

Mass Producing the Personal:

The Greeting Card Industry's Approach to Commercial Sentiment

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Abstract:

The greeting card industry manages the challenge of mass-producing images and texts for use in interpersonal communication through both specific production techniques and narratives that “make sense” of this seemingly paradoxical task. The mass production of the personal is negotiated in the processes of writing sentiments and creating designs, as well as in identifying sending situations for cards. At Hallmark, the approach to creating emotional, relational communication for anonymous others is captured by the phrase “universal specificity,” which suggests that people’s emotions are essentially universal, and that the industry can meet the nation’s social expression needs by customizing these core insights. This view justifies the high level of concentration in this cultural industry. “Universal specificity” as a logic of cultural production conflicts with other, arguably more dominant theories of what constitutes authentic communication, in which emotional expression should be original, unique, and emanating from the speaker.

Key Words: Greeting Cards, Cultural Production, Authenticity, Commercialism, Emotion, Cultural Industry

Hallmark and other players in the greeting card industry have their work cut out for them in managing their public image. They seek to come across as members of an industry that can take care of all the customer's "social expression needs" while downplaying any perceived contradictions in a commercial enterprise mass-producing cards for intimate, personal expression. But the paradox is not just a question of public image. It's a conundrum that greeting card industry professionals face every day – how to produce cards that will feel personal to thousands of card senders and recipients they will never meet.

This article examines the techniques and narratives used in the industry, particularly by Hallmark Cards (which controls more than 50% of the US greeting card market), to manage the challenge posed by mass-producing images and texts for consumers to use in interpersonal, and often emotional, communication. Through their ways of "making sense" of greeting cards we can see notions of authentic communication and emotion being produced within a context of commercial cultural production, a seemingly paradoxical task.

Producers and consumers of greeting cards interact with these objects against a backdrop of dominant beliefs in American culture about communication and the self that suggest they might be an inauthentic form of self-expression. Authenticity is a term that connotes many different cultural values. Here I use the term authenticity in the sense of "being true to oneself," a construction that relies on ideas of an essential self that can be known and then communicated to others. Despite postmodern and poststructural theorizing about the de-centered and fragmented self, a dominant narrative that persists in mainstream American culture is that there is a self that is primarily in charge of thoughts and feelings and expressing them to others (Taylor, 1992; Carbaugh, 1996; Guignon, 2004).

Privileged models of communication – ways of communicating that are commonly thought to be "best" – often contain the idea of an authentic self, such as an artistic model

that imagines authenticity in terms of spontaneity, uniqueness, and original expression emerging from the self (Becker, 1982); and a public sphere model that also privileges spontaneity, a lack of mediation (preferring a face-to-face context), and a chance for dialogue (Peters, 1999). These models can be captured by the ideology of expressive individualism, which emphasizes the autonomy of individuals in communication (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1985). Communication becomes the “how of self” (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981, p. 305), because through authentic communication individuals convey their selves to the “other” without limitation or interference from outside forces. An often unstated assumption of these models is that authentic communication is unsullied by the market.

Greeting cards notably violate these privileged models of communication because they mediate expression, and because their pre-printed texts and designs contradict principles of originality and uniqueness, as well as of spontaneity. They threaten the ideology of expressive individualism because they involve people looking to the mass market for the symbolic materials with which to communicate the self, thereby ceding their independence in expression. These critiques are regularly rehearsed in the popular press and are also reflected in scholarly critiques (Hobson, 2000; Jaffe, 1999; Illouz, 1997; Papson, 1986). While past scholarship has focused largely on how greeting cards represent the commodification of *consumers'* emotions (with the exception of Shank's (2004) historical study), here I consider how cards depend on *producers* turning their own emotional and relationship insights into objects with market value.

I examine how the mass production of the personal is negotiated in the processes of writing sentiments and creating designs, as well as in identifying sending situations for cards. I then consider what philosophy of communication supports the creation of emotional, relational communication for anonymous others, which at Hallmark cards is captured by the

phrase “universal specificity.” I consider the variation in thinking about these issues between the largest US greeting card company, Hallmark, and smaller, self-styled “alternative” greeting card producers, concluding that despite some apparent differences, ultimately both mainstream and alternative players subscribe to similar explanations of why sentiment can and should be mass produced.

I argue that while the industry clearly has guidelines and tricks of the trade for word choice, style of fonts, and imagery, it also subscribes to ideas about the nature of emotion and communication that “make sense of” the mass production of sentiment. Although greeting card writers and designers must work hard and use craft for consumers to perceive their greeting cards as sufficiently personal, it is possible to create “authentic” sentiments for anonymous others, the industry argues, because human emotions and the need to communicate them through sentiments are timeless and universal. This belief in the universality of human emotion is framed positively because it suggests that human differences are less important than what unites us. Underlying this form of cultural production, then, is a working theory of emotion and personhood. The greeting card industry promotes an understanding of the nature of emotion and relationships where they are understood to be, at bottom, universal, thereby justifying the ability of social expression experts to provide sentiments for the nation through the mechanisms of the market.

Greeting cards highlight what is endemic to much of popular culture: the integration of mass-marketed symbolic products into everyday life. Rather than seeing this state of affairs as a given, this paper explores this as an institutional accomplishment. By viewing it as contingent and dependent on particular narratives and ideological perspectives on communication and emotion, this paper also raises the possibility that the current arrangement is not inevitable but must be reproduced and “worked on” at the level of

production, and therefore can evolve or be changed. In order to reproduce this system, cultural workers capable and willing of doing the emotional work required to make commercial sentiment must also be produced and reproduced.

Methods

The primary data for this paper come from field work in the greeting card industry carried out from 2002 to 2005, including ethnographic and semi-structured interviews with seventeen members of the industry; three visits to the National Stationery Show in NYC; a week at Hallmark Headquarters in Kansas City, MO, including touring the Visitors' Center; and attendance at eight Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour events in three states. These events were a public relations initiative that involved a team of three creative staff appearing at coffee shops and libraries where they talked about the process that goes into creating Hallmark cards.

The field work data are triangulated with other sources, including textual materials about the greeting card industry such as autobiographies, the trade press, and manuals for aspiring card writers and designers; and archival data on now defunct greeting card companies, specifically Rust Craft, examined at the Smithsonian Museum for American History.

My analysis emerged inductively as I spent time in the field and with the textual materials. Once textualized, all data were imported into a qualitative research software program and coded thematically. Drafts of this paper were shared with some industry informants in order to gain further insight into my analysis. Those who responded made minor corrections of facts or things that had changed since I had left the field, but were overall positive and did not object to my analyses.

Mass Producing the Personal - Formal Elements

The tension created by greeting cards being both products of the mass market and vehicles for interpersonal, emotional expression is acknowledged within the industry and dealt with using a variety of techniques – strategies that help designers and illustrators strike what they argue is the *right* balance between me-to-you message and sendability. These two industry terms capture the seeming contradiction of needing to create a card that will read as a message specifically from “me” to “you” by a critical mass of consumers. A card that might seem very personal might also be too restrictive in terms of who will relate to it, hurting its “sendability.” Conversely, a card designed to be vague enough for a broad audience can fail to connect with people or seem like a sufficiently personal “me-to-you” message. About this balancing act, Hallmark writer Molly Wigand explains that, “Good editors and writers walk the line between specific enough, to give the card a strong “just for me” appeal, and too specific, which will exclude too many potential purchasers” (quoted in Szela, 1994, p.133).

An oft-cited technique for giving greeting cards that “me-to-you” feeling is through, as suggested by the term itself, the careful use of pronouns and forms of address. Rust Craft explained to its writers in the 1950s, that “Those who study the sales of cards are convinced that our customers more and more prefer a card which sounds as though it has been personally tailored for the one who is to receive the card” (Rust Craft Publisher’s Writer’s Manual, p.31). So, for example, the manual advises to not just say “you” but say “mother,” “grandmother,” “grandma” or whatever term people are likely to use in their relationships.

In keeping with the idea that the writer is providing expression for others, instructional manuals say that the writer’s style should only serve the purpose of providing

communication between a sender and recipient. Rust Craft advises its writers, “Write as though one person were talking to another. Never use words that are out of the ordinary or not understandable” (Rust Craft Manual, p.25). The manual argues that even rhyming greeting card sentiments must be conversational and seem natural to the consumer as she or he quickly reads it in the store, saying “The rhythm pattern should be neither too complicated nor too sing-song” (p.18).

In fact, while verse is an enduring feature of greeting card sentiments, of late there has been a trend towards more “conversational copy” or prose in the industry (also documented by Shank, 2004). *Between You and Me*, a line launched by Hallmark in the late 1980s and one of its most successful, is an indication of the popularity of conversational, sentiment-driven cards (Hallmark, 2003). According to Hallmark, these cards are meant to sound how someone might actually speak or write more than traditional greeting card sentiments which are written in verse.

The extent to which most provided greetings serve as a “me-to-you message” is highlighted by those cards where additional verses or quotations appear, whose authors *are* credited in contrast with the majority of “me-to-you” sentiments. Card writer and industry expert Karen Ann Moore (1999) describes this convention saying:

A quote is additional copy on a card. It does not have a me-to-you message and is meant to give extra information or emphasis to a sentiment or to the artwork used on a card. It may be anything from a Bible verse to a literary quote from *Bartlett's Famous Quotations*, to a special piece you wrote about what it means to be a mother. (p.20)

Of course in the case of greeting cards, none of the pre-printed text is written by the *actual* sender, but receivers are meant to read sentiments *as if* they are. A card with a quote often

also has a separate “me-to-you message” that acts as a bridge between the sender of the card and the quote that might seem too abstract, philosophical, or formal to stand in for the sender’s own thoughts and feelings. For example, a card written by Hallmark writer Barbara Loots features a long verse entitled “Finding Time for Friendship” printed out on the front of the card in a “typed” font (see Figure 1). Inside is a shorter piece of prose in a cursive font that looks like “real” handwriting that comments on the ideas and feelings in the verse on the front, but that works better as a “me-to-you message” (see Figure 2). In writer John Peterson’s words, this allows the sender to “stand behind” the quote, but also have a more relatable me-to-you message to which they can sign their name. In Goffmanian (1974) terms, the two parts of the greeting card texts are “keyed” differently, with linguistic and visual elements serving as cues for what is meant to be a shared quote or thought, and what is meant to be considered “from” the recipient.

FIGURE 1

Caption: Front Cover of “Finding Time for Friendship” from the “Secrets of a Joyful Heart” line featuring the work of Barbara Loots. Hallmark Cards, Inc.

FIGURE 2

Caption: Sentiment from the inside of “Finding Time for Friendship.” Hallmark Cards, Inc.

Those responsible for the visual elements of greeting cards are also guided by the balance between “me-to-you message” and sendability. This consideration applies not only to the subject matter, but as suggested in the previous example, the style of fonts and just about every visual aspect of the card. In order to keep the card “sendable” illustrators stick to subjects that they feel confident large numbers of people will relate to – hence the consistency in greeting card imagery of flowers, animals (particularly pets), landscapes, and

other traditional symbols for particular holidays. Eva Szela, author of an advice manual for aspiring illustrators, suggests:

Animals representing the couple are an excellent solution because then the specific physical characteristics of the actual couple are avoided. Color of hair, kind of build, degrees of attractiveness, and race are all set aside. If you use the two birds flying off into the setting sun, you then have an entirely appropriate symbol for every couple everywhere of the ideal perfection of their everlasting love. (Szela, 1994, p.17)

But card imagery can't just be sendable. Like the sentiment, it must also communicate a "me-to-you message." Hallmark illustrator Mike Willard explains that in the wildlife imagery which is his specialty he looks for the emotional message, or human parallel in the wildlife image that he paints, be it a pair of raccoons (see Figure 3), a mother bear carrying her baby, or a fox. While his paintings are basically faithful to their real-life equivalents, Willard explains that he does "idealize" and "romanticize" those images, particularly when it comes to the eyes and expressions, to make them more relatable and emotional.

FIGURE 3

Caption: Featuring the art work of illustrator Mike Willard. Hallmark Cards, Inc. The verse

inside the card reads:

I love our playful, fun times....

our quiet moments, too...

In fact, my favorite pastime

is being close to you!

Bridging the essential anonymity of the greeting card commercial exchange with a multiplicity of techniques that will eventually feel personal to card senders and recipients is

central to the work, both technical and imaginative, of greeting card production. These activities acknowledge the wish of each individual to feel and be addressed as unique, even within a medium which everyone knows operates on an industrial scale. In this way the greeting card industry flirts with a potentially uncomfortable insight, that, in the words of Roland Barthes, “no love is original” (1977, p.137).

Mass Producing the Personal - Sending Situations

Techniques such as using vague terms and using animals to represent people suggest that these companies want to reach all customers without having to make cards that reflect the diversity of society and complexity of human relationships. While this conclusion may have been more justified in the past when greeting card companies tended to project normative ideals of whiteness and the nuclear family on cards (Shank, 2004), recent years have seen a shift to targeting more niche markets within the mass market - another way of crafting a “me-to-you message.” In an evermore competitive marketplace, the industry speaks more directly to groups who want to see themselves explicitly represented in the greeting cards they buy, including linguistic groups, religious groups, cultural and ethnic groups, and people in different kinds of relationships and family situations. This shift coincides with greater attention to more specialized target markets across the cultural industries, including television, film, and advertising (Sender, 2004; Dàvila, 2001; Halter, 2000; Turow, 1997). Scholars who have investigated this phenomenon have emphasized how profitable speaking more directly to people’s identities can be, as well as how mixed the results of these “advances” in market recognition can be politically. While consumer empowerment is certainly relevant to empowerment as citizens, these scholars have warned against confusing one for the other.

Both Hallmark and American Greetings now have specific lines devoted to the African American, Latino and Spanish language, and Jewish markets. This effort to be more culturally specific has come about in the past couple of decades, with Hallmark introducing its first sixteen-card promotion directed at African-Americans in 1987, which in 1991 turned into the full-fledged Mahogany line (Hallmark, 2006). An African-American consumer who attended a Hallmark Writers and Artists on Tour event in Durham, North Carolina took a moment to convey her thanks to those illustrators and art directors who ensured that people of different “hues” were represented in their Mahogany line. This comment poignantly illustrates the importance that many people place on seeing themselves, whether in terms of their heritage, skin color, or sending situation, in greeting cards, just as they do for other forms of media and popular culture.

Attention to diversity is not limited to creating cards for cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. American Greetings suggests that “The New Family” is an emerging market that these companies seek to cater to. The birthday section of a card shop usually includes cards for both Daughter and Stepdaughter, Mother and Stepmother. Increasingly, the large greeting card companies are also making cards for people to send to “found families,” and people who have been “like a mother,” “like a father,” or “like a sister.” As American Greetings points out, “today's definition of family is very broad. Our writers brainstorm lists of as many different types of families as they can, including blended families, and make sure they write appropriate messages” (American Greetings, 2002). Of course, this individualization must still be balanced with considerations of sendability. On the Hallmark Writers Tour, humor writer Bill Gray elaborated on the concept of sendable sending situations by offering the example of having cards for “Missing you on Father’s Day,” for kids who are separated from or live far from their Dads, but not indicating on the card the

reason for the separation, which could be due to military or other work-related leave, divorce or separation, or incarceration.

Although Hallmark and American Greetings do appear to make substantial efforts to address different domestic situations in their captions and sentiments, neither company has yet directly served the gay and lesbian markets. New York Times Magazine contributor Gerri Hirshey, after her visit to Hallmark Headquarters in 1995, commented that:

No one at Hallmark is very comfortable using the G-word when it comes to love. Smaller gay greeting card companies serve that market well, I'm assured. Hallmark produced one "AIDS awareness" card that did well. And the party line is this: Hallmark is so deft in its universal specifics that the most esoteric sets of lovers, from interracial lesbians to preoperative transvestites, should be able to find something "appropriate" amid the Very Best. (p.15)

I heard a very similar story at Hallmark during my visit in 2003. In fact they do make cards in the wedding category captioned "Appropriate for Union," and a similar argument was offered: that by making a variety of cards for committed relationships, many of which are not specific in terms of the gender of the sender and/or recipient, gays and lesbians would be able to find cards that would be "sendable" for their sending situations.

However, this explanation of what consumers look for in cards seems to contradict Hallmark's emphasis on the importance of cultural specificity in cards directed at other kinds of groups. Being served indirectly is unsatisfactory for those gays and lesbians for whom being explicitly addressed and having their relationships publicly acknowledged in the marketplace is an important step in the struggle for visibility. Having a Hallmark or American Greetings card for gay or lesbian relationships would be quite a symbolic statement of "mainstream" acceptance, although clearly the political goals of gays and

lesbians are not monolithic and not everyone is in favor of “mainstreaming” queer culture, nor sees consumer culture as an important sphere for empowerment.

Both Hallmark and American Greetings make much of their ability to meet the card-sending needs of their consumers, creating cards that are specific to different people in different situations and addressing many niche markets in order to produce cards that feel personal. However, clearly they are limited by considerations of the size of the potential market and, in certain situations, by considerations of brand image. Niche markets can foster brand loyalty with identity groups who feel underserved by mass media and consumer culture. Nevertheless, these niche lines are generally conceptualized by the industry within the framework of universal specificity, just like any other card that must feel personal but still be sendable. This way, similar to what has occurred in other cultural industries, mass market players like Hallmark can justify serving these niches in-house, rather than leaving it to, or partnering with, other companies run or owned by members of those niches.

Universal Specificity

The tension in making cards that are both a “me-to-you message” and have broad sendability is one way of talking about the paradoxical task facing the greeting card industry. A more in vogue term for capturing this tension, at least at Hallmark Cards, is to talk about achieving “universal specificity.” Sentiments must speak to emotions or relationship situations that are in some sense “universal,” and will therefore appeal to a wide or at least a large market, but will *feel* specific and personal to both the buyer and the recipient.

When Hallmark greeting card writers talk about where they get their inspiration for card sentiments, they switch back and forth between narratives of writing from experience and writing from empathy. Some writers describe reflecting on their own relationships and

recalling their own feelings when they write sentiments. In this scenario, the resulting verse conforms more closely to the ideals of creativity and self-expression found in art worlds (the ways in which those ideals do not reflect the actual production of art, notwithstanding) (Becker, 1982). If writers draw inspiration from the self and from their own experiences, then greeting card sentiments bear the stamp of their authentic self, according to the ideals of expressive individualism. And yet in other cases, writers emphasize their attention to popular culture, to the relationships and experiences of others, and describe the process of writing these sentiments as dependent on their imagination, almost as an acting or role-playing exercise. Of course, both strategies are no doubt in use across the many fields of cultural production, across the spectrum from high to low, but the stakes are arguably higher when it comes to greeting cards because of the personal and emotional uses to which the products are explicitly put.ⁱ

Underlying both these narratives, whether the writing draws from experience *or* empathy, is an assumption about a kind of universality for emotions and relationships. The specificity is in tailoring the expression of a particular sentiment properly to be age-appropriate, gender-appropriate, culturally specific, or properly pitched to the emotional intensity of the sending situation. The people in that particular sending situation are looking to see themselves, to recognize a feeling or scenario that comes across in the sentiment. But according to Hallmark, a fundamental universality must lie deep beneath these specific circumstances, making the industrial creation of sentiment possible. This belief is useful to a company that from its base in Kansas City and with only fifty to fifty-five writers (plus seventy odd editors) sets out to serve the communication needs of the nation.ⁱⁱ

The notion that human relationships, emotions, and therefore “communication needs” are, at bottom, universal runs throughout advice to aspiring greeting card writers and

illustrators, and in talk from writers themselves about how they view their work. One Hallmark writer earnestly explains, “I don’t think that my emotions are that different than anyone else’s. Emotions are universal, they don’t change” (Hallmark, N.D.a).

And yet, the default setting of the Hallmark writer’s creative work arguably depends on imagination, empathy, and research. Writers at Hallmark are generally expected to work on very different kinds of assignments, providing communication for diverse people and situations, although certainly some writers tend to stick to similar assignments, like humor. In explaining their work, greeting card professionals emphasize the extent to which writers must set their egos aside, disregarding their own preferences in favor of what the targeted sender and recipient would like to say or hear. The writers talk about the effort they make in putting themselves into someone else’s shoes, imagining what it’s like to be a grandmother; a new parent; a bereaved spouse; of a different age, gender, or ethnicity; or with different values or politics. They talk about looking for inspiration and an understanding of others’ experiences in the world around them, from reading literature or magazines to eavesdropping on people in a waiting room, mall, or airplane; from watching movies and television to talking to friends and family. At the Writers’ Tour events fans asked the writers time and again where they could possibly find the inspiration to write so many sentiments, day in and day out, and their answer was consistent: “from everyday life.” The routinization, repetition, even feminization that scholars have associated with “everyday life” was not here seen as a negative, but rather as a comfort and a testament to the “realness” of the feelings expressed through the sentiments (Felski, 2000). Compared to the potential inauthenticity of the industrial workshop, “everyday life” was offered as somehow untouched and independent of the capitalist cultural industries.

At Hallmark writers are not generally assigned to tasks based on their demographics or identity. Although an estimated 80 to 90% of cards are purchased by women (American Greetings 2000; Greeting Card Association 2004), estimates of the gender breakdown of Hallmark writers and editors indicate that about 50% are women. African-American writer Deirdra Joi Zollar reported that while she was writing for Mahogany Mother's Day, among other assignments, at the time of our interview in 2003, she was the only African-American member of the three person writing team, and generally she is assigned to many different writing tasks, not just African-American themed ones. While the editor of the Mahogany line is African-American, Zollar explained that there were not currently enough African-American writers at Hallmark to organize the writing assignments by racial identity, but she also argued against this logic of task assignment.ⁱⁱⁱ Just because she's Black, she argued, doesn't mean that she is qualified to write about and reflect all Black experience. Just like the other writers, she participates in the research and looks at materials to inspire and instruct her in the nuances and details that will make Mahogany cards feel "culturally specific" to African-American consumers of different ages, genders, and life experiences. Zollar explained that sometimes she's able to draw more directly on her personal experience for writing assignments, like if she is writing on the theme of "girlfriends," but if she's asked to write a sentiment for a situation that she's never experienced she has to try and get out of her own "subject position" and "dig deep." Regardless of what line they are writing for, Zollar explained, the writers combine what makes a sentiment feel specific with their knowledge and understanding of universal emotions, to create sentiments that "work."

Derek McCracken, an editor at Hallmark when we spoke and now a Creative Director, admitted that some writers are more versatile than others. Some people really master heartfelt rhyming verse, while others' strengths are mainly in humor or short, snappy

sentiments. Sometimes writers excel at writing sentiments that don't seem to correspond to their own identities or communication styles. Linda Elrod, for example, is widely hailed in the company for her romantic verse, earning the moniker the "Queen of Steam" (Hirshey, 1995). And yet, she confesses that she and her husband are not very demonstrative and do not often verbalize their romantic feelings, so she isn't necessarily drawing from her own life when she writes these sentiments. Similar to Elrod, Jeannie Hund (now Jeannie Jackson) is a white woman who, according to McCracken, really understands how to write for Mahogany. McCracken explains that she is able to tap into the "soul" necessary, which he illustrates with a hypothetical example, like a Wife to Husband sentiment that begins, "Baby, you make me feel so fine." In contrast, he explains, sentiments crafted for the "Caucasian" market (understood to be the majority demographic for Hallmark's core lines) might be more buttoned up, like "We have a very special relationship." McCracken suggests that writers are generally expected to write well whether they are assigned to tasks near or far from their own identities or life experiences. The most common kind of greeting card production at Hallmark, then, involves writing sentiments as very much an exercise in structured creative writing rather than an exercise in "free" self-expression.

Even though Hallmark does not usually match writers up to their tasks according to their identity and experiences, there are times when this does happen. It's notable, however, that these occasions are highlighted in Hallmark's communications with the public out of proportion with how frequently they actually occur, I would argue because of the legitimizing connection with "real" experience that these production arrangements have in the public eye. For example, the connection that Barbara Loots, a frequent writer of inspirational cards, makes between her work and her own inner life is highlighted by Hallmark: "she writes inspirational cards out of her Christian beliefs, knowledge of the Bible,

and life experiences leading to her own understanding of God” (Hallmark, 2002). Similarly, another Hallmark press release explains, “Father's Day has taken on new meaning for Derrick [Barnes], too. Now when he writes, he writes through the eyes of a young man looking at his baby. He now understands what “father” means” (Hallmark, N.D.b). Here Hallmark draws on the authenticity that people are likely to associate with expression that comes from personal experience, even though it isn't their dominant model of cultural production. Derrick Barnes, for example, would have been assigned to write Father's Day sentiments before becoming a father himself.

The role of personal experience in informing the creation of sentiment is reflected in the final comment from a writer in the Hallmark Visitor's Center film on creativity: “Our diversity is our creative strength. Because we are diverse in our experiences and perspectives, our talents and our interests, we speak with many voices” (Hallmark, N.D.a). To some extent, different life experiences must be represented among the creative staff - writers, editors, and designers - if Hallmark hopes to create cards that will appeal to diverse parts of the American market. However, the diversity that can be represented among the fifty odd full-time Hallmark writers plus their editors is clearly limited, demonstrating that “writing from empathy” is ultimately the dominant model of production. This effort on the part of Hallmark and other greeting card companies to connect greeting card sentiments with the personal experiences of their writers is very much in line with a host of public relations strategies that anticipate critiques of industrialized sentiment, including emphasizing the creative nature of greeting card production over its industrial nature, and connecting greeting cards to art and folk traditions (West, 2007).

The View from Alternative Card Companies

While American Greetings and Hallmark are estimated to control 85% of the greeting card market between them, the rest of the market is made up of companies ranging from mid-size organizations like Recycled Paper Greetings and Blue Mountain to very small start-ups and companies in which one person “hand-makes” their cards and sells them to local stores. While the greeting card industry resides in a much broader “field of cultural production,” *within* the field of greeting card production there is a range of positions taken up by different kinds of companies (Bourdieu, 1993). Smaller companies seek to establish their symbolic capital based on contrasts with supposedly less legitimate or less authentic others, such as Hallmark and American Greetings who clearly dominate in terms of economic capital and control of the mass market. The distribution of capital in this cultural field may explain why those who work outside large-scale corporate environments are more likely to argue that consumers are looking for cards with a distinctive and personal voice. At smaller companies, or among those who freelance in the greeting card market, it’s less common to see the division of labor in greeting card production that is found at Hallmark and American Greetings, where sentiment, illustration, overall design, and lettering are contributed by different creative staff, all overseen by editorial and art directors. Perhaps as a result of this organizational contrast, some greeting card professionals insist that part of the appeal of *their* cards is that, because they execute both the art and the editorial, all the elements “come from the heart.” Greeting card and licensing powerhouse Flavia Weedn says:

Through the years, I learned that part of my uniqueness within the greeting card industry was that each of my cards was a combination of my personal feelings and my art. There was always a connection because it was coming from the same source: me. My sentiments were being printed in my own handwriting. Because I was using

conversational words and the feelings being expressed did not seem to come from an editorial department, there was a more personal appeal to the cards. And I quickly learned from my mail that people felt they were sending their own cards. I was truly writing what they felt... (quoted in Szela, 1994, p.36)

This kind of rhetorical contrast between the largest greeting card companies and smaller ones became apparent during a lawsuit brought by Blue Mountain Arts, who primarily feature the poetry of founder and President Susan Polis Shutz, against Hallmark Cards in 1986. Blue Mountain Arts is credited with inventing the “non-occasion” card and exemplifying the growing popularity of cards with inspirational, conversational, and “heartfelt” messages. Created by a couple of self-described hippies in 1971, the company sold cards featuring the non-rhyming poetry of Susan Polis Schutz and the art of her husband Steve. By the mid-1980s the Blue Mountain *Airebrush Feelings* line had become the number one selling line of cards in America (Schutz, 2004, p.143). In response to the success of this upstart company, Hallmark came out with its own “alternative” card line called *Personal Touch* that bore a striking resemblance to the Blue Mountain cards. In Schutz’s account of the lawsuit she argues for the authenticity of her own cards, which are poems she writes for specific friends or family members and that relate to her own personal feelings, in comparison with the Hallmark cards which were crafted according to market research by writers who apparently had been instructed to imitate Shutz’s style. To emphasize the contrast, Schutz (2004) writes that in *Blue Mountain’s* creative process, “We let our hearts guide us” (p.173). In a memo instructing its writers on what was appealing about Schutz’s work, even Hallmark appealed to the authenticity of someone writing from personal experience:

Consumers talk again and again of [her] work being “warm and serious, sentimental and personal”...The length of her writing expresses caring. Specificity is an asset, not a liability...In expressing her life, people feel that way but didn’t know it until they read her work. (Hallmark memo quoted in Schutz, 2004, p.200)

Blue Mountain eventually won the lawsuit, forcing Hallmark to discontinue *Personal Touch*. However, the popular Hallmark line called *Between You and Me* line continues the tradition of long, personal sentiments, using a visual design that is more distinct from the Blue Mountain cards.

Like the folks at Blue Mountain, smaller-scale greeting card producers tend to appeal to an individualized model of the creative process, in which the ideal is to express the self rather than using research and expertise to anticipate consumers’ communication needs. In other words, in order to create a “me-to-you message” for the market, the card needs to originally be created by a single “me” for a particular “you.” Echoing romantic models of the artist and art as ultra-authentic self-expression, they argue that cards made by one hand, in accordance with one vision, and “coming from one heart,” work better as authentic communication than a card that is the result of a more industrialized approach to sentiment with a greater division of labor. However, their explanation for why greeting cards “work” still appeals to the universality of emotion, because of their belief that their customers feel the same way about relationships and want to communicate exactly the same way about them as they do. The distinction that these card producers wish to make between themselves and the “big players” is not as great as they suggest, as the logic of universal specificity is arguably in play in both spheres of production. A more compelling critique might focus on the sheer concentration of the market in the hands of two major players, whose corporate

policies and brand images may result in certain sending situations, such as GLBT sending situations, being rendered invisible in the mass market.

Conclusion – Working Theories of Communication

Greeting cards, while nodding in the direction of human uniqueness with the principle of specificity, are fundamentally predicated on the existence of universal emotions and relationship experiences. In this way, the industry redirects the potentially negative associations with “mass,” commercial culture into the positive association with “universality.” This state of affairs in the greeting card industry reflects in microcosm a broader dynamic in mass culture, as industries face increasingly diverse markets within nations, and as cultural industries increasingly participate in global markets. Global marketers are particularly invested in the notion of universal human needs and dispositions, that when combined with the key to present products and brands in a culturally specific way can, they hope, unlock more markets for their goods and services (Maxwell, 1996). This belief upholds the hegemony of global corporations and defines away the possibility of confronting difference that might challenge the right or ability of a corporation, particularly a member of the cultural industries, to operate.

At Hallmark, the call for “universal specificity” embraces and celebrates the idea that, underneath it all, our feelings and the relationships that yield them are commensurable. This universality is meant to demonstrate a kind of common humanity, perhaps even an idealized equality. From this perspective, the niche markets and need to make sentiments specific and personal are the window-dressing on a mode of communication that speaks to the essential commonality of human emotions and relationships. And yet, when the greeting card industry has a chance to connect their products with the legitimizing “real” and specific experiences

and feelings of their writers and artists, or of particular identities, they don't hesitate to do so, demonstrating the power of normative cultural models of authentic communication that emphasize uniqueness and singularity.

Certainly, theorists such as Bakhtin (1981) have long noted that the notion of expressing oneself with complete uniqueness or originality through language is impossible, because language itself is derived from previous utterances. And just as language is thoroughly social and cultural, social constructionist theorists of emotion argue that emotions, while popularly thought of as emanating from the self, are also to a great extent shaped through culture (Illouz, 2007). And yet, these scholarly insights are fairly taboo in a culture so taken with the ideal of an independent self who communicates a unique interior through original expression.

Distaste for mass-produced greeting cards, then, is a reaction in part to the idea that the market could provide tools with which to express not only individuality, as with fashion, but to communicate in and about intimate relationships. Whereas for some observers this state of affairs represents a threat to the uniqueness, singularity, and authenticity of self-expression, to those sympathetic with greeting card culture, including those who work within it, this same state of affairs demonstrates our "common humanity." This understanding of greeting card sentiment is illustrated by the comments of one Hallmark writer, Linda Barnes, who remarked that the sentiments she wrote for patriotic cards after the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11th, 2001 seemed like they "wanted to be written"; almost like they had already been written and she was just remembering them rather than creating them (KSHB-41 News, 2002). Her comments frame greeting card sentiment as tapping into the zeitgeist of the culture and what unifies it rather than expressing her own personal vision.

Over fifty years ago cultural critic Dwight MacDonal argued that Midcult, a category of culture he disdained because of how it attempted to “pass itself off” as High Culture, could be summed up in eleven words: “There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being” (1962/1952, p.38, 40). Perhaps in no other arena of American popular culture is this observation more widely shared and acted upon than in greeting cards, where the industry must explain why commercially produced sentiments make sense for interpersonal, even intimate communication. The principle of universal specificity also shines through in the promotion and evaluation of other forms of popular culture, such as movies and books that are praised for representing the “triumph of the human spirit.” This construction can be viewed as depoliticizing, in how it de-emphasizes difference and social inequality. However, it’s a set of beliefs that is highly functional for the greeting card industry, because it supports their whole enterprise, as well as the idea that a large, mass market company can have “divisions” that deal with niche markets, such as ethnic or religious markets, rather than those niches being served by different companies owned and run by representatives of those identity groups. As a concept, it discourages the question focused on by so many critical media scholars: who says what to [or in this case, for] whom? (Lasswell, 1960/1948).

These are beliefs about communication and emotion that are the official line of the industry, and that can also be taken up by its workers in order to “make sense” of their daily work. The Hallmark creatives I met seemed to truly embrace universal specificity as a positive world view. These lay theories of communication, then, help reproduce the emotional and creative labor that make this cultural industry’s work possible. The principle of universal specificity may also make its way into more widely held emotion ideologies, and therefore play a role in shaping how the public understands emotion, communication, and

the self, as well as how they think about what is universal to the human experience and what important differences exist among people – a distinction with clear political implications.

This study illustrates how cultural ideals of authentic communication are relevant even in a field of cultural production that is widely assumed to violate those ideals – the world of mass-produced, commercial sentiment. In a sense, privileged models of authentic communication structure this field, even as competing conceptualizations of authentic communication are promoted to make sense of the mass market's role in the realm of the personal and emotional. Producers and purveyors of commercial culture are part of the ongoing cultural conversation about the status of the self in a world increasingly experienced through mass production, mass mediation, and the market. However, they have business incentives, and a lot of resources and cultural visibility, to shape this conversation in very particular ways.

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ⁱ I am indebted to Hallmark writer Ben Accardi for pointing out that these imaginative techniques are not unique to the greeting card industry.

ⁱⁱ That being said, Hallmark at one time boasted of having the largest creative staff in the world, with an in-house creative workforce of about 800 at Hallmark Headquarters in Kansas City, MO, including artists, designers, stylists, writers, editors, and photographers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hallmark staff were quite open about their efforts to recruit more writers of color to their staff over recent years.