

BlaHa  
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### **‘You just signed your name’: The hidden effort of sending greeting cards**

Whenever I’m researching and thinking about a topic a lot, every piece of media I engage with seems to reference that topic in some way. While I was reading studies about the use of greeting cards in the U.S. over the past few days, “The Pledge Drive” episode of *Seinfeld* happened to be on TV. It’s the one where Jerry is scheduled to host a PBS pledge drive and, what do you know, a representative from the station (a woman, it’s important to note) sends him a thank-you card for his participation. Rather than hold onto the card, Jerry throws it away, and the representative happens to notice it in his garbage can when she’s at his apartment reviewing the script for the pledge drive. The representative is hurt, saying that she put a lot of effort into finding that card, but in Jerry’s view it’s not like she wrote it—all she did was sign her name. Before storming out of the apartment the representative accuses Jerry of being *unsentimental*, to which he pulls out all the birthday cards from his grandma that he’s saved over the years. The PBS representative is unmoved by this. Why should cards from his grandma be more worthy of saving?

This *Seinfeld* episode makes several points about greeting cards that I want to touch on in this paper, including what it means to send what Alexandra Jaffe (1999) calls “packaged sentiments” or “pre-packaged words,” the different card categories there are to choose from (like “General Thank You” or “Daughter Birthday”), gender differences not only in card designs but also in their consumption, the feelings evoked within the sender and receiver, and the personal mark we want to leave on the words we didn’t write

ourselves. I intend to break down these different elements of the greeting card by analyzing three birthday cards I recently received from my mom, aunt, and sister. I want to be clear that this paper refers to the physical greeting cards that don't come with any personalization options. What I hope to show is how choosing from sets of mass-produced words to somehow express our feelings has become second nature.

The need to buy a greeting card is usually sparked by an occasion, whether it's a nationally-recognized holiday like Valentine's Day or a personal event like a birthday. But in an effort to bring some level of personalization to these mass-produced greetings, many companies create cards that are specific to an *occasion* and a *relationship*. That's why you'll often see categories like "Daughter Birthday," "Sympathy - Friend," and "Sister Wedding Shower" in the card aisle of a store. Most standard card brands, I would say, aim to promote a heteronormative view of the world, trying to fit all our feelings and relationships into these neat categories. The purpose of the card category, however, is to help someone buying a card find one with a message that has the *appropriate* level of familiarity for showing that they care. While choosing a "mass-produced medium over other written media" may not be a "neutral" choice (Jaffe, 1999, p. 118), why shouldn't we have a variety to help us get as close as possible to what we want to say?

While the birthday card from my mom (and dad, but mom's been signing his name on cards for years) didn't mention "daughter" anywhere in the message, the tone and design of the card fit that "Daughter Birthday" category. The front is off-white with watercolor flowers painted on it, and there's a red ribbon glued on the left-hand side. "Life changes year to year, but love is for always" the front message, in violet script lettering, reads. This has been a theme with a lot of the cards my mom has sent me now

that I'm in my 30s—you've changed, life changes, but you're still my daughter and I love you. The text on the front of a card is always just a setup for what's inside:

*“No matter how old you get,  
no matter where you go  
or what you do,  
you'll always make  
your family proud.  
Happy Birthday”*

The thing about card categories is that they usually specify the gender or identity of the recipient, not the sender. A father could have given his daughter this card (technically it is from both of my parents), but based on the relationship I have with my mom I know that these sentiments are coming from her. She knows that I'm planning to move to Europe this year, that I'm trying to find purpose in my life, and her card's just letting me know that she supports me. I know that she took time to find a birthday card to express this very sentiment.

Shopping for greeting cards is an *emotional labor* that is usually designated to women (West, 2009). Men either don't care all that much (except for the holidays data shows they buy greeting cards for like Mother's Day) or rely on a woman in their life to handle the greeting card communications. And the effort that goes into picking out a card can go unnoticed—think of how dismissive Jerry is to the thank-you card the PBS representative sends him, thinking that all she really did was sign her name. But there's a reason, according to Emily West, that greeting card communications are part of “women's work” (p. 286): it's about maintaining interpersonal relationships, and “the gender system is relational.” The greeting card industry is aware of this divide and uses it to a marketing advantage. They know that their core demographic is women 45 and older (Hallmark,

2000). While a lot of the marketing greeting card companies do is meant to tug at the heartstrings of this demographic, they also perpetuate the socially-constructed narrative that men are “bad at cards” (West, p. 296) to their advantage by promoting greeting cards as “solutions” (West, p. 292) for the challenges of communication around those holidays where there’s an increase in men buying cards. This is a narrative that we’ve all come to believe, as evidenced by the married women West interviewed who would never dream of letting their husbands handle the greeting cards.

There’s a generational difference that has helped shape this gendered narrative of greeting card consumption (again, Hallmark’s key demographic is women who are 45 or older), though I have also seen this pattern replicated among my Millennial friends who are married and send physical greeting cards. My Aunt Mimi, now 80, would never question why she has handled all the greeting card communications over the years. She’s someone who even stockpiles cards for different occasions in case something comes up. “Commodity coupons,” Jaffe (1999, p. 123) calls them—cards that aren’t purchased with specific people in mind but to have on hand. I’ve received cards from my aunt in the past that are specifically for a *niece on her birthday*, but this year I seem to have received a stockpile card. It’s a birthday card with a picture of a cupcake with a candle in it and “Happy Birthday to you!” in teal script lettering on the front. The colors of the card aren’t gendered and the message isn’t specific to our relationship. It’s generic. But that doesn’t make receiving the card any less special. My Aunt Mimi remembered my birthday. She even took the time to write a one-sentence note inside: “Hope you have a wonderful day and year!” An attempt to combine her own words with the ones printed

inside (“Hope you feel perfectly celebrated and completely happy today!”), a way to make this mass-produced card more like an extension of herself.

My sister Katie did this in her birthday card, too, letting me know that “I wish I could be with you!!!”, as though her handwriting could close the distance between us. Sometimes, I think we write an additional sentence or two in cards, because we need to feel a kind of ownership over the content. Katie’s birthday card is interesting—gendered in its design, feminist in its message. She chose a “Sister Birthday” card. The design motif is butterflies and jewels. The message is about how she’s proud to come from “a family of wise, wonderful women” and she thanks me “for being the strong, amazing woman and sister” I am. It’s more than a birthday message; it’s an affirmation of the person I’ve become, of the *sisterhood* Katie and I belong to. It’s an example of how greeting card discourse has changed as society has evolved. The mainstream greeting card industry still enforces a gendered and heteronormative view of society, but if there’s one thing I know about capitalism it’s that it’s willing to adapt if it can make a buck off it. And for the sake of marketing, for the sake of staying relevant, the American greeting card industry knows it needs to be on the lookout for “niches” (Shank, 2004, p. 247) they can mass-produce more words to fill.

What’s left to discuss is how we interpret sending and receiving greeting cards. Jaffe (1999) argues that the “power” of a greeting card lies in how it’s never purely a “gift” or a “commodity.” I would add that it’s also never purely a *solution* (West, 2009) to the struggles of communicating our feelings. Sure, it solves the problem of having to write down in our own words how we feel about someone, but it also presents the new challenge of having to find the right mass-produced words to convey these feelings we

can't or don't have time to commit to paper ourselves. Whether a recipient keeps a card usually depends on their relationship with the sender. I don't keep every birthday card, and I don't even keep the most meaningful ones forever. I'll hold onto them for what feels like an *appropriate* amount of time—this varies from card to card, from sender to sender. I will say that I'm more likely to keep handwritten letters and postcards over greeting cards. So maybe Jerry Seinfeld had a point about the thank-you card. It's not like the PBS representative did anything more than sign her name.

## References

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