient to the sender in his or her life. The feelings may be genuine, but those feelings are hard to separate from a rational assessment of one's relationships, and whether or how effort should be expended to maintain those relationships. In that sense greeting cards are part of the "rationalization of emotion management" that Schwarz suggests characterize people's uses of music (Ch.3, this volume), or the "emotional utilitarianism" that Shachak (this volume) recognizes in the techniques that positive psychology offers. This reflects a broader rationalization of emotion that Illouz (2007) has argued is emblematic of "emotional capitalism," and that so often goes hand-in-hand with processes of commodification. Greeting card selections may require a sober assessment of how a recipient will receive a given message, an exercise requiring equal parts cognition and emotional intelligence. Emotions are part of relationships, but those relationships are not expressions of pure emotion, nor are the efforts that go into creating and maintaining those relationships. As scholars such as Hochschild (2003), Di Leonardo (1987), and Miller (1998) have convincingly demonstrated, relationships and the emotions that sustain them require (often gendered) work.

As much as the public, tangible, and even commercial nature of greeting card sentiment can contribute a sense of security to emotional communication, these same characteristics are at the heart of why greeting cards are often viewed as inauthentic. People who use and make cards construct their understanding of authentic emotional communication by negotiating between two seemingly contradictory beliefs: that each individual is unique, and yet emotions and the ways we communicate them are socially shared, even universal. In fact, an industry term that guides the production of sentiment is "universal specificity" (Bloomberg Businessweek 2014; West 2008).

The emotional products of consumer culture, and greeting cards in particular, count on the utility of emotional scripts. And yet, it is the very scriptedness of cards that inevitably raises questions about their authenticity that must be constantly worked on and resolved, moment to moment, by both producers and users.

Beyond the scriptedness of any given card, there are other questions to raise about how the greeting card industry contributes to a particular emotion regime (Reddy 2001). Defined as socially privileged guidelines for expressing emotion, William Reddy's concept of emotion regime draws attention to how historically and socially contingent emotional styles are linked with dominant power interests. The greeting card industry is highly concentrated – in the United States about 65% of the greeting card market is controlled by two companies, Hallmark and American Greetings (Turk 2014). This profit-driven industry has a tremendous platform for shaping and reinforcing prevailing ideologies of emotion. The ubiquity of card practices suggests that they have been somewhat successful in making card-sending a “socially compulsory gesture” even in the digital age, at least for some occasions (Unity Marketing 2005; see also Fottrell 2013). Despite notable shifts in gender politics, it is remarkable how gendered greeting card use remains, with at least 80% of card purchases still made by women (GCA 2014; West 2009). The industry as a whole does little to contradict the notion that sending cards is part of the gendered work of home and family. Finally, the industry has a vested interest in convincing consumers that they can depend on the market to help them communicate emotion, sometimes not so subtly undermining consumers' own abilities to express themselves. The take-home message is that the purchase of carefully selected commodities is the most effective way to communicate caring. The intellectual

challenge remains how to integrate these kinds of critiques about the meta-communication of greeting cards as a cultural form with the sense- and culture-making of card users.

This brings us to the normativity question raised by Illouz (Introduction to this volume). As analysts and interpreters of culture, on what basis do we challenge some people's stated preference, often accompanied by compelling stories and impassioned testimonials, for the affective magic wrought by pre-printed sentiments on lovingly selected greeting cards? Pursuing an ethnography of authenticity brings us up close to the lived experience we seek to understand. Although it may not be strictly possible to experience emotions second-hand, people's actions and accounts testify to the emotional effectivity of their encounters with these commodities, as well as the ways in which they sometimes fail. Somehow we must describe and honor their experiences while simultaneously holding in view the broader emotion regime that shapes the possibilities for these experiences to begin with.

A brief word about the study

My reflections on greeting cards as emotional commodities draw on research with North American producers and consumers of greeting cards, conducted between 2002 and 2005. The primary forms of data were 50 interviews with greeting card consumers, including mostly women but some men, ranging in age from eighteen to their eighties, concentrated mostly in the Northeast United States. I also interviewed seventeen people who work in the greeting card industry, and spent time at Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, Missouri. I attended eight Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour events in three states, a public relations initiative taking place at this time in which members of the public had a chance to meet Hallmark creatives, ask them questions, and "share their own card

stories.” In addition, I consulted archival sources about cards and the card industry, followed news and public commentary on the same, attended the National Stationery Show in New York City, and collected many different kinds of greeting cards. Throughout these various forms of data collection my guiding research question was how people understand authenticity (or the lack thereof) in a commercialized form of emotional communication.

The high risk territory of emotional connection

Consumer culture, and advertising in particular, has often been accused of promising emotional rewards through products that can ultimately never be delivered, thereby engineering never-ending demand (e.g. Campbell 1987; Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill 2005). Illouz counters this perspective by arguing that the market does, indeed, commodify emotions (Introduction to this volume). Since emotions are always the result of “completion” or “co-production” by the consumer (Ibid, p.22), then it follows that the emotional outcome of the market exchange remains fundamentally uncertain. Consumer objects and experiences can promote or facilitate a certain emotion, but the desired emotional use value is not guaranteed.

In talking to consumers about why they use cards, I came to understand that most people reject the view that greeting cards are some kind of sure-fire shortcut to communicating emotions to others. They were very clear about what they as consumers had to do to select the right card, complete it, and use it correctly to achieve the desired effect. Certainly some consumers experience the commercial nature of greeting card sentiment as a threat to the possibility of authentic expression of the self. Yet, most of these consumers nevertheless find ways to participate in this “socially compulsory” gesture – sometimes by appropriating greeting card sentiment ironically, or by

choosing cards that emphasize visual design rather than sentiment. That being said, many informants expressed genuine appreciation for how the sentiments in greeting cards assist them with emotional communication. Finding what seem like private thoughts and feelings reflected in the sentiments available in the marketplace can be very affirming, authorizing many people's desire to communicate those feelings. In this chapter I focus primarily on those consumers who do appreciate the utility of greeting card sentiments; elsewhere I have elaborated on how consumers who worry that pre-printed sentiments are an inauthentic expression of emotion nevertheless find ways to buy and send lots of cards (West, 2010a).

Several respondents commented on the positive feelings they experience in "discovering" a pre-printed sentiment that matches their own feelings for a particular person or sending situation. For example Daisy, a clerical worker in her 40s said:

You'll be like, oh my gosh! I mean, if you read the card, you'll be like, that is me! You know or, that sounds just like you....it is amazing how they just put it down and you're like, wooh, I could have said that!

Betty, also a clerical worker in her 50s, said something similar:

...the messages in cards that you buy from the store, it just seems, if I read the words and I feel it, feel something for that person that I'm sending the card [to], I like to pick cards out like that.

Their descriptions of the process of finding the "right" card demonstrate how the initial emotional experience that cards produce takes place in the store, as the buyer reads sentiments as they shop for cards.

People commented that a card sentiment can communicate how much thought the sender put into the relationship and the occasion when picking it out. Of course, this perspective is more likely to be expressed by people *who themselves* put a great deal of effort into picking the ‘right’ card. For example when Salma, a working mother of three in her 20s, explains why she appreciates receiving cards, she assumes that others put as much effort into picking out cards as she does. She explains:

You know, they actually looked in a store and picked out a card, you know, cause you can’t just go in a store and pick out one. You know, usually I have like five in my hand before I decide, okay, I’m going to get this one, so I think that’s why [a card means more than a written note or other form of communication].

My respondents often talked about the effort that goes into finding the perfect card in quite moral terms, as something that you are supposed to do to be a good person and do right by others. Heather, a woman in her thirties who was one of the most dedicated greeting card senders I spoke with, said “I would, you know, go through, I might look at twenty cards until I find the right one. Some people just don’t care. They’ll run in and grab anything, and I don’t, I don’t buy my cards that way.” Cindy, a retired real estate agent, seemed to feel quite strongly about the effort that should go into picking out cards. She said:

You just have to have patience and you have to care about what you’re doing. It isn’t just running in and grabbing any card and sending it. The idea of sending a card doesn’t mean anything if you don’t convey a message, how you feel about the person you’re sending it to.

Among my respondents, those who pride themselves on finding the *right* card to send, particularly those who try to find a pre-printed sentiment that captures what they would like to say, tend to assume that others do the same.

College student Lesley commented on the excitement she feels upon finding a pre-printed card sentiment that captures her feelings, but accompanied this thought with the caveat that, “It’s not because I don’t want to think for myself, I don’t want to say it,” thereby acknowledging the cultural critique of cards as somehow displacing an authentic communication of sentiment. Other respondents were more comfortable admitting that card sentiments sometimes helped them express feelings they are unable or nervous to put into writing themselves. Some interviewees reported either that they find it difficult to express themselves through the written word in general, or that in particular for emotional messages they looked to card sentiments to find the “right words.” These might be difficult emotions, such as sympathy at a time of loss, or expressions of love and attachment to the most important people in their lives. Indeed, the greeting card industry reinforces the notion that it can be hard to express ourselves by regularly producing sentiments known as “More than Words can Say” or “Seldom Say,” which explicitly reference the difficulty the sender has putting his or her feelings into words.

While this trope is common across sending situations for cards, it is particularly pronounced in cards designed for men to send to women. A typical example of this from Hallmark reads “For my Wife – I never have been good about telling you ‘I love you’ enough or complimenting you as much as I should...but I hope somehow you know how glad I am to be your husband and that I love you more than anything in the world. Happy Birthday.” Card sentiments like this one position themselves as the vehicles by which inexpressive men are able to communicate emotionally to their loved ones. Card texts can be conceptualized as a publicly sanctioned set of instructions on how to communicate emotion. When these scripts invoke a gendered communication gap, they

ultimately re-inscribe it. Greeting card industry marketing tends to reinforce the idea that men and women communicate very differently, but that greeting cards are the perfect solution to this communication gap (West 2009). This is especially true for card-sending occasions that men are expected to participate in but without the assistance of their wives – Valentine’s Day in particular. While overall only 15-20% of cards are purchased by men, the figure rises to 45% for Valentine’s Day (Greeting Card Association 2014b). Hallmark and American Greetings create larger cards at higher price points for men to buy on Valentine’s Day and similar occasions, reasoning that because they feel anxious about what kind of card is expected, they will gravitate towards more expensive-looking cards (American Greetings Corporation 2000).

Ideally a greeting card sender recognizes his or her emotion reflected in the card in the store, selects and completes the card, and then the card effectively conveys the emotion to the recipient. However, it’s no surprise that this outcome is far from guaranteed. The asymmetry of emotional experience that can occur between sender and recipient was humorously portrayed in an American television commercial for Budweiser beer in the early 2000s. The ad cuts back and forth between a young woman carefully looking at cards in a store, reading the sentiments, and a young man picking up a six-pack of beer at a different store. At the register, he sees a greeting card display and quickly grabs a card, hardly looking at it. Then the ad cuts to the couple at dinner, drinking their beer, presumably celebrating a special occasion. They each open their cards, and the woman almost cries with emotion at the card sentiment that her boyfriend had so carelessly selected for her. Although an ad for beer, this TV commercial taps into the cultural narrative that cards are women’s work and men cannot be expected to express emotion effectively, demonstrating what a dominant trope this is across consumer culture.

However, the ad inverts the likely emotional effects of cards. In fact, my respondents argued that how *they* feel when picking out a sentiment is the more reliable emotional experience that cards produce. People are aware that the desired emotional effect of the card they send remains uncertain, particularly in sending situations where difficulties in communication or emotional connection already exist. One respondent, Shannon, pointed to the cards she receives from her father which seem to reflect his tastes and not take hers into account. The failure of the card to achieve emotional connection in this case is emblematic of a larger problem in their relationship. This example recalls another respondent, Tanya, who knows that her mother-in-law prefers cards with extended effusive sentiments because that's the kind she gives. But because Tanya isn't comfortable with using pre-printed sentiments to express herself, she sticks with the blank art cards that she feels represent her best, knowing that her mother-in-law will likely not appreciate them the way she does. In contrast, Jane has several elderly relatives to whom she regularly sends cards that she describes as "flowery" – in terms of both design and sentiment - not the kinds of cards she would like to receive, or that even resonate with her emotionally, except to the extent that they signify her desire to maintain her connections with her aging aunts.

Greeting cards are no emotional quick fix. Even if they touch the sender's heartstrings, they may fall flat at their destination. Or the sender may need to compromise finding something that represents her taste and feelings in order to find a card that will have the desired emotional effect. Within a broader belief that greeting cards are useful for emotional communication, consumers recognize the contingencies involved in their emotional effectivity. They draw attention to the emotional work and effort that they as a sender must carry out in order for the correct card to be

identified for a given relationship or occasion. Whether this is merely a rhetorical move to distance themselves from being mere cultural dupes of commercial sentiment, or whether it's an accurate representation of this cultural practice is hard to determine once and for all. But awareness of ways that greeting cards can fail as emodities bolsters the notion that greeting cards offer a strategy for emotional connection, but one that still relies on consumer effort and execution.

For many consumers, just the right greeting card sentiment has a special ability to capture their feelings and convey them to others that their own words might never have. The existence of that sentiment in the marketplace affirms their feelings and the propriety of communicating them. As Berlant (2008) has argued, an attachment to conventionality should not be read merely as an attachment to the constraints of social order, but as an expression of desire for social belonging, which in turn implies its lack. The public, commercial nature of the card produces a sense of security in the inherently risky activity of emotional communication. This sense of authorization can function for both senders and recipients of cards, as suggested by the testimony of a woman who “felt less alone” after receiving a Hallmark card specifically for someone who has had a miscarriage (Radio-Times 2013). Realizing that this event happens often enough for Hallmark to make a card for it made it easier for her to imagine the community of women who have shared her difficult experience.

Even for those consumers who feel confident in their own ability to express emotion through language, many find something useful about the more formal and declarative communicative style of cards. Consider how two of my respondents explained the value they find in greeting card sentiments (West, 2010b). Victoria said:

someone you see every day, you're not going to tell them, I really respect you, I admire you as a person, you never do that. And a card, it's like a special occasion, you can actually tell them, hey, I really, you know, I like you (laughing).

Here is a similar thought from Sue:

It's an event, and it's an opportunity for acknowledgement. So I treat it as such, and I make sure that I acknowledge them....And it's different than off the cuff. Off the cuff can be good but, you know, rehearsed is sometimes a little better.

The sense of "rehearsed" that Sue describes applies to the appropriation of a pre-printed sentiment, but also to how greeting cards require and then communicate a sender's forethought to a recipient. These greeting card users raise an important characteristic of emodities in general, and greeting cards in particular: their performativity.

Greeting cards as consumer objects: communicating time

The commercial nature of greeting card sentiment lends it a publicness, and that publicness has value to many consumers even for private, emotional communication. As Sue and Victoria argued, commercial sentiments bring a sense of occasion and preparation, and therefore a sense of commitment, to emotional communication. The mass-produced nature of cards might be what makes them such a target for accusations of inauthenticity, but their status as consumer objects is key to why many people recognize greeting cards as genuine expressions of feeling (Illouz, Introduction to this volume). Consider the comment of Pat, a retired teacher. Pat is generally speaking not a fan of greeting card sentiment, preferring to select cards on the basis of their design. However, she said:

Even if there's a written message, somebody else's written message, it shows that you've cared enough to buy it, to address it, and to mail it! And those are three different steps, so it's supportive of whatever you're trying to convey.

Pat's comment, echoed by many others in my study, highlights how the labor of consumption – the time and effort of selecting goods in the marketplace, and then transforming them into possessions – can function as a form of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Miller 1998).

People's understanding of how cards work on this most basic level recalls John Durham Peters' (1999:270) observation of why performance often communicates more powerfully than language alone:

Touch and time, the two nonreproducible things we can share, are our only guarantees of sincerity. To echo Robert Merton, the only refuge we have against communication fraud is the propaganda of the deed. No profession of love is as convincing as a lifetime of fidelity.

Greeting cards, especially the paper variety rather than electronic greetings, function largely through this “propaganda of the deed.” They allow consumers to not just “inform” the recipient about their feelings, but “perform” them (Rothenbuhler 1998:23). While critics of greeting cards deride them as cheap and easy, most users view the effort involved in finding just the right card, in the right store, writing the right message, and delivering (or even better, mailing) it to be an effective way of demonstrating that they were thinking of the recipient. Indeed, the very asynchronicity and cumbersomeness of cards - especially now with so many options for instantaneous, convenient communication – is what makes them emotionally effective in the eyes of many. Miss Manners has advised that a good rule of thumb is “The more emotional the content,

the more cumbersome should be the means of conveying it” (Martin 1997:22), and in an age of instantaneous digital communication, the greeting card has never looked so cumbersome. In a cultural context where lives are understood to be busy and time scarce, even taking the time to select a card carries a premium. While at one time, cards were more likely to be compared unfavorably to handwritten letters, which for some represent more time and effort than a store-bought card, today cards are more likely to be compared to a phone call, email, or Facebook post. Even in 1926, the Greeting Card Association (the American trade association for this industry) presented letter writing as a quaint custom of a past era:

In the days of famous letter-writers like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the keeping up of a correspondence was a serious matter, for each letter had to be, as it were, an essay in friendliness. But nowadays, with more opportunity for personal association and less time that can be devoted to the writing desk, we must depend more and more upon outside help in keeping up our correspondence. (GCA 1926:7)

The trade association highlighted the greeting card’s time saving function but also reassured consumers that they were an appropriate substitute for handwritten letters, saying “Convenience and beauty alike commend them to busy and yet friendly folk” (Ibid:8). The case of greeting cards highlights the importance of the category of “time” in a consumer capitalist society. Consumer objects that signify time spent can be powerful statements of caring and connection in a culture where time is always experienced as a scarce resource, even by the retired and unemployed as Daniel Miller (1998) found in his ethnographic study of shopping in London.

Although from an objective standpoint greeting cards do seem like time-savers relative to handwritten notes or letters, or even compared to phone calls that can be hard to coordinate and

may become protracted, from a subjective standpoint *most* consumers see them as requiring a significant amount of time and effort. My respondents pointed to the multiple steps in sending a card - leaving the house, visiting shops, going through cards to find the best one, writing in the card, addressing it, stamping it, and mailing it – as crucial to endowing the card with emotional significance.

Hallmark's advertising campaign from the early 2000s capitalized on this aspect of greeting card communication, using the tagline: "They'll never forget you remembered." The television commercials depicted recipients opening cards with surprise and delight, and the tagline emphasized how the card represents the sender thinking of and remembering the recipient at a previous time and place. Hallmark's advertising campaign resonates with what people say about why they appreciate receiving cards. My interview respondents as well as many fans who attended Hallmark Writers on Tour spoke about how cards make them feel "remembered" and "thought of," and how they appreciate receiving cards from friends and family even when they don't particularly like the card itself, because it shows the sender was thinking of them. As college student Jess puts it, when comparing cards with the phone or email, "I guess it's the time issue, that it requires. And if someone sent you a card, and it arrives on time, then presumably they were thinking about this and it just shows more thought, I guess." Similarly Salma, quoted earlier, said: "Cause anybody could just write a note, or pick up the phone. It takes effort to go out and put a stamp on it and send it." According to these responses and many others from people of different ages and backgrounds, what is appreciated is taking valuable "time out" and devoting it solely to the recipient.

One of my respondents reported that she couldn't bring herself to buy cards in a drugstore (where they are typically sold in the United States) because, ironically, it was *too* convenient, and so she would feel she had not put enough time into the purchase and therefore it would no longer be a valid sign of caring. For her, the time and effort necessary to show caring through greeting cards involves making a special trip to a greeting card store or gift shop, rather than picking a card up while running other errands. In her mind, shopping for a card to be used in "sacred" interpersonal communication must be kept separate from the contamination of shopping for other, profane everyday items.

The importance of the effort that goes into selecting cards for particular occasions with the recipient in mind was further highlighted by the comments of card stockpilers - people who keep a collection of cards at home to send when they don't have time to go out and make a special trip. Jean, a single professional and graduate student in her late thirties, keeps a stockpile of attractive blank cards at home to use when she wants to drop friends a quick note or a thank you. However, she explains that she would never use one of these blank cards for a specific occasion such as a birthday because she would "feel bad" about sending a card she hadn't clearly shopped for and picked out with their special occasion in mind. Further, if a friend is turning forty she will make sure to get a card that is captioned for a fortieth birthday. The industry obliges consumers who have this concern by producing cards with quite specific captions, such as "To My Aunt on Passover," "Wedding for Mother and New Stepfather," or "Congratulations on Getting Your Driver's License." However, despite the fairly extensive specificity of the available captions (at least in larger card stores), one of the most frequent complaints that I have heard from consumers about the greeting card industry is not being able to find the exact caption or sentiment for a

particular sending situation. Certainly the lack of cards from Hallmark specifically suited for a gay or lesbian wedding was a point of contention until they started to explicitly serve this market in 2008 (Associated Press 2008). Although Hallmark had previously produced cards that were consciously designed to be ‘sendable’ for a gay or lesbian wedding or union, mere sendability has never been satisfying for most consumers given greeting cards’ emotional logic. Certainly the callers into WHYY’s Radio-Times for a 2013 show about greeting cards were not interested in cards that would be merely sendable for the situations that they felt were invisible or underserved in the market: cards for the incarcerated, for people who live in nursing homes, and Mother’s Day cards that acknowledge difficult mother-child relationships. Most consumers seek specificity in captions, designs, and sentiments that speak to their identities, cultural experiences, and the precise emotion that they are trying to capture. Indeed, Hallmark increasingly emphasizes that they create cards for a wide range of relationships. For Mother’s Day 2015 they explained that the brand “creates cards for hard-to-find situations such as birthday, foreign language, caregiver, goddaughter and cousin,” and that, “Cards also exist to meet the needs of today’s complex family relationships – stepmother, two moms, partner, former in-laws, dad-as-mom, dad’s wife, birth mother, mother of my child, and anyone who is “like a mother” (Hallmark 2015b).

Rather than finding a reflection of one’s personal experience or feelings in the marketplace to be a threat or something that diminishes one’s originality or specialness, many consumers seek to find their experience and emotions affirmed in the market. Sending a hard-to-find card whose caption or pre-printed text captures something that feels specific about the recipient or sending situation advertises a certain level of time and effort on the part of the sender in the marketplace, recalling Shachak’s argument (this volume) about the “emotional performativity of the market” in shaping

practices of emotion work as well as how value is perceived and measured. Illouz's conceptualization of the emodity foregrounds commodities, like greeting cards, that are designed to be completed by consumers with their own time and emotional labor. Ultimately, the performativity of using the market to express interpersonal feeling may be the most important reason that cards are widely read as representations of caring.

Greeting cards as consumer objects: communicating touch

Paper greeting cards effectively communicate time spent on the recipient, in the marketplace, which has come to serve as a powerful sign of caring. However, if we return to Peters' point about touch also being an ingredient of performative communication (that does not rely on language for its effectivity *or* affectivity), we also need to consider how the tangible card signifies touch between sender and recipient. The traditional ink-on-paper commercial card represents the *actual* physical labor of the sender in procuring, completing, and sending the card, therefore the recipient may feel connected to the sender through their respective touching of the same object. However, cards also frequently suggest work that the sender did *not* do through their design and lettering. The handmade look is often interpreted by consumers as more personal and as communicating caring better than cards that bear less evidence of the hand's work.

One of the cards I used in my interviews prompted some of my respondents to say that it reminded them of the kind of card they would dash into CVS (a large drugstore chain) to buy at the last minute. The card in question was a 99-cent card from Hallmark's "value" Warm Wishes line, although their reaction had less to do with the price than with the rather generic, computer-generated design of cake and presents and fairly non-committal copy inside: "Wishing you the

happiest kind of birthday!” Shannon, a creative professional in her thirties, commented about this card, “I’d pass right over that, it doesn’t seem celebratory enough to me. This is more like one of those cards like, oh I was late, I just stopped in the CVS to grab a card. And this is what I found, it was the last one in the shop.” So in this sense, the card does not effectively communicate time spent in the marketplace, and risks being read as a last-minute gesture. In the same sample of birthday cards I included another Warm Wishes selection with a design that had a hand-painted, watercolor design and copy with a “handwritten” appearance, and this card was often identified as more “thoughtful.” About this second card college student Rebecca said it seemed to indicate “more effort,” whereas the other Warm Wishes card screamed “CVS” to her.

Cards that are handmade, or look handmade, even though they are purchased in the marketplace, bring an aura of caring that makes them extra special, and extra-appreciated when they are received, according to my informants. There are a variety of conventions in greeting card text and imagery that suggest that the card is handmade when, in fact, it is mass-produced. For example, many greeting card texts resemble handwriting, either by using actual handwriting or calligraphy, or by having imperfect fonts that suggest the individuality and idiosyncrasy of handwritten text. While mechanized print announces its disassociation from physicality, handwriting is a “medium of the self” because of its connection to the body (Thornton 1996:xiii). Jaffe (1999:119) writes of this convention, “Handwriting is one of the physical aspects of texts that gives them an ‘aura’ linked to the ‘history of the hands that have touched them.’”

While some respondents explained that they liked cards with a handcrafted or hand-painted look best because they were more like “art,” others said that they liked how it created the impression

that the sender might have actually made it themselves, even when the card was clearly a commercial card and no one would likely be fooled. Several respondents were quite self-reflexive about their responses to these cards, like Emma who said, laughing, “I like the ones that look like you made them, even if you didn’t.” Similarly, responding to the Warm Wishes card with the hand-painted look, homemaker and amateur watercolorist Tina said “It does look like I might have made it by hand. Again, if I wanted to have them think, oh, she spent all this time you know, creating this just for me! Although Hallmark has its claim to fame on the back.” Even though people realized that the cards were mass-produced, they often responded to the handmade “look” of a card, pointing out brushstrokes, attachments, and the look of collage as features that contributed to this aesthetic.

The way that cards communicate the physical touch of the sender can also help us make sense of the fact that the majority of cards sent have very little written in them. I found this in my examination of various archives of saved cards (at the Smithsonian Institution of American History and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania), and this finding has been confirmed by Shank’s (2004) archival research on greeting cards as well as by Hallmark archivist Sharman Robertson. The minimum expectation is to include a salutation and a signature - “e.g. Dear Mom,” followed by the pre-printed sentiment, “Love Shirley” - and indeed most saved cards include just this much written content from the sender. While some of my study participants were very focused on their own written message as the source of the card’s authenticity (generally speaking those with more formal education), the evidence in archives as well as the kinds of sentiment-driven cards that the industry largely produces testify to a smaller amount of handwritten text being the norm. However, if the card communicates emotion and caring by representing the touch and time of the sender

rather than the originality of his or her thoughts, this explains the more succinct approach to card completion as much as, if not more than, the notion that people are unable or unwilling to express themselves through words. It seems that leaving home and making a selection in the marketplace reads as valuable time spent on a loved one that serves as convincing evidence of underlying emotion, more so than other strategies such as taking the time to compose heartfelt messages by hand.

Immaterial sentiment: E-cards

During the time period of my study, digital greeting cards – more commonly known as e-cards or e-greetings – were rising in popularity, a trend that has intensified since. According to industry reports and the trade press, sales of paper cards are on a steady decline due to the new digital alternatives. Although the Greeting Card Association still claims that industry revenues in the US are between \$7 and 8 billion dollars a year (GCA 2014), an independent report from IBISWorld describes a 3.8% annual decline in industry sales from 2009 to 2014, leading to current sales of \$6.1 billion annually (Turk 2014). The major players are scrambling to respond by playing catch-up in the e-card world, which includes not only cards that are sent via email and social media, but using the online space for the customization of cards that consumers can send in either digital or paper form (Franzen 2013). The rise of e-cards is also influencing trends in paper cards. People may be buying fewer paper cards but they are choosing ones that are more embellished, with more expensive-looking materials (New 2013; Thompson 2013). In other words, paper cards have become more gift-like in the context of an explosion in digital communication, especially for occasions when paper cards are still somewhat obligatory, like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day.

How does the immaterial version of the greeting card complicate a communicative logic organized by “touch and time”? With the introduction of electronic greetings, the mass-produced greeting card now has a foil against which it is the morally better way of communicating emotion or messages of connection. From being the suspect “fast and easy gesture,” the paper card now reads as the time-consuming, and therefore more caring option in comparison to an e-card. And certainly card makers and marketers are capitalizing on this sentiment by promoting products that are not just tangible but celebrate this fact, through special papers, pop-ups, attachments, a handmade look, or designs that connote nostalgia for a pre-internet age. By announcing their tangibility these cards remind the recipient that the card has passed through the sender’s own hands. Janet, a professional and graduate student in her forties, explains why she ultimately prefers receiving regular cards to electronic greetings, saying:

I love getting a card that someone has written to me. You know opening that little envelope is like getting a little gift with the surprise of the picture. You get the surprise of the artistry that one doesn’t get with an email. Even the email cards, some of them are trying, but you can’t touch it, or see it later. So I think the tangibility of them is important to me. The tangible, touchable, tactile, visual sense, and the sense of being able to keep it is important to me.

Similarly Sandra, a graduate student in her twenties, explained: “That’s why I really have no interest in email cards. There’s no texture to them, they’re inside the machine, they’re not real.”

While ink-on-paper cards communicate because of how they represent time spent in the marketplace and capture the “aura” of the “hands that touched them” (Jaffe 1999:119), e-cards operate according to a different logic – of timeliness versus time spent, and immediacy versus

forethought. Digital greetings contribute to a broader sense of synchronous experience in online space even among friends and family who are at a distance. This produces intimacy and emotional connection in a different way than the asynchronicity of paper cards, which speak to time and effort on the sender's part that is unknown to the recipient until the card arrives.

E-cards were generally perceived by my respondents as having tenuous moral standing compared to traditional paper cards, mainly because they take less time and effort to send. Even though it is *possible* to spend a great deal of time looking for the perfect e-card (in fact, digital greetings can be even more specific and personalized, because they aren't limited in the same way by economies of scale), generally it was seen as the quick and easy option, especially because you don't even have to leave your home or office to send one. You might be in the virtual marketplace, but it's not quite the same process as transforming a commodity from the physical marketplace into a token of social expression (Miller 1998). In the end, the tangibility of the offline card seems crucial to how it signifies caring to many users, perhaps more so now that e-cards are an option. Homemaker and mother Tina explains this perspective clearly:

I think they're fun. But I guess I've been using regular greeting cards for so long, I kind of feel cheated, it's almost like an afterthought, that someone said, oh my god it's their birthday, let me send them an e-card. Whereas with the other ones they take the time to look for it. Which I know you look for them on these web sites. But, it's just the going out and purchasing, and taking the time to write it or write a personalized message, or put a stamp on it and send it, just seems a little more personalized.

She goes on to say that she feels guilty sending them herself, even though she's conscientious about the selection process, "Because I keep thinking, do they think, like I do, like oh, she didn't

take the time to go out and get me a card, so I'm getting an e-card." Tina struggles with the fact that sending an e-card *can* be a lot of work, but in the end this effort does not count, or is not as obvious to the recipient as the effort of picking out a paper card from a store. While Tina was over 40 at the time of our interview, her attitude was not specific to a certain age bracket among my respondents. Many of my younger, web-savvy respondents felt the same about electronic greeting cards. Amanda, a college student, said she enjoyed sending electronic greetings in high school, but recently hadn't been sending them, saying "...it's not as personal online cause you can do it so easily and it takes two seconds, so why send it when, it takes more effort to go to a store and buy it, so it's more thoughtful of you if you go out and buy it rather than just send an email card."

While a few respondents did argue that the content and intent of a card was more important to them than the medium in which it was delivered, most of my informants did see electronic greeting cards as a somewhat poor substitute for paper cards. The interpretation of the e-card as a last-minute gesture may in fact be accurate as a number of my respondents mentioned that they would normally only send an e-card if they had realized too late that a special occasion was coming. In fact, some early electronic greeting cards were invented under just those circumstances. Susan Polis and Steve Schutz, whose bluemountain.com was one of the first electronic greeting card sites, initially came up with the idea to put together an electronic version of one of their paper Blue Mountain cards for their son who was at college when they realized on the day of his birthday that they had forgotten to mail one (Schutz 2004). The electronic greeting proves that "hey, I remembered!" even if it is sent on the day of an occasion. Those consumers who only use e-cards in this way may tend to assume, when they *receive* an e-card, that it is also a "just-in-time" gesture.

A great deal of evidence points to the performative qualities of the card as an object, animated by the time and effort of the sender, as crucial to how it works as a form of emotional, interpersonal communication. Although finding the right sentiment or image for a card is something that some consumers report putting a great deal of effort into, they almost all agree that just the fact of sending a card has considerable communicative power. The physical and emotional effort that goes into selecting and sending a card is what my respondents consistently pointed to when explaining why greeting cards “work” as a form of communication, and how they are different from other forms of communication like phone calls, email, or face-to-face conversation. Their responses point to how the card as a material object is used for phatic communication – declaring and renewing an existing relationship – almost independent of its actual content. Even card users who send cards ironically, thereby distancing themselves from their own usage of commercial sentiment, nevertheless are participating in the core of the greeting card’s emotional logic of touch and time. The commercial nature of the card actually supports this function of cards, by connecting the private, interpersonal nature of a relationship to a socially recognized communicative form, in a format that is designed with viewing and semi-public display in mind.

Conclusion: when ethnography and critique meet

In this chapter I have tried to disrupt what can be a too-easy dismissal of the greeting card as commercialized sentiment that reduces our individualized feelings to the lowest common denominator, a move that resonates with how Illouz problematizes a normative critique of emotions and their expression through commodities (Conclusion to this volume). While greeting card sentiment is almost another word for inauthenticity, especially in circles that are already critical of consumer culture such as the academy and other elites, an ethnographic perspective on

their use reveals a distinct communicative logic in which genuinely felt emotional connection through these commodities is understood to be possible. While the mass-producedness of greeting cards would seem to be a built-in threat to their emotional authenticity, the publicness that accompanies their commercial nature brings a sense of recognition, certainty, and authorization to what can often feel like a high-risk activity - expressing emotions in relational communication. Although we often imagine emotion as belonging to the private sphere of the individual, it's clear that emotions and their expression are fundamentally social, not least when they are exchanged between two people (a point that Illouz elaborates in the Conclusion to this volume). Scholars have distinguished between the category of emotion – which is socially-recognized and for which there are available discourses in the public sphere – and the category of affect, which may be experienced and even be observable, but for which there may not be language or recognizable cultural forms (Kavka 2008; Wetherell 2012). Illouz (2007) argues that one of the defining features of emotional capitalism is “the transformation of the public sphere into an arena for the exposition of private life, emotions, and intimacies” (108).

The commercial mass-producedness of cards contributes to their performativity as emotional commodities. Even if someone can't find just the right words to express an emotion or recognize an occasion (either within themselves or in the marketplace), the card signifies time and effort, which is offered as a kind of proof or evidence of caring. The status of cards as consumer objects is key to this communicative logic, and in the age of digital connection, cards are becoming even more object-like in order to draw attention to the sender's touch and time.

Having made the case for why greeting cards “work” as emotional communication for so many (but certainly, not all) consumers, based on the understandings and experiences they shared with me, I also want to make space for critiques of emotions that this analysis fails to address, and indeed, the new critiques that it raises. While the market functions as a resource for identifying and expressing emotion, it is clearly also then likely complicit in emotion regimes that regularize ideas about emotion and link them to broader dynamics of power and subjectification. Certainly the greeting card industry contributes to particular ideologies about emotion, both in its marketing and its products. Although from a feminist perspective it would be desirable for the industry to promote more equity among men and women in terms of expectations for emotional expressivity, as well as the labor of sending cards to maintain social relationships, the industry has largely conceded defeat in converting men into regular card senders. Indeed, many cards and ads use the idea that men and women have trouble communicating about emotion as a selling proposition for their products that are presented as the solution to this problem, thereby only reinforcing it. Similarly, while no doubt communicating emotion to loved ones is high stakes, the greeting card industry only highlights this belief and undermines people’s confidence in their own abilities to express or convey emotion when they present cards as the solution to this problem (West 2008). Although it seems unlikely that the industry has invented this communication problem out of whole cloth and somehow imposed this belief on consumers, it certainly has a vested interest in reinforcing and reproducing it. Even if public symbolic resources are inherently valuable in bringing a sense of formality and authorization to interpersonal communication, why must those resources be so insistently commercial? Reliance on greeting cards highlights the lack of widely known alternatives for emotional language, scripts, and gestures in the larger public sphere.

Perhaps most troubling is why “spending” time and effort in the marketplace is such a hegemonic standard for signifying caring. My informants never discussed the value of a card in terms of its price, which is interesting since almost all cards actually have the sale price printed on the back, where both sender and recipient can easily see it. The money paid for the card becomes almost invisible compared to its representation of the sender’s time and effort, offered as evidence of feeling. If performativity is key to effectively conveying emotion, then what are the alternatives for performing caring when shopping is so privileged as its sign? Even the DIY (do-it-yourself) approach to creating cards and tokens is effectively captured by the market with the increasing options for creating customized cards digitally, either using software on a home computer or through an online service. No doubt a committed DIY population exists that eschews commercial solutions in creating their homemade expressions of caring. But will the truly homemade gestures – the handwritten letter, the card crafted from scraps – actually be read reliably as a sign of time, effort, and caring, as intended? At least a few of my informants volunteered that they see greeting cards as more emotional and sentimental than handwritten notes or letters, suggesting that a DIY approach is not on equal footing with commercial cards among at least some segments of the public.

Although greeting card sales in the US are on the decline, this emotional commodity, or “emodity,” shows no signs of disappearing soon. As digital technologies transform our modes of interpersonal communication, the authenticity of gestures that effectively convey feeling in an interaction-rich environment are under continual negotiation. Whether the greeting card will continue to be privileged as an authentic expression of emotion ultimately remains to be seen.

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