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A Taste for Greeting Cards: Distinction within a Denigrated Cultural Form

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ABSTRACT:

Greeting cards are a denigrated product category in the United States, and yet consumers use them at high rates across taste formations. Consumers with relatively high cultural capital place a premium on originality in their self-expression, hence greeting cards present a consumption problem because they are a mode of expressing the self through mass-produced means. Based on interviews with 51 people, I show that consumers with higher cultural capital are more likely to prioritize card design over sentiment; select smaller, simpler designs and sentiments; prefer cards that are handmade, look handmade, or remind them of fine art; and are more likely to use cards ironically. In this way, consumers perform exclusivity through their taste, even through a form of mass culture. However, the social embeddedness of greeting card communication means that many consumers balance questions of taste with the requirements of effective interpersonal communication, itself an indication of cultural knowledge and therefore of high cultural capital.

Key Words: Greeting Cards, Distinction, Authenticity, Mass Market, Irony

Pat: I had a school friend who worked for Hallmark. And she was a very good artist, and I must say that impressed me, this was some time ago, that they hired her. I mean, she really was the best one at my school. And *that* impressed me. Somehow, when I say the word Hallmark, I always smile, just a little bit.

Emily: Why is that?

Pat : Well, it's mass media. And, kind of for the middle class culture. And I use it! (laughter) I mean I'm being snobbish but, I use it, and that's why I laugh.

This exchange between myself and Pat, a retired art teacher, illustrates how greeting cards are an arena in which people communicate their taste, consciously or not, in addition to communicating messages of emotion and relationship to others. When people send cards they are declaring not only "I like this," but "This represents me" and even "I mean this," because cards are representations of the self. While most consumer goods are ultimately relational, in that they mediate between self and others, greeting cards are explicitly so. This makes the question of taste particularly relevant, and sometimes even fraught, for those consumers for whom using products of the mass market to represent the self presents a consumption problem.

Greeting cards present this taste problem not just because they blend consumer purchase and interpersonal communication, but because the greeting card as a product category, at least in the United States, is often seen as outside of "legitimate culture" (Bourdieu 1984: 28). Carrie, a college student, compared her distaste for greeting cards to her sense of alienation from television, which she watches rarely because she feels it is of low quality. The denigration of cards (by those who are taste-conscious, or orient to "legitimate" culture) stems in the first place from how they represent the mass production of sentiment (e.g. Hirshey, 1995; Martin, 1997). Indeed, much of the public

relations of the greeting card industry and its largest players (Hallmark and American Greetings) is aimed at de-emphasizing the industrialized nature of greeting card production in the eyes of the public (West, 2007).

Consumers who express distaste or suspicion of greeting cards as a product category tend to experience them as a threat to individuality and therefore to a particular notion of authentic communication, one that draws substantially from Romantic ideas of expressive individualism. This dynamic has been described as part of the paradox of modernity, in which people feel obliged to produce and exhibit an authentic self, but through the mass-produced goods of consumer culture (Botterill, 2007; Slater, 1997). However, Holt argues that it is mainly people with high cultural capital who approach consumer subjectivity in terms of “constructing what they perceive to be a unique, original style through consumption objects” (1997: 113). He explains that, as a result, people with high cultural capital are much more sensitive to the “homogenizing potential” of consumer goods, and so actively seek to “individuate their consumption” (1997: 113).

Indeed, those with more formal education, especially in professional occupations, are more likely to distance themselves from the mass-produced nature of greeting cards. This trend in my fieldwork is consistent with that of Illouz (1997), who found that her middle- to upper-middle class respondents scorned “stereotypical” Hallmark cards because they did not allow for sufficient creativity, originality, and self-expression. It extends back to the 1950s, when Spaulding concluded from her research in the suburbs of New York City that while lower and lower-middle class respondents saw greeting cards as a valuable form of communication, in contrast “Indifference to, or hostility toward, the custom increases with educational level” (1981[1958]: 14).

A second reason why greeting cards particularly bear the stigma of mass-produced culture in the United States is that the product category has become so strongly identified with its most prominent brand – Hallmark - in part because it controls more than 50% of the greeting card market

(Fasig, 2003). Hallmark, located in Kansas City, MO, is a middle America, “Heartland” brand, and promotes itself as such. While Hallmark is a tremendously successful company, its success also makes it a cultural target, especially for its “middleness.”

My informants who explicitly expressed distaste for cards from the largest greeting card manufacturers, particularly Hallmark, were almost all on the higher end of the cultural capital spectrum. They would sometimes invoke “Hallmark” when reacting negatively to a card that was not to their taste, such as a sentimental, ornate birthday card that I showed them. Interestingly, these same respondents also picked out Hallmark cards that they liked, particularly cards that were blank or had interesting designs. However, these cards did not read as Hallmark because they were design-driven, and these consumers associate the Hallmark brand with a particular kind of effusive sentiment. In contrast, it was mainly respondents with lower cultural capital who described themselves as loyal Hallmark shoppers, regularly going to the Hallmark store or Hallmark section of the drugstore. The taste conundrum in greeting cards, then, plays out at the level of brand choice, particularly because Hallmark is such a dominant brand in the US, and therefore symbolizes the mass production of sentiment.

With greeting cards, it is difficult to tease apart the stigma of mass-produced sentiment and the stigma related to femininity, and in fact these characteristics are related. Our current conceptualization of sentiment as a denigrated category can be traced to the simultaneous mass production and feminization of culture (Douglas, 1977; Felski, 2000). Cultural anxiety about greeting cards reflects the overlapping nature of the spheres of the feminine, the domestic, the sentimental, and the commercial, formed by the historical situation of women being primary consumers and, partly through consumption, responsible for social reproduction. Indeed, the labor of purchasing and sending cards remains remarkably gendered in American households, with the industry consensus that at least 80 percent of greeting cards are purchased by women (Greeting Card

Association, 2004). The greeting card is a reliable source of humor in the “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” vein – in comedians’ monologues, sitcom episodes, and Budweiser commercials - pointing to its association with a denigrated mode of feminine consumption.

The puzzle that this paper addresses is the broad participation in this product category across consumers, despite the ways in which greeting cards as a product category are tainted by their association with feminized mass culture. In fact, large-scale survey data show that sending greeting cards is positively correlated with education and high cultural capital habits like attending art museums, relatively independently of income.¹ How do consumers who inhabit taste formations for whom greeting cards have an embarrassing quality nevertheless find ways to purchase and send cards to friends and family? In addressing this question, this study responds to Johnston and Baumann’s recent call to focus less on “hierarchy between cultural genres” and more “on hierarchy *within* cultural genres” (2007: 198).

Greeting cards are not a common form of media to study or discuss, but they offer a fruitful site to explore a variety of issues. While the questions they raise are manifold and have begun to be explored by scholars (Jane Hobson, 2000; Eva Illouz, 1997; Alexandra Jaffe, 1999; Stephen Papson, 1986; Barry Shank, 2004), here I focus specifically on issues of taste. Greeting cards are such a fruitful site for studying questions of taste in cultural consumption because, especially for women (who I concentrate on here) they are a “socially compulsory gesture” (Unity Marketing, 2005), and relative to most consumer goods and services, they are inexpensive. Hence, greeting cards are a product category of uncertain legitimacy that nevertheless has high participation across taste formations.

Theories of Tastes

This paper rests theoretically on the now familiar observation that what is considered good taste is socially constructed, and is in part a mechanism for class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) argued that lower-middle and working class people embrace a popular (or functional) aesthetic because of how it “makes sense” in relation to their lives lived on or close to the borders of necessity. This economic reality leads them to have a seemingly “natural” preference for aesthetic or cultural objects that are useful in everyday contexts, bring pleasure, and are built on widely shared cultural codes. The “pure” aesthetic on the other hand, preferred by those in the upper-middle and upper classes, indexes the leisure and education that result in the appreciation of objects and activities with complex codes, and celebrates the form or “how” of representation rather than “what” is represented. Whereas the popular aesthetic is associated with pleasure and real-life experience, the formal or pure aesthetic is meant to be disinterested and to connote intellectual appreciation from a distance (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu writes, “Popular taste applies the scheme of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life” (Bourdieu, 1984: 5). Within Bourdieu’s framework, greeting cards as a product category speak to the popular aesthetic because they subsume aesthetic values for instrumental, personal purposes.

Contemporary American culture is not characterized by a straightforward taste hierarchy with a clear vertical ordering of “brows” (e.g. highbrow, middlebrow) (Collins, 2002; Holt, 1998). Indeed, it seems that almost everyone in the United States participates in popular, mass forms of culture. As Peterson and Kern suggest, “Perfect snobs are now rare in the United States” (1996: 904). However, the role that taste plays in social status reveals itself in other ways, through: 1. Omnivorous vs. Univorous Tastes, 2. The “how” of consumption, 3. The aestheticization of popular culture, and 4. Discourses of authenticity about cultural consumption.

Peterson and Kern (1996) developed the concept of the cultural omnivore, inspired by the insight that Americans with high cultural capital do not generally consume exclusive, recognizable forms of high culture such as opera or fine art. Rather, they participate in popular and mass culture. However, they do exhibit a wider variety of tastes than other Americans, in Peterson and Kern's research operationalized as appreciating a higher number of low- and middlebrow forms of music, compared to those with low cultural capital who appreciate a smaller number (it has since been demonstrated beyond musical tastes – Erickson, 1996; Kuipers, 2006; Vander Stichele & Laermans, 2006). Peterson and Kern argue that while cultural omnivores have “an openness to appreciating everything,” (1996: 904), they still make distinctions, sometimes dismissing certain genres that are difficult to appreciate with the pure aesthetic, or that are too obviously commercial (e.g. heavy metal – Bryson, 1996). Further, cultural omnivorousness facilitates distinction because popular culture provides such a broad, eclectic, and complex field within which people can develop knowledge and therefore tastes. Peterson and Kern also suggest that even if consumers with high cultural capital consume the same things as others with lower cultural capital, they consume them *differently* – with a greater sense of “intellectual appreciation” rather than “personal enjoyment” (1996: 904).

Holt (1998) and Kuipers (2006) provide empirical evidence that distinction is often achieved not so much by the “what” of consumption but the “how.” These differences can manifest themselves through the different ways that consumers use and interpret the same products, or through the fine-grained distinctions that consumers make within a category that might initially appear homogeneous. Kuipers (2006) argues that even in the realm of Dutch television comedy, a cultural field that one might initially assume to be lowbrow and relatively homogeneous, there exists a complex set of taste stratifications in terms of the programs and comedians preferred by viewers with differing cultural capital. Further, she notes that those with high cultural capital may consume, or know about, programs and comedians that are not to their taste, whereas those with low cultural

capital either do not have knowledge or are “despondent” about the kinds of comedy enjoyed by high cultural capital viewers (Kuipers, 2006: 370). Fitting with the paradigm of the cultural omnivore, those with higher cultural capital consume programs that are “too” lowbrow in a way that keeps their taste orientations intact, and at the same time develop a thorough knowledge of this cultural field in order to support and justify their taste formation. Kuipers writes, “At the upper end of the taste hierarchy, taste always is a performance of competence and social worth. Thus, the power to judge comes with the obligation to perform” (2006: 374). This performative dimension of taste, particularly strong among respondents with higher cultural capital, was relevant in my own interviews (where high cultural capital was associated with having more to say and seeming comfortable with discussing aesthetic preferences), and I argue is relevant to the practice of sending greeting cards more generally. Taste or cultural capital is not something one *has* but something one performs, lays claim to, and reproduces with each consumer choice or selection. In other words, we are accountable to our greeting card selections, in terms of how they represent us and our taste (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

Greeting cards are used in consumption performances with multiple possible inflections – they mean at more than one level simultaneously. They can be a performance of personal taste, a performance of interpersonal connection, and a performance of consumer competence. However, different consumers prioritize these inflections of greeting card communication differently, and the same consumers prioritize different inflections depending on the communicative and relational circumstances. Consumer culture in general is a constant negotiation between affinity and distinction, or between “coordination” and “domination” (Erickson, 1996: 219), and greeting cards highlight the tension between communicating with the other and communicating about the self.

Distinction within the product category of greeting cards also takes place against a backdrop in which “taste” and “design” are being mass-marketed as never before, a phenomenon Collins

(2002) has coined as “high pop.” In the system of high pop, “signatures” formerly associated with the world of high art or literature (i.e. name recognition designers, artists, and writers) become “brands” in the world of mass-marketing (Frow, 2002). What Collins points out is that while parts of popular culture present problems to taste-conscious consumers, other parts of popular culture provide solutions, in the form of “taste education” or taste- and design-conscious brands (2002: 18).

Collins reflects on the stigma of mass production and mass culture that is a key source of denigration for greeting cards, writing:

Where the standard form of the ideology of mass culture made mass distribution an evil unto itself, the mode of transmission precluding the possibility of genuine art as the content of that widely disseminated message, the taste ideology that authorizes the pleasures of high-pop distinguishes between the two, uncoupling the Modernist pairing of rarefied content and exclusivist delivery system, by insisting that knowledge, rather than money, is the only thing required in order to appreciate the *apartness* of the object, even as it becomes ever more widely available. (2002: 24)

This analysis suggests that the paradox or tension that faces many greeting card consumers – how to express the self through a ubiquitous, mass-produced cultural form – can be mitigated through consumer performances that index cultural knowledge.

The arena of high pop helps consumers solve the greeting card legitimacy problem because taste becomes a question of mindful, performative selections made possible by a “popular connoisseurship” (Collins, 2002: 27), a form of “aesthetic reflexivity” on the part of consumers (Lash & Urry, 1994: 5). The performance of taste can still be exclusive even in a context without clearly defined taste hierarchies, and this exclusivity is accomplished through discourses of authenticity about cultural consumption (see also Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Zukin, 2008).

Collins theorizes that authenticity in the sphere of cultural consumption reflects Romantic ideas about the self, such that there is a coherent and unique self that seeks expression, which by definition also performs its “apartness” from the mass at which mass culture is directed (2002: 27). However authenticity is socially constructed, and is not a monolithic concept. How people define authentic communication is shaped by their cultural capital, and hence becomes a factor in processes of distinction in consumer practices (West, 2010). The social constructions of authenticity in play among my taste-conscious research participants are homologous to the logics found in other contemporary spheres of American cultural consumption. Consumers with higher cultural capital emphasize design over sentiment in card selection, recalling the logic of high pop (Collins, 2002); look for simplicity in both design and sentiment (Holt 1998; Johnston & Baumann, 2007); seek cards that announce their separateness from an industrialized mode of production (Bendix, 1997); and enact an ironic stance towards greeting cards (Drew, 2005). However, these strategies for consuming greeting cards authentically must be balanced with the relational, interpersonal function of cards, and taste-conscious consumers describe these negotiations in their card choices as well. Therefore, this study demonstrates how practices of distinction are negotiated within the social, relational contexts in which they are embedded.

Methods

This paper is based on field work with both consumers and producers of greeting cards. I carried out fifty-one face-to-face interviews with consumers from 2002 to 2003, primarily in the Philadelphia and Boston metropolitan areas. Informants ranged in age from their early twenties to their nineties. I used snowball sampling to access greeting card consumers for interviews, making an effort to reach people different from myself, in terms of age, ethnicity, type of occupation, and educational background. Forty-six of my informants were women (reflecting the estimated gender

mix of card purchases), I interviewed 42 white consumers and nine people of color, and my informants represented a range of class backgrounds. In this paper I focus only on the responses of women in order to consider people's attitudes to cards separate from the stigma that men might feel participating in a feminized cultural practice.

Table 1 illustrates how my interviewees were distributed across the two variables I considered as indications of cultural capital: level of education attained (this variable has been simplified into those who do and do not have a college diploma) and occupation (following as much as my data allow the formulations of Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1997)).

Table 1

Type of Occupation by Level of Education in my Interview Sample

Occupation	Less than a college diploma	College diploma or more	Total
Professional		13	13
White Collar	13	12	25
Manual Labor	2	1	3
Service	2		2
Student	5*	2	7
Homemaker	1		1
Total	23	28	51

* College students were counted as “Higher Cultural Capital,” even though they did not yet have their diplomas.

In order to observe overall patterns, I split my sample of 51 between those who did and did not have a college diploma, leading to 33 people designated as “higher cultural capital” (I included the five college students currently studying) and 18 as “lower cultural capital.” Of course, this kind of categorization can be reductive, and indeed, this distinction does not capture situations such as my informant with a college degree who worked in a management role in a manual labor setting, or distinguish between the different kinds of white collar work that people did.

Although the cruder typology of “higher” and “lower” cultural capital did correlate with interesting differences in greeting card preferences at the aggregate level, at the individual level there are exceptions and complexities that defy the simplicity of this binary. People’s familial, gender, generational, racial, ethnic, and professional identities were also relevant to their individual responses to the cards, and intersected with their class habitus in important ways. I include as much of this context as is practical in order to provide a more nuanced image of their individual habitus.

Each interview began with an exercise in which I showed informants six sets of cards, organized by occasions, and asked them to respond to them. Each set of three or four cards varied on a particular attribute or dimension, such as the style of design and the length of the sentiment. We discussed their preferences among the cards, and who they might send the different options to. In my interviews I sought to attend to both levels of taste – both *what* cards consumers picked and *how* they described their preferences and distastes. Then, I proceeded with questions about their card and correspondence habits, encouraging informants to think of particular stories or examples that illustrated the place of cards in their lives. My informants also filled out a questionnaire that asked basic details of their card use – how many, how often, and to whom – along with information about their hobbies and interests, and their demographics.

I also draw on field work in the greeting card industry, primarily my three visits to the National Stationery Show in New York City, where the smaller and alternative greeting card companies sell their wares; industry press releases and the trade press; a visit to the MOMA store in Soho, NY at a special presentation about the MOMA Holiday Card line; and interviews with fifteen greeting card industry professionals.

All textual data were imported into N-Vivo (qualitative research software), in which I inductively developed codes that captured important concepts, themes, and patterns. Questionnaire items were summarized in an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate descriptive comparisons and patterns in

responses. I focused particularly on opportunities for triangulation – comparing preferences registered on the paper survey with the specific preferences manifested among the cards I provided, in turn compared to ways that people described their card practices and preferences. I considered both consistencies and seeming inconsistencies to be important sources of data.

Design or Sentiment

Those consumers who are wary of greeting cards as a product category focus on expressing themselves and their taste through the design rather than the sentiment, thereby exhibiting a formal (or pure) aesthetic when it comes to greeting cards. Consumers with higher cultural capital tend to distance themselves from the pre-printed sentiments in greeting cards by gravitating towards blank or “simply stated” cards, or by adding their own substantial message to the provided sentiment (West, 2010). In contrast, the purchasing decisions of consumers with lower cultural capital tend to be sentiment-driven, focusing more on whether a card “says what they want it to say” about their feelings, rather than whether it reflects their aesthetic tastes (West, 2010).

I asked my respondents directly whether the design or the text was more important when they were picking out a card. Tina, a former schoolteacher, said:

I can't truly say that the verse is going to sell me. I think that it's the exterior of the card that's going to sell me first, and then, if it happens to have a verse that's fine. If it doesn't, I can still write my own message.

In contrast Val, who is college educated and a manager in a Manual Labor setting, says that while she has to be attracted by the visuals of a card, “the sentiment takes priority.” In fact, the conventional knowledge in the industry is that “greeted cards sell 3 to 1 over blank cards, because most people like to add their names to a pre-printed message” (Kelley, 2002: 34).

Certainly, the correlation in this sample is not deterministic, such that every respondent categorized here as Higher Cultural Capital prioritizes design over sentiment. However, out of the 38 respondents who were willing to say whether they prioritized either design or sentiment in their greeting card choices (and a number insisted on “both”), those with higher cultural capital leaned towards design (fourteen prioritized design, ten sentiment) much more clearly than those on the lower end of the cultural capital spectrum, for whom only one out of thirteen identified design as more important.

The trend among my own informants became apparent in part through the choices made by respondents among specific cards, but also through how people talked about their card choices. So while Rita, a college-educated former teacher who has a strong interest in fine art, chose a card in my sample entitled “Thankful for a Friend Like You” that has a fairly long sentiment, she explained that she did so because it was the most visually appealing to her (“It just has to be visually attractive, message is sort of secondary...”), while most of the lower cultural capital respondents who picked it spoke about the sentiment and how it captured the kind of thing they would like to say to a close friend on Thanksgiving. While the objective consumption choice was identical, the reasons for the choice, or the accounting for it, differed markedly.

Similarly, when I asked Pat (quoted at the beginning of this essay) what her “ideal” greeting card would be, she replied in terms of visual criteria, saying relatively little about finding the “right” sentiment. She explained:

Well, it has to be what I think is attractive, and this is so ambiguous, what I think is attractive is maybe not what you think is attractive. It has to appeal to me because I think it’s artistic. I think the paper quality is important, I think the style of writing is important. It can be good cursive writing or good block print, but it has to be done nicely. I think the message needs to be relatively short and to the point....It has to appeal to me artistically, I have to think that

this is in good taste. And if you break down good taste, that would be layout of the design, or picture, colors that are as true as possible, that type of thing. It's almost automatic when I look at it. It's like looking at a piece of sculpture.

Pat's comments on her greeting card preferences recall the truism that our tastes appear natural, or "automatic" to us. Although Pat is far from naïve about questions of taste (as suggested by her comment in the opening quote of this essay), she does not attribute her taste in greeting cards to her education, upbringing, or exposure to culture in general. In contrast to Pat's very clear emphasis on the formal qualities of cards (the character of the fonts, the design, the colors) and her use of the language of taste, the most common responses among my respondents with lower cultural capital was looking for a card that 'says what they feel or want to say' (West, 2010).

Attitudes toward boxed cards also illustrate the different logics guiding greeting card consumption. Hallmark has noted that people tend to pick boxed cards to reflect their own personality or taste, while individually bought cards are more likely to be purchased with the sender in mind (Hershey, 1990). In fact, my respondents with higher cultural capital were more likely to report that they send boxed greeting cards, while most respondents with "less" cultural capital expressed less interest in boxed cards, as for them the point of greeting cards is how their sentiments capture a particular feeling, on a particular occasion, for a particular recipient. When they did report using them at the holidays, it was for reasons of economy. Daisy, a full-time clerical worker with some college education, who also serves as guardian to her grandkids, sends many thank you cards but wouldn't buy a box of them because then each recipient is getting a card that "says the same thing."

Similarly, among my respondents, eight of the eighteen with lower cultural capital reported that they almost never buy blank cards, and did not offer any preference among the set of blank cards I showed them. Industry wisdom suggests that blank cards are "art-driven, and sell best in

museum shops, lifestyle stores and any store where cards are an impulse buy, and the clientele cares less about the text than the image” (Kelley, 2002: 34). Several of my respondents mentioned specific galleries where they regularly buy boxed greeting cards (which are usually blank), and of these respondents, all but one fell into the higher cultural capital category. Greeting cards are part of the retail trend popularizing design and “signature” art and art styles (Frow, 2002). People for whom aesthetics loom large in their greeting card choices are not necessarily from very high social strata, but high enough to be well-versed in “high pop” (Collins, 2002).

Although greeting cards may have a tarnished image because of their association with mass production, in practice consumers can orient to cards in ways that mitigate this threat. Some consumers conceptualize greeting cards as aesthetic objects that can be used to represent the self, through the selected design as well as by their own written message. Others focus on their selection of just the right sentiment as what transforms a card from a product into interpersonal communication.

Searching for Simplicity

Another notable split in greeting card preferences arises around the question of the simplicity of cards, and related to that their size. This distinction has also been documented in the articulation of good taste in *Gourmet Magazine*, where simplicity is constructed in relation to folk cuisines and food that avoids pretension through its lack of complex preparations (Johnston & Baumann, 2007). The logic of this can again be traced to Bourdieu’s theory of tastes. Holt (1997) notes that people with lower cultural capital value material things and luxury because their habitus is more defined by material constraints, while those with higher cultural capital value the “metaphysical as opposed to material aspects of life,” therefore expressing a preference for the understated and a distaste for conspicuous luxury (110). While greeting cards are not luxurious per se, they do vary in

the elaborateness of both design and sentiment, and their connotations of abundance (or effusiveness) versus minimalism.

The three interview respondents (Pam, Tandra, and Joanne) who explicitly expressed a preference for smaller cards and designs (thereby connoting minimalism) hold college degrees and work in white collar jobs. Pam, for example, explains that she prefers to find something “small” and “understated” that, for her, seems like “something more” than a larger card with a big design. In reacting to a set of thank you cards, she finds they compare unfavorably with the note cards she keeps at home for thank you’s, that are “small and simple,” with very minimalist designs on good quality paper.

While Pam, Tandra, and Joanne, who volunteered that they prefer smaller cards, fit into the high cultural capital category because of their education and occupation, another respondent who explicitly discussed the size of cards – Heather - also falls into this category, having a graduate degree and a white collar job, but her overall orientation to cards conforms more to a lower cultural capital habitus, given her focus on greeting card sentiment, her enthusiasm for cards, and her Hallmark Gold Crown membership. When it comes to the size of cards, Heather says, “You know, I have this weird thing where I don’t usually buy smaller cards. Cause I think a lot of times a smaller card, like the size looks cheap to me or something. I usually buy a bigger card than this size” (referring to a small interview sample card). In general, those who embrace greeting cards as a form of communication, like Heather, respond well to elaborate, large cards, whereas those who maintain some critical distance from greeting cards as a product category manage that tension in part by looking for cards that are “simple.”

Eight of my informants explicitly said that they looked for simplicity in the design and sentiment of the cards they send, and seven of them had college degrees or were studying. For example Tina, a homemaker and former teacher, identified the Thanksgiving card she would pick

out of the set I showed her because of its size (it was smaller than the other choices) and its “simple, elegant” design. For her the other cards were “a little garish.” Jane, a college-educated researcher in her 40s, picked out a card with a simple, clean design, and explained her preference saying “if I have a choice between a card that has one lily on the front, or hundreds of flowers, I’ll probably pick the one item.”

Two of my participants who identified simplicity as an important component of the cards they look for, Pam and college student Rebecca, both also defined their taste in contradistinction to that of their grandmothers, and were both prompted to do so by some of the larger, ornate cards with longer sentiments in my sample. Rebecca’s grandmother consistently buys the formal, wordy cards that are “always \$5 compared to the usual \$3.50.” Similarly, Pam said her grandmother would be attracted by “all the ribbons and the flowers and the script” in one of the birthday cards. However, while Pam and Rebecca were embarrassed by cards that are ornate in their design, these are precisely the cards that those with “less” cultural capital among my respondents were attracted to. The large birthday card that Pam and Rebecca did not like was selected by ten people as their preference, only two of whom fall into the high cultural capital category while eight fall into the lower cultural capital category. In my sample of interviewees, those with less formal education reported that the “simple” cards left them cold. Minimalism and simplicity can be interpreted as sincere and as avoiding commercialized hype, according to a higher cultural capital logic, or alternatively, it can be interpreted as holding back, and failing to find the most expressive and beautiful card for someone you care about.

Cards as Art or Craft Objects

In his research on American cultural consumption, Holt observed that consumers with higher cultural capital manage their participation in the mass market by using “goods that are

artisanal rather than mass produced, and experiences that they perceive to be removed from, and so minimally contaminated by, the commodity form.” (1997: 113). In terms of greeting card consumption, I learned that consumers with higher cultural capital seek out cards that either *are not* mass-produced, so “art” cards found in boutiques and art stores, or cards that *appear* to be distant from the mass market – cards that have a handmade or handwritten look.

Those with more formal education were more likely to invoke the criteria of art and particular artists when responding to card designs. For example, a number of the higher cultural capital respondents pointed out that the watercolors of one of the birthday cards reminded them of Impressionist paintings. They also mentioned that if a card was very beautiful they might frame it, or that they sometimes saved cards based purely on their appearance. Through their practices, then, they repurposed greeting cards that they received into candidates for aesthetic appreciation. In describing their greeting card choices to me, they also demonstrated their knowledge of art, in terms of particular names and styles.

The prestige of cards that can be read as art is central to the high profile boxed holiday card program from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). MOMA cards, available in museum shops, gift shops, and some larger retailers such as American book chain Barnes & Noble, are the urbane, cosmopolitan foil for the “typical” Hallmark card sold in Hallmark Gold Crown stores, drugstores, and discount retailers. MOMA cards attract consumers with higher cultural capital through the appeal of the innovative, modern-looking cards in combination with the fine art cachet of MOMA, which in turn evokes the cosmopolitanism of New York City.

Graphic designer John Pirman’s Mod Holiday card has been described as MOMA’s signature card (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – “Mod Holiday.” MOMA holiday card designed by John Pirman.

The emphasis in MOMA cards is on clean contemporary designs and innovative paper-techniques such as pop-ups, interactivity, and color, rather than on sentiment per se. In Mod Holiday the focus on design is evident both in the retro, Eames-inspired furnishings, the silk-screen design, as well as in the card’s color palette (strong colors, mixing traditional red and green with blue, orange and black). This card is designed to read as sophisticated and cosmopolitan, rather than sentimental, thereby advertising the cultural capital of the buyer. Even the square shape of this card signals it as an “alternative” to traditional rectangular cards. As the director of the MOMA Holiday card line put it, “it just sort of is something that is very popular in a New York, urban, sophisticated, area...it appeals to that group of people.”

In addition to cards that present themselves as worthy of an artistic gaze, greeting cards are often made, and marketed, around the idea that they are handcrafted, thereby providing a contrast with the mass-produced card. One small line featured at the National Stationery Show was actually called “Made by One Girl,” thereby framing the cards as non-industrialized craft objects. As one of my respondents, Janet, a professional and graduate student said, “I love cards that are artistic. Where someone, an artist, has put something together that is very unique.” Shannon, a young professional

with a college education, explained that she was drawn to cards that “look like they've been handmade, that are actually mass-manufactured. It's sort of like making them, but you don't have to do them yourself.”

One of the sets of cards I showed varied on the dimension of how handmade it looked, with one card featuring a computer-generated design, another with a reproduction of a watercolor painting, and a third card featuring collage that actually was made by hand. The third, hand-made card was responded to best by the higher cultural capital respondents, with seventeen people with higher cultural capital identifying it as a preferred card (more than 50% of HCCs), while only four LCCs did so (22% of LCCs). As Jess, a college student, said when she responded to this card: “it looks kind of like handmade, not really like the average card that you would see in, like, a CVS or like, a supermarket.” Similarly, she said about another card in the sample, “This I feel the same way about, it's like, a different-looking card, it's like a watercolor picture, and it doesn't seem like your traditional Hallmark, cheesy card.” Here we again see the aversion to Hallmark, as well as how it is associated with particular types of “profane” retail environments (where everyday fast-moving consumer goods are sold). The desire to keep greeting card purchases clearly separated from these more profane purchases was also evident in Laura, a college-educated mother of three, who said, “I couldn't bring myself to buy cards at the drugstore or the grocery store.” The boutique greeting card market addresses this concern about mixing purchases for profane, everyday things with purchases that are personal.

Nevertheless, major players like Hallmark are not left out of the artistic card game or boutique retail environments by any means (whether or not consumers realize it), illustrated by Hallmark's line of Impromptu cards, many of which are blank and design-intensive. Hallmark also distributes a line called “hannah handmade cards,” on the back of which appears the following blurb:

andrea liss, creator of hannah handmade cards, looks at each of her greeting card confections as a work of art. bringing the spirit of the artisan to her work, andrea breathes into her pieces a sense of quality, craftsmanship & timelessness....

Similarly, in 2001 American Greetings (the second largest greeting card company in the US) made a move into the “boutique” card market with a line called Winking Moon Press. In comparison with American Greetings’ regular lines, Winking Moon Press is more design-driven, more in-tune with current design trends, more likely to feature signature artists or cartoonists, and more international in flavor. “We handpicked designs from artists around the world to offer our retail customers a selection they won't find down the street,” the director of the line says (American Greetings, 2001). In their marketing for this line, American Greetings acknowledges the concerns of the consumer who is looking for cards that are unique, and perhaps relatively inaccessible to the mass market. The international emphasis of this boutique line fits with a cultural omnivore logic, similar to the rising popularity of both world cuisine and world music as markers of distinction (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Peterson, 1990). Some consumers, then, find greeting cards that are not mass-produced, or that connote art or craft in other ways, thereby managing their use of mass culture to express the self.

Irony

Those people who see greeting cards as a somewhat suspect form of communication reported that when they send a card they sometimes try to do so ironically. They might accomplish this by choosing a card for the wrong occasion on purpose. As college student Rebecca explained, she finds it “funny” that cards are divided up into “the compartmentalization of how different people relate to you.” Indeed, many cards are organized by caption, such as “For Mother, For Sister from Brother.” About a recent shopping trip for Easter cards, Rebecca said, “So of course I chose

one For Kids for my grandma, cause I thought that was funny.” The card choice, then, says as much if not more about Rebecca’s relationship to captioned cards than it says about her Easter wishes for her grandmother. Another mode of sending cards ironically is by adding to or changing the card. College student Carrie says if she were to send the watercolor birthday card from the card sample she would have to write something “sarcastic” under the sentiment (which reads “Hope your birthday’s special...just like you”).

Using greeting cards ironically recalls Robert Drew’s (2005) description of self-conscious karaoke singers, who mock the “serious” karaoke singers’ earnest performances with their own over-the-top parodies. By singing karaoke they out themselves as consumers of lowbrow mass-produced pop, so with their ironic performance they distance themselves from this form of music and from imitation as a form of self-expression. Drew writes, “The ironic stance toward performance thus allows certain middle-class performers to participate in karaoke while still maintaining a sense of class distinction and superiority” (2005: 378). Similarly, ironic greeting card senders satirize their own use of mass-produced sentiment, thereby distancing themselves from the idea that a greeting card that they did not create or write can be an authentic expression of the self. It is a strategy of distinction that nevertheless allows consumers to participate in what can often seem like a “socially compulsory gesture” (Unity Marketing, 2005).

Consumers can send cards ironically through their own offbeat selection or alteration of cards, but there are also cards that themselves speak to an ironic stance toward this product category. Although the mainstream greeting card companies make (and sell) plenty of “ironic” greeting cards, arguably it is the smaller greeting card companies who specialize in this area. And of course, by definition a smaller “fringe” greeting card company is distinct from one of the big brands like Hallmark or American Greetings, so consumers can distance themselves from the mass market through their choice of brand as well as choice of specific card. Pam, for example, mentioned

specific alternative brands that she looked for, such as the irreverent Mikwright line. Some alternative brands strive to make greeting cards for consumers who are looking for something “different,” often explicitly positioning their cards as antithetical to mainstream, sentimental greeting cards. An example of this marketing strategy is a line called Artists to Watch whose slogans are, “A cure for the common card” and “Intelligent cards for thinking people.” Another company that makes greeting cards featuring photographs, plenty of white space, and short quotes from artistic, literary, or historic figures, explicitly appeals to the taste conscious consumer who wants to separate him or herself from the rest of the pack, saying in their marketing come-on, “Reiterations [the name of the company], motivation for the rest of us.” The notion that alternative cards are for the “thinking” consumer resonates with the comments of Michael Fitzgerald, co-creator of the successful clayboys cards that feature cartoons with a queer sensibility. When I asked Michael how he thought clayboys’ cards differed from mainstream, traditional cards, he thought part of it was the themes and wry look at mainstream culture taken in the cartoons. But also, for their designs and jokes, “...we figure that the audience wants to do a little thinking and a little work, and when it’s all over, they’re rewarded for it! By getting the joke, that’s not, you know, for everybody.”

Many alternative cards flatter the audience by rewarding them for “thinking” in a way that makes them feel like they are in on a joke that others will likely miss (Frank, 1997). Irony, either in mode of consumption or in the products consumed, allows people to participate in mass culture in a way that supports their sense of individuality and independence from it. As Frank (1997) argues though, this ubiquitous mode of “hip consumerism” is actually a boon to culture industries because of the need for an ever-changing array of distinctive, individualistic products.

Reconciling Personal Taste and Interpersonal Communication

Overall, it is clear that some consumers, and disproportionately those with higher cultural capital, are mindful of how their card choices speak to their taste. However, these consumers are also aware that greeting cards serve an interpersonal function, and that their feelings about how a card represents them is just one consideration. I noted how respondents discussed those moments when they encountered a conflict between picking a card that would best express themselves and picking a card that would most please the recipient. Some respondents said that they really wanted the greeting cards they sent to reflect their own taste, rather than trying to pick cards to please the taste of the recipient. I asked Emma (a white collar working mother in her 20s with some graduate education) whether she would ever send a card that was not really to her taste if she knew the recipient would like it, and she said:

No, it's pretty much about my taste. Which is probably very selfish of me but, I want it to be something that reflects who I am, and what I think of them. I mean I guess there are times when, I mean, I want to think a little bit about what they would like, but it's also, are they gonna like it, and am I gonna like it too? Can I stand to send it?

The stakes in sending a card that one has distaste for, that will be read as a representation of the self, are articulated in the question – “can I stand to send it?”

Similarly Tanya, a graduate student in her thirties who placed the most emphasis of any informant on finding artistic cards and writing her own messages, described an inner conflict over what kind of cards she should send to her mother-in-law, who favors traditional cards with sentimental verses. She explained that she had not been able to disregard her own preferences in order to send what she knew her mother-in-law would appreciate most, saying:

... I know she likes these cards, and I know the most appropriate thing would be to buy a big glossy card, like this with a glossy font [referring to one of the sample cards]. But I still like send it my way, the way I think, like what I think is the most appropriate way for me to

express something, so for me it's like, a card that I think is appropriate and, my own words, like from scratch, like nothing on it. (By "nothing on it" Tanya means no pre-printed greeting or sentiment)

However unlike Tanya and Emma, many of my design-focused, taste-conscious respondents were willing to make compromises in the cards they sent if they knew it would please the recipient. Many respondents identified certain cards as not particularly to their taste, but something they might buy with a particular person in mind who they knew would appreciate it. Jane, the researcher, sends greeting cards on all the major holidays to elderly relatives around the country and picks cards of the flowery, sentimental, and religious kind that do not at all run to her personal taste, because she knows those attributes will be appreciated.

People with a higher cultural capital taste orientation, then, tend to see greeting cards as a realm in which they can express their individuality and creativity, but they sometimes feel that they cannot have complete freedom in self-expression when considering the taste and identity of the recipient. Most consumers will bend to the sociality of greeting cards, respecting the differences of the other and trying to pick something that will bridge the distance between themselves and the recipient. Some of my respondents actively reflected on how sending and receiving greeting cards could be an exercise in negotiating the differences between self and other, although not always successfully. Shannon (the college-educated young professional), who is very taste-conscious and interested in the design qualities of the cards she sends, describes her card-selection process saying:

The first part of my hunt is always like, to find both. Something that is part of my personality but I think the other person would really enjoy. If I can't find something that I really like, yeah, I'd probably just go with what I think the other person would like to receive, more than what I would like to say.

Shannon may feel moved to respect the tastes of her recipients because she often receives cards from her father that she believes reflect his tastes without attempting to reflect hers. She presented this state of affairs as emblematic of their communication problems in general. As suggested by Shannon's experience, not taking into account the tastes of the recipient can sometimes be a source or indication of interpersonal tension, symbolic of a broader unwillingness to "connect."

Of course, the ability to discern when one's own taste will not be appreciated by another, or when it is necessary to essentially code-switch from a design-focused greeting card logic to a sentiment-focused logic, is itself a sign of cultural knowledge, or omnivorousness (see also Erickson, 1996). It is worth noting that I did not encounter any reports of code-switching in the other direction, where a consumer who prefers larger, more ornate, sentiment-driven cards reported choosing a blank, design-focused one because the recipient would prefer it. The ability to engage in this aesthetic code-switching may have concrete social advantages (that come with the ability to socialize and communicate with people both within and outside of one's own habitus), and should itself be seen as an aspect of cultural capital.

Conclusion

A greeting card, over and above the specific statement of relationship it makes, says something about how the sender sees his or herself in relation to mass culture – as an enthusiastic participant or unique individual on the periphery looking in. Greeting cards, then, are a contested terrain of taste and distinction, a communication practice frequently engaged in *and* frequently derided by the educated and the elite, similar to how they interact with much consumer culture. As Pat suggested at the beginning of this essay, she simultaneously participates in greeting card consumption and "smiles" while she's doing it.

This study illustrates how the mass market is both a threat and an inevitability for many consumers. Producers and consumers collaborate, in a way, so that taste-conscious consumers can participate in mass consumption in such a way that preserves their sense of autonomy and distinction. The variety of products in the greeting card market facilitates this, as well as the mass marketing of design, but consumers also accomplish it through the “how” of their consumption. Activating knowledge – whether about art and design traditions, or about other people’s tastes in greeting cards – can make even greeting card consumption an arena for consumer performances of distinction. It is through the nuances of consumer performance that exclusivity is achieved even within a cultural sphere that is open to “everyone.”

What greeting card consumption demonstrates perhaps better than other products is how taste figures into the social embeddedness of consumption. On the one hand this social embeddedness makes the stakes of consumer performance high, because product selections will be observed and potentially judged by others. On the other hand, this social embeddedness also introduces the need to de-prioritize questions of taste in favor of the exigencies of effective and compassionate communication. The expressive individualist desire to be unique and express the inner self comes into conflict in greeting cards, where senders may have to compromise on their taste or on their preferred mode of communication in order to make a connection with the recipient. As Erickson has argued, culture is used for both “domination” and “coordination,” and sometimes consumers must choose which (1996: 219).

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ⁱ I used the DDB (Doyle, Dane, Bernbach) Lifestyle Survey, to see if I could find confirmation of the popular image of who buys and sends greeting cards. This data was made available through DDB Worldwide of Chicago, Illinois for fair use for academic research, downloaded from Robert Putnam's website (<http://www.bowlingalone.com/data.php3>). I used only the 1998 data for this research because it was the most recent. The sample was large (N=3290). Putnam argues that the DDB Needham Lifestyle Survey, despite its drawbacks because of being a mail panel, is reliable based on extensive comparisons made on questions that are common with the General Social Survey (Putnam, 2000). The survey included several questions about greeting card consumption.

I found that rather than those with "less" cultural capital sending more cards, the rate of greeting card consumption was positively correlated with a number of different variables that one might look at to capture social class or cultural capital, including level of education attained, type of occupation, frequency of visits to art galleries, reported interest in books, and interest in other cultures. For example, while the number of cards sent does not vary significantly with Level of Income, except for households earning \$70,000 per year or more, the DDB Lifestyle Survey does yield a statistically significant positive correlation between Level of Education attained and Total Cards Sent, contradicting the

idea that greeting cards are a communication crutch mainly used by the less educated. This positive relationship between level of education and card-sending persists over different income levels.