

A Holiday Loved and Loathed: A Consumer Perspective of Valentine's Day

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ABSTRACT

From a consumer perspective, we investigate the behaviors, rituals, meanings, and themes associated with Valentine's Day as it is "celebrated" in the U.S. The objective of our multi-method study is to provide insight into Valentine's-related rituals, themes, and meanings as a basis for understanding consumer behavior for this holiday. We seek to add to conventional thinking about the impact of Valentine's Day on various consumers in the U.S. We analyze consumer diaries, online postings, group interviews, surveys, and in-store observations to address three distinct research questions. Our research questions focus on: a) behaviors and rituals (both in-store and in the private sphere), b) key consumer meanings and emergent themes, and c) roles of marketing communications during this holiday. We report various behaviors and rituals and key meanings behind such actions. We find that this holiday is associated with extremes (e.g., consumers either love it or hate it). Commercialism and marketing communications contribute to consumers' reactions to this holiday by fostering materialism, togetherness, and gender roles. At the same time, there are strong anti-consumerism and anti-commercialism sentiments. We discuss consumers' perspectives on this holiday and suggest avenues for future consumer research on this unique holiday.

INTRODUCTION

Valentine's Day and the surrounding season is a time for rituals and romance in the U.S. This holiday is worthy of study due to the unique consumption, gift/card exchange, grooming, dating, and romance-based consumer behaviors associated with this holiday. Some of these Valentine's-related behaviors are ritualized to an extent. In a general sense, rituals organize life and give it meaning. Ritualized behaviors are important to study as they may propose consumer behavior principles, which in turn lend marketers to product and service positioning opportunities (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2004, p. 93). Consumer rituals for this holiday are especially enacted by individuals in romantic relationships. Valentine's Day is generally known as the day for celebrating romantic relationships; yet, this day also celebrates other non-romantic relationships as well (e.g., familial, friendly).

For any type of relationship, however, this holiday celebrates commercialism and spending. This socially constructed, mass-marketed day and surrounding season is the stimulus for many consumers to purchase romantic goods (e.g., roses, chocolate, jewelry) and services (e.g., massage certificates, vacations) for both themselves and for their significant other. Furthermore, this holiday entices many to exchange "Valentines" or similar greeting cards for romantic partner(s), friends, and family members. In fact, over one-billion dollars worth of Valentine's Day cards sell annually in the U.S.

It is not to say that all consumers look forward to or even like this day of romance and rituals. For some, Valentine's Day serves as a somewhat unwelcome reminder of their "single status". For others, it is a time when society suggests that money should be spent as an indicator of affection. In fact, this holiday can be a source of obligation, self-loathing, and/or disgust for various segments of the

population. Such sentiments entail their own distinct rituals for this holiday (e.g., singles nights at clubs; self-gifts).

We believe that it is important to understand this commercial holiday from a consumer perspective. We focus on three research questions:

RQ1: What are the consumer behaviors and rituals associated with Valentine's Day?

RQ2: What are some key consumer meanings and emergent themes associated with the holiday?

RQ3: What roles do marketing communications play in shaping the holiday?

We address these questions via multiple methods of data collection, including: a) consumer diaries, b) online postings, c) surveys, d) group interviews, and e) in-store observations.

The following section reviews relevant social science research on rituals and gift exchange. Next, we describe our methods of data collection. We then report and discuss the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rituals and Valentine's Day

Rituals are sets of multiple, symbolic behaviors that: a) occur in a fixed sequence, and b) tend to be repeated periodically (Solomon 2002). We analyze the holiday further as it pertains to a variety of classifications of rituals. Valentine's Day is a holiday that is associated with a variety of cultural rituals. Cultural rituals are behaviors that occur in a relatively fixed sequence that are repeated periodically (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2004). Other types of rituals that may be associated with this holiday are religious, magical, aesthetic, calenderical, and rites of passage (Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan 2004).

Such rituals may be further categorized as primarily personal rituals, ethological rituals, or consumer rituals. Personal rituals are those repeated behaviors that are performed via an individual's emotions and desires. Ethological (e.g., greeting, mating) rituals, however, are a component of biology (Rook 1985). Consumer rituals include possession, grooming, divestment, and exchange. Possession rituals occur when a product moves from the market to the place of consumption (e.g., home, workplace). Grooming rituals are often private behaviors that assist with transforming the private self to the public self and vice versa. Possession rituals may be grooming rituals, in the event that the individual is cleaning, polishing, or restoring the self or the extended self. Divestment rituals are performed as an individual dispossesses something (e.g., a grandmother's wedding ring). Exchange rituals (e.g., rites of passage) are often associated with gift giving and receiving. We note that rituals exist in cycles, which may be global consumption rituals (Rook 1985; Arnould et al. 2004). In any sense, rituals, often retail and market driven, organize life and give it meaning or purpose and may be apparent in various Valentine's-related behaviors.

Gift Giving and Exchange

A substantial portion of academic literature associated with Valentine's Day is devoted to the study of gift exchange (generally gift giving). For instance, the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss

¹Thank you to the informants who contributed to this study.

concludes that reciprocity motivates gift giving (1925). Since that time, pioneering insights have been added to that observation. Sherry (1983) combines anthropology (a social aspect) and consumer research (a psychological aspect), to create a macro-model of the gift exchange process. He recommends that the "reformulation" stage (the final stage of the gift giving process) should be studied thoroughly, as knowledge in this area is crucial to understanding the socio-psychological dynamics of gift giving (Sherry Jr. 1983, p.165). We consider these dynamics as important for understanding Valentine's gift exchange and related rituals.

Goodwin, Swift, and Spiggle (1990) also examine motivations associated with gift-giving. They propose that gift giving is a product of either voluntary or obligatory motives; time, money restraint, and many consumer behaviors are affected by these motives. Belk and Coon (1991; 1993) explain how such motivations have traditionally been viewed from either an economic or a social model of exchange—inappropriate for romantic gift exchange.

Belk and Coon (1993) confirm that more emphasis should be placed on a modernized representation, such as the Model of Agapic Love. This model focuses on gift giving from a pure, unselfish, and altruistic viewpoint. Such a love-oriented model applies to a study by Huang and Yu (2000). Huang and Yu (2000) focus on a survival analysis for gift giving in a romantic relationship. They claim that links exist between gift consumption amongst partners and the length of the romantic relationship. Their findings apply to gift exchange for Valentine's Day; however, their study is not specific to the holiday, as are the following studies.

Netemeyer, Andrews and Durvasula (1993) contribute a study entirely focused on Valentine's gift giving. They show how three behavioral intention models may be applied to both planned and voluntary behavior. Otnes, Ruth, and Milbourne (1994) study attitudes toward Valentine's gift exchange from the *male* perspective. They find that males have motives with respect to: purpose, gift/card giving, and the reasoning behind *why* males choose to engage in or opt out of the gift giving. Polonsky, Neal, Rugimbana, King, Bowd, and Porter (2000) follow the Otnes et al. (1994) study, and confirm the themes of obligation, self-interest, and altruism. In contrast, Polonsky et al. find that either obligation or self-interest is always present.

Few prior studies focus on non-gift rituals associated with this Valentine's Day. Thus, one of our research questions focuses on exploring a more comprehensive account of consumer behaviors for this holiday. We will now discuss the methods we used to address the research questions.

METHODS

Table 1 summarizes our methods and informants, sample sizes, timeframe, and relevant details.

Method I: Diaries

Eighty-eight consumers kept diaries related to their thoughts and behaviors concerning the holiday. The age of diary authors ranged from 18-47, with a mode of 23 years-old. A relatively even distribution of males and females in various relationship statuses completed entries. Diary entries focused on the holiday's: a) cultural rituals, b) male roles, c) female roles, d) enjoyment factor, and e) comparison to other holidays (e.g., meanings, associated marketing communications). Diary entries provide a personalized data source for this more intimate holiday.

To complement the offline diaries, we analyze online diary entries that have been published on the Internet. Online diary postings are often written under a non-recognizable screen name;

such anonymity provides for rich, truthful data concerning individuals' sentiments and experiences with the holiday. While some individuals post with a first name and other information (e.g., age, city of residence), we are not always able to obtain the poster's age or gender.

We used axial, open, and selective coding techniques for data analysis, and grouped similar entries into categories of meaning. Such contributed towards revealing the emergent patterns of each category (Wolcott 1990). The authors reviewed each other's data interpretations until saturation.

Method II: Survey

For a supplementary perspective, we distributed a twelve-item exploratory survey on Valentine's Day (2003) to college students. We administered one hundred surveys in order to gather insight from individuals in a romantic relationship. We included a screener question (i.e., Are you currently in a romantic relationship?). If the respondent reported to be in a relationship, they were directed to complete the survey. In total, we analyzed sixty-four surveys (thirty-two for each gender).

Survey items questioned the expectations, behaviors, perceptions, and the commercial aspects of this holiday. In addition, respondents indicated their age, gender, and whether they are in a "new relationship" (less than six months) or a more established relationship (six months or more) as suggested by Huang and Yu (2000).

Method III: Focus Group Interviews

Unlike the survey administered to both genders, we designed a focus group for female college students in a relationship, to encourage discussion without males present. We choose to focus on females for group interviews, as this is a more "female holiday" in the U.S. Furthermore, insight on male perspectives has been examined (e.g., Otnes et al. 1994; Polonsky et al. 2000) in extant literature. The focus group participants included six females (three in a new relationship and three in a more established relationship). An outside moderator served as the discussant. Two researchers took field notes during the session. The researchers debriefed the session and constructed overall themes and sub-themes.

Method IV: In-Store Observations

By conducting in-store observations, we witnessed aspects of commercial preparation for Valentine's Day. The observations and fieldwork took place in floral departments of two large national grocery store chains and other retailers associated with the holiday. Observations took place at the first location, located in a southeastern city, during the week of and on Valentine's Day 2003. A second round of observations took place at another grocer in a different town, on Valentine's Day 2004. A final round of observations took place in a mid-size southwestern city the weekend before Valentine's Day 2005.

At the outset of our study, we did not intend to focus on one specific kind of human relationship (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual). However, our informants tended to focus on heterosexual relationships or did not specify the type of romantic relationship.

FINDINGS

RQ1: WHAT ARE THE CONSUMER BEHAVIORS AND RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH VALENTINE'S DAY?

A wide variety of rituals, often retail related, are associated with Valentine's Day. We show five broad interrelated categories and their defining behaviors in Table 2. In light of our research

TABLE 1
Methods of the Study

Method	Informants	Time Frame	Details
Consumer Diaries (n=88)	Undergraduate Students Males and Females Ages 18-47; Mode Age=23 Any relationship status	2002-2004	Entries focused on the: a) cultural rituals, b) male roles, c) female roles, d) enjoyment factor, and e) comparison to other holidays.
Online Diaries/ Postings (n=22)	Anonymous posters to online diaries & message boards Males and Females All ages Any relationship status	2000-2004	Sources include: diaryland.com, opendiary.com, my-diary.org, pfft.com, diarist.net, mydeardiary.com, marketing science message board, various personal websites
Survey (n=64)	College students Males and Females Age 18-22 Currently in a romantic relationship	2003	Conducted on Valentine's Day
Focus Group Interviews (n=6)	College students Females Age 18-22 Currently in a romantic relationship	2003	Moderator's guide covered: rituals, meanings behind the holiday, traditions, reasons, and self-gift giving
In-Store Observations (n=41)	Customers at floral department and associated holiday retailers Males and Females All ages Any relationship status	2003-2005	Conducted on the week of and on Valentine's Days; field notes taken Conducted in the southeast and southwest

objectives, we will not discuss the meanings of *each* of these items; however, we focus on those that contribute to addressing our specified research questions.

Exchanging Gifts and Cards

Gift and card exchange is the most frequently mentioned behavior. One informant describes how she is just a *partial*-conformist to the American norm (Santino 1995, 1996):

Many people in America celebrate Valentine's Day by participating in the same rituals. The most common (gift giving and consumption) rituals are buying your loved one chocolate candy, red roses and wine. I also participate in these typical traditions, but I try and modify them for meaningful reasons. [F, Diary]

This informant, like others, partakes in traditional rituals, yet she maintains a sense of individualism on a day that is otherwise conforming to the consumption and/or exchange of specific products and brands. Valentine's is a day when many *speak of* giving personalized gifts in lieu of the "status quo" gifts of roses, chocolate, stuffed animal, and/or perfume. One way to optimize gift giving is to involve as many senses as possible. One informant describes her gift giving technique:

When I buy my Valentine's Days gifts, I also try to use all five senses. I will purchase some kind of candy for taste, flowers or cologne for smell, a nice dinner with candles so it looks nice, a winter shirt to feel warm in and I like to buy my loved ones a soft sound CD to listen to. [F, Diary]

Personalization is an important element of altruistic gift giving. She continues, as she discusses the importance of considering the preferences and tastes of the recipient:

I always try to put effort in my gift giving and personalize them too. For instance, my mom would prefer flowers and my dad would rather have cologne. So, whoever the person I am shopping for, whether it be my boyfriend, mom or dad I always try to be creative, use all five senses and most importantly show them my love. [F, Diary]

However, it is often more difficult and time intensive to select and purchase personalized gifts on this holiday due to the mass-production of Valentine's-related merchandise online and in on-ground retail locations.

Others view the entire idea of gift giving for this holiday as purely market-driven and store-bought. Many men have learned to "listen to the shelves" and to avoid certain gifts for romantic occasions (e.g., blenders, cleaning supplies). One man takes time to help other gift-givers by specifying what, in his experience, women *do* want for this holiday:

Any way, amigo, if you want her happy always remember: the gift has to shine or smell [good] or she should be able to wear it! Otherwise, you'll be doomed. [M, Posted 2-14-04]

This perspective is in stark contrast to many of the female posts, diaries, and discussions of appropriate gifts to give and to receive. Many females discuss how the gift exchanged should be meaningful to the couple, thoughtful, or unique.

TABLE 2
Valentine's Holiday Consumer Behaviors & Rituals

Category	Specific Behaviors & Rituals Mentioned by Informants
Exchanging Gifts & Cards	Personalizing/non-conforming gifts, incorporating symbols (e.g., cupid, heart), decorating rooms/vehicles, incorporating senses, lighting candles, sharing chocolate anything, surprising loved ones with gifts or meaningful gestures, giving shiny or scented gifts, e-gift giving, preparing a special gift basket, giving specific items: red roses, flowers, concert tickets, teddy bear, pearls, diamond jewelry, engagement ring, chick-flicks, romantic movies or television shows lingerie, candy, diet candy, Spa Sydell half-day certificate, framed picture of the couple, car, new house, gifts for pets. Cards: personalizing, cutting out hearts, using artsy/crafty Valentine's, exchanging cheesy store-bought Valentine's, writing poetry, expressing true romantic feelings in a card, sending e-Valentine's, exchanging Valentine's with other singles, sending secret admirer cards, naming the "Hallmark Holiday"
Showing Affection	Sex, kissing, making out, acting sensual, making loved ones feel special, slowing down, building a fire, cuddling on the couch, going on a date, romantic getaways, getting in the mood, love-making, celebrating love, spending time alone, enjoying each other's company, staying in together, avoiding the crowds, emphasizing commitment to one another, renewing vows, proposing, celebrating a romantic anniversary, getting married, snuggling, reading to each other, being grateful for each other, displaying affection, reminding friends and family they are loved, playing a game
Going Out	Nice restaurant, going to the ballet, parties, get-togethers, singles parties, fraternity date nights, hiring a sitter and escaping out, movies, theatre, concert, shopping, carriage rides, clubs, bars, spa getaways, weekend vacations, anti-Valentine's parties, going to virtual spaces: e-dating sites, singles chats, Valentine chat rooms, message boards
Preparing & Consuming Food/Drink	Preparing romantic food, heart-shaped sandwiches, actually cooking in lieu of fast food, cooking surf-n-turf, aphrodisiacs, drinking expensive wine, drinking champagne, eating candy, candy hearts with messages, eating chocolate, avoiding cheap chocolate, eating alone, eating desserts, whip cream, avoiding overcrowded restaurants, having candle-light dinners on the back porch, picnics, expensive dinners
Grooming & Clothing	Wearing certain colors (i.e., red, pink) of lingerie and/or clothing, wearing pretty underwear, wearing heels, planning what to wear in advance, buying a new outfit, wearing sexy clothes, wearing a themed tie, putting on a cute outfit, getting dressed up to go meet singles, taking time off to groom, bikini and leg waxing, spending extra time on make-up, tanning, spray-tanning, getting a special hairdo, applying manicures/pedicures in pink or red, actually showering and brushing teeth, applying lotions and glitter, beautifying the entire body, looking better than other females, applying a temporary heart tattoo, wearing extra perfume, working out, shaving chest hair into a heart shape

Some males mention that the Internet makes it much easier to give feminine gifts (e.g., lingerie). These males share that they are uncomfortable spending time in a women's lingerie store, such as Victoria's Secret, aside from feeling that they make the women shoppers uncomfortable. One male reports that he actually enjoys giving lingerie—if it is purchased on the Internet:

Yeah, I enjoy the experience of buying a gift online. It makes it more efficient. Victoria's Secret it is easier to go to online. Call me crazy. It is easier to do it online. [M, Diary]

Some informants also use the Internet to send online greeting cards for this holiday to friends and family members in certain situations. However, others choose to send an e-gift card:

I wouldn't ever buy a card online and send it online (like an E-card), but I would buy a greeting card to have sent along with the gift. But if the gift card was a free E-card, then, yeah (I would send it), that's not a problem. I don't mind even just putting in a little note, five or so words in a message, that comes along with the gift when it is sent. I would even pay a couple dollars extra to make that message longer. [M, Diary]

To this informant, e-cards with gifts are an important part of the gift exchange and even worth paying a premium for; however e-cards should be free. Traditional, paper greeting cards (store-bought and homemade) are discussed as the more common form of card exchange among romantic partners. In general, these gifts and cards are a vehicle of showing affection.

Showing Affection

A key group of behaviors involves showing affection. Informants discuss relaxing with loved ones as a way of sharing affection. Whereas some individuals involve themselves with "holiday hype", one young woman shares how she likes to slow down with loved ones on this holiday:

Even though Valentine's Day is not necessarily about gift giving I enjoy the holiday every year just for the sole purpose that I get an extra chance during the busy year to let my loved ones know I care and have a nice dinner and celebrate each other's love. My fondest memories of Valentine's Day is every year building a warm fire after dinner and relaxing with each other. [F, Diary]

Kissing, making out, love-making, and sex are other behaviors informants commonly share as a way to show affection to loved one(s) for this holiday. This is one example of “celebrating” the holiday in the private sphere.

For those in and out of romantic relationships, more daring behaviors take place on Valentine’s Day. This holiday makes it more appropriate to be direct with affection. This day is different:

There is a sense of magic, excitement, and romance. [F, Diary]

On this day, some take initiative to rekindle a relationship or connect with someone new:

It can be a day to try to find a loved one. It is a day when a secret admirer might emerge. [M, Diary]

It is the holiday that entices some to come forward with their romantic feelings.

Going Out

Although many celebrate the holiday intimately at home, a common Valentine’s-related behavior entails “going out”. Many informants discuss going out on dates in the public sphere (e.g., movie theaters, parks, restaurants). Many singles choose to spend the holiday at singles events or with a group of other singles. This is one day where singles seek each other’s company:

Singles might sit around in a group, watching movies or feeling sorry for themselves. Or, they might find a way to celebrate the day. [F, Diary]

One informant tells how this is the *one* night he is sure to go out to meet someone, because other singles are out celebrating, while the couples are home together.

Preparation and Consuming Food/Drink

Whereas many consumers go out and celebrate over dinner in a restaurant or café, others celebrate the holiday by preparing and consuming food and drink in the privacy of the home. Some consumers share that romantic dinners at home have the benefits of saving money, avoiding risks from drinking and driving, and have a comfortable and personal atmosphere.

Some of the more commonly exchanged and consumed items for this holiday are sweets and chocolates. Women often receive sweets on this day, and this consumption ritual is based on the assumption that women go weak for sweets (see Barthel 1989; Belk and Costa 1999). Some do not just like chocolate—they LOVE it. Such instances may explain why sweets are a common gift to women on Valentine’s Day. As one woman explains:

It’s not just candy. I have a fatal weakness for desserts. I love ice cream, cakes, pies, pastries, chocolate, fruit, and most other sweets with a passion. Whenever I go to a moderately nice restaurant, I’m mostly thinking about the dessert I could get at the end of the meal if I’m not too full. At Italian places, I dream of espresso pie and tiramisu, and most restaurants have good cheesecake. If it’s homemade and comes in a pool of raspberry or chocolate sauce, I go weak at the knees. [F, Posted 2-14-03]

Such information may be of interest to men, as it appears that this woman would be pleased with gifts of chocolate just as much as expensive jewelry or roses. She is disappointed that her husband does not love sweets. It is not from the dieter’s viewpoint (i.e., it is

unfair that he goes without sugar cravings), but from the pity-filled perspective that he is truly missing out on one of life’s finer things:

It’s a little disheartening that my husband doesn’t share my love of sweets. He will happily eat ice cream or cheesecake or apple pie, but he doesn’t seem to savor it, and really look forward to the next time the same way I do. The power sugar holds over me doesn’t hold him. Some people in my situation would envy his self-control and lack of need of candy, but I just pity him, knowing he’ll never understand what it’s like to be in love with it. [F, Posted 2-14-03]

Just as chocolate and candy are frequently mentioned, red wine and champagne are the beverages many informants associate with the holiday. Wine is even a part of grooming rituals for some individuals on this holiday.

Grooming and Clothing

One grooming behavior of note is the act of “primping and priming”, or taking extra effort to look one’s best. In the group interviews, the females discussed how grooming efforts on this day are much different from their everyday rituals. One woman spent hours beautifying herself for her new boyfriend:

I was so nervous getting ready for Valentine’s Day when I first met my boyfriend, I literally attempted to calm my nerves by drinking a couple glasses of wine, and then beautified my entire body, from head to toe. [F, New; FGI]

Such a lavish grooming ritual may be more common for young women in new relationships. One woman, in a more established relationship explains that she no longer performs extraordinary grooming rituals:

I love my boyfriend dearly, but I don’t think it is necessary to buy a new dress to wear for one night like I would have for the first Valentine’s Day that we spent together! We tend to use the money that I would have spent getting my hair and nails done on something that we can both share together, like a really nice dinner. [F, Longer-term; FGI]

Unlike the young woman who shunned the need to buy a dress, another informant was proud of both her recent purchase and the way it complements her “purchased” skin tone:

I bought a new dress, but I had to make sure that it was classy but sexy at the same time. I made sure I had a nice color by going to the tanning bed a couple weeks prior to Valentine’s Day. [F, New; FGI]

Such women in new relationships were *especially* eager to share their preparation rituals, and the session transformed into a “competition.” Many of the young women spoke at once, trying to surpass one another with their lavish doings. One woman in a new relationship seemed confident of her extra beauty efforts, as he took time out of her school and work schedule to groom:

I had to make sure that I had time to go to the spa to “fix” my body up for Valentine’s Day. [F, New; FGI]

Some men may not believe (or desire to acknowledge) the preparation that some females go through; however, informants stated that their partners were extremely pleased with the final “product.”

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Some of the ritualistic behaviors may seem unnecessary; however, these behaviors contribute to these females' individuality. Our informants (women in romantic relationships) do prepare for Valentine's Day in similar ways; however, the females in new relationships discuss going to greater lengths and monetary expenses for their partners.

We now consider the underlying meanings and emergent themes associated with these behaviors.

RQ2: WHAT ARE SOME KEY CONSUMER MEANINGS AND EMERGENT THEMES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS HOLIDAY?

The key meanings and themes we discuss here include: "love, affection and intimacy", "altruism", "mutual expectations", "self-gifts", and "negative feelings". Other themes (e.g., commercialism) are discussed in the section related to our third research question. We begin with the "positive themes" and then discuss more negative aspects of Valentine's Day.

Love, Affection and Intimacy

One key meaning of Valentine's Day is the showing of love, affection, sharing intimacy, and sex. In the public sphere, kisses, hugs, and hand-holding in public are more common on this day; public displays of affection are sightings that many have come to expect on February 14th. In the private sphere, this holiday celebrates romantic love and intimacy. For some, it is a time set aside for sex:

It is the holiday to stay in and share intimate times and sex. [F, Diary]

Valentine's means displays of love, affection, and care. [F, Diary]

Informants often associate the holiday with *all* loved ones (e.g., family, friends, significant-other):

Valentine's Day is a time for love and affection. I do not know anyone who wants to spend Valentine's Day alone. I love to spend my Valentine's Days with the person I am dating or my family. I love buying and giving gifts during this holiday but the most important thing is being with the people I care about and love. [F, Diary]

Family, specifically, is often mentioned as an important part of the holiday. Important family members include parents, siblings, and grandparents. Many phone calls and letters for this holiday are not just for romantic loved ones, but also for such family members.

Altruism

Altruism, or voluntary giving which is not directed at gain, is a key Valentine's Day theme. Motivations for gift giving in a romantic relationship change with time, and altruistic gifts may extend the relationship (Huang and Yu 2000). We find, for instance, that males in a longer-standing relationship have positive feelings for this holiday stemming from altruistic motives and love. Polonsky et al., however, find that "the altruism motive was rarely found to occur independently amongst young males, especially with relationships that have been established for periods longer than six months." (Polonsky et al. 2000, p.1003)

We find a similar phenomenon in responses from women. Women in a longer relationship were more likely to share selfless giving than the women who were involved in a fairly new relationship. Past studies (e.g., Huang and Yu 2000; Polonsky et al. 2000)

also found altruism is positively related to relationship length. However, those studies focused on males' gift-giving; our findings extend to women as well. Altruistic motives are apparent with males and females and underlie behavior for this holiday.

Mutual Expectations

Childhood experiences play a large role in shaping adult Valentine's expectations. Early memories of the day evoke images of elementary school and the parties, arts and crafts, candy, time off from schoolwork, and egalitarian exchange of Valentine's cards. Time off from schoolwork is more common on Valentine's Day in public elementary school, because of the secular association with the holiday, as compared to the policies that limit celebrations of religious holidays (e.g., Christmas, Easter) during class time. Because of such strong, early-rooted influences, consumers build up high expectations for the day. As a result, consumers enter their teenage years with high expectations. Such heightened expectations may lead to disappointment (e.g., by teenage females who expect uninformed young males to shower them with gifts and affection).

These expectations are mutual; over half (53%) of the males and 63% females in our survey expect a gift(s) from their significant other for the holiday. Heightened female expectations might be associated with the fact that women receive more gifts than they give on Valentine's Day (Goodwin et al. 1990). A further explanation may be that women see themselves to be gift-receivers more so than givers on this day. However, males do view the lack of gifts received as a negative factor associated with the holiday (Otnes et al. 1994).

Interestingly, a higher percentage of males and females in a new relationship expect gifts, as compared to those in a more established relationship. As the duration of the relationship increases, both men and women expect fewer gifts from their partners. As both partners may begin to feel comfortable and confident in the relationship, they may not feel the need to impress the other, as with self-gifts.

Self-Gifts

Self-gifts are gifts that are given to oneself to try and appear more attractive in their partners' eyes (Huang and Yu 2000). Examples of "self gifts" include perfume, cosmetics, and lingerie. We find that more of the women in a *new* relationship indulge in self-giving. This could be explained by the negative relation between relationship length and pressure to look "perfect". Valentine's Day is viewed as one of the most romantic times of year, and women who spend this day with someone special for the first time often go to greater lengths to "prepare themselves". Females speak of these self-gifts as a way to make themselves "absolutely irresistible" for their partner.

Negative Feelings

Not all informants hold the same warm feelings for the holiday; some consumers "can't stand this day of love." Past studies have suggested that men are primarily the ones with "anti-Valentine" feelings; however, there are expressive females speaking out and sharing their distaste for this love-oriented day. One woman turns to chat rooms and message boards when her misery needs company:

I've spent this valentines surfing the net, looking for sites about love sucking! My bou of 4 years broke up about 1 month ago, he is with someone right now...DEATH TO VALENTINES! [F, Posted 02-15-00]

Another young woman encourages others to send hate mail instead of “happy-grams”:

I want to urge everyone to join me in sending hate mail instead of Valentine’s on this wonderful day. It makes you feel better. I promise. [F, Posted 02-15-00]

However, another woman shares her suggestion of getting rid of the day completely:

I always used to hate this holiday, and my friends told me I was weird- but now I know I’m not alone! Abolish Valentine’s Day! [F, Posted 02-11-00]

Yet, some individuals just have problems in the way society interprets the holiday—or, they do not think it is a holiday at all:

I hate Valentine’s Day because all those people in love think that it is a real holiday and it’s not...it is a time of the year that everyone who is in love gets stupid and all mushy while the rest of us get left out yet again and we are forgotten about just because we haven’t found the one...this sucks...! [M, Posted 02-04-00]

A theme we see often is that informants do not think that love is to be shown on “this day and this day only”. The following men seem to have more of a problem with it being *the* day for showing love:

I hate Valentine’s Day, because...I don’t know. I think, if you love someone, you don’t need a special day to show it. Every day is suitable for this. [M, Posted 02-15-00]

Some of this dislike for the holiday (and what it represents) stems from unfulfilled expectations. Not getting a gift, “the right” gift, or desired attention often leads to disappointment. Self-esteem may fluctuate on Valentine’s Day, as some get a boost or a threat to their self-esteem. We now consider the role of marketing communications on consumer expectations and experiences for this holiday.

RQ3: WHAT ROLES DO MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS PLAY IN SHAPING THE HOLIDAY?

Marketing communications play a role in shaping feelings of materialism on one hand, and togetherness on the other. Marketing communications also contribute to gender roles for this holiday. We begin by discussing some observations of in-store marketing communications practices, and then discuss some roles that various forms of marketing communications play in fostering materialism, togetherness, and gender roles for the Valentine’s holiday.

In-store displays sometimes start appearing months prior to February 14th. Our observations in floral departments and retailers that cater to the holiday include: multiple red and pink displays, including balloons, a “Valentine’s Day Gift Center” banner, and extra options for floral and gift-wrap arrangements. Such a promotional arrangement attracts mainly men, who often purchase flowers, a card, chocolates, a balloon, and/or another small gift all at once. In turn, we see that few females come seeking gifts. Interestingly, there were no masculine items in the area.

One of the most traditional gifts for this holiday is a dozen red roses. However, some specifically requested something different:

I need a really nice arrangement for my girlfriend— but rather than roses, can you use tulips instead? [M, Observation]

To further individualize the gift, the saleswoman asked:

Have you two been together for a while, or is this the first time you would be purchasing flowers for her? I need to know so I can pick the right colors for the arrangement. Normally, red symbolizes love... [F, Observation]

He jumped in:

Yes! (pointing to a peach shade) That would be perfect, since my girlfriend prefers softer colors instead. Also, I really don’t have a limit on how much the flowers cost. This is the first time I’m buying flowers and I want it to be nice. [M, Observation]

Here, price is a proxy for quality. He was willing to pay for “the best”. He described his spending limit as:

As much as it takes to satisfy my girlfriend! [M, Observation]

Another observed customer described how he begins saving months in advance, because he expects a considerable financial burden for this holiday. Marketing efforts also entice women to spend, among other enticements:

Marketing gets me “in the mood”, and causes me to buy more stuff than I normally would. For example, I bought Valentine cards for everyone in my family and all of my friends. [F, Diary]

Fostering Materialism

Valentine’s Day has a materialistic aspect that is reflected in the multitude of ads, public relations material, in-store displays, and e-communications that remind consumers to purchase something for their loved ones. Recall we found that both women and men expect to receive some sort of gift. Some consumers overtly trace these mutual expectations to marketing communications. Recall that some consumers express negative feelings toward this holiday. Some explicitly attempt to avoid marketers’ influences. One way is via the exchange of non-marketed, “hand-made” gifts (e.g., home-made dinners, massages, original song lyrics, homemade cards). However, traditional store-bought goods or services (e.g., restaurant meals, massage certificates, CDs, greeting cards) are mentioned by the majority of informants. Some individuals aspire to share luxurious items and brands (e.g., Tiffany & Co., Godiva) with their loved one, as ad images suggest. However, not all informants associate Valentine’s marketing communications with materialism. Instead, they notice the “togetherness” reflected in marketing communications.

Fostering Togetherness

Marketing communications foster a sense of togetherness for some. Images often depict lovers spending time together. One informant recognizes the meaning of showing such images, and how she now appreciates this holiday’s meaning:

Having people around to share special occasions leaves a much stronger impact in one’s life rather than receiving material things. Every year on Valentine’s Day, I have a nice breakfast with my mother and father and then a romantic dinner with the person I am dating... that way I can spend a little time with everyone that I love. [F, Diary]

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For some, the shared gifts, food, and drink, are a vehicle of spending quality time and showing affection with loved ones and non-materialistic in nature.

A formal engagement is a symbol of togetherness. Some ads suggest proposing on this day. One male even recalls the advertiser:

Every Valentine's Day this one jeweler, the Shane Company, I think, calls out for men who are in relationships and suggests we come to their store and buy a ring. I don't want some businessman telling me that it is time to propose! [M, Diary]

The Valentine's season is a popular time for advertising engagement rings and wedding goods. To some informants, a diamond ring (and the future marriage that it symbolizes) is the ideal exchange. One informant had a day to remember. She is happy to share her story, as well as glimpses of her solitaire:

We went down to Atlanta on Valentine's Day and checked into the Westin Hotel and went outside for a picnic that my boyfriend had planned. It was raining so we were carrying an umbrella. We went to a horse and buggy, to which I was very surprised, and rode around Atlanta. We got off at Centennial Olympic Park and sat under a pavilion and had a salad, heart-cut sandwiches, fruit, and strawberries dipped in chocolate. After lunch, my boyfriend had a velvet Godiva chocolate box (that I had asking to eat all day!) I finally go to open it, and at this point, I was thinking that he might have put a ring in there, since our day had been so extravagant. I opened it and it (a ring) was not in the box. I got some chocolate and put the box down (disappointedly). [F, Diary]

Her diary continues:

Later, he picked the box (of Godiva chocolate) back up and asked me to see what kind of chocolate was in the center. I opened it and the ring was in there! He asked me to stand, and he got down on one knee... and asked me to marry him! I was crying and, of course, it was one of the most exciting days of my life. [F, Diary]

Upon hearing that her friend received a ring, another female responded with a half-joking tone:

You got a diamond ring—I didn't even get a card. [F, Observation]

Such sentiments are not uncommon—especially from singles on this holiday that reportedly “discriminates against” single people. To those who have negative Valentines feelings, marketing communications overtly depicting togetherness and engagements are especially irritating.

Fostering Gender Roles

Marketing communications fosters gender roles for this holiday. For example, consumers state how marketing messages suggest, imply, or state that this is a day for females. Informants reference the ads and messages that suggest pampering the female with a gift, card, dinner, and other purchased signs of affection. In turn, a somewhat common female perspective is that it is a day for female attention:

Females are supposed to be pampered and spoiled on this day. [F, Diary]

Some males perceive their gender role as a day to cater to “the ladies”:

Valentine's Day is cool...since I'm a true ladies man 🍷 It is a great day. 🍷 [M, Posted 5-20-04]

Other male roles apparent in marketing communications include buying, buying enough, and finding romantic activities to do. One woman realizes the pressure the hype for this holiday seems to put on some males:

There is so much hype, I think it sucks even for people IN a relationship- what should they do/buy, are doing/buying too much (for women), are they doing/buying enough (enough)? I got married on Valentines day and I remember every man invited was all smiles, because it gave them something “romantic” to do on valentines day with their partners that didn't cost them anything, and took all the pressure of them! Its embarrassing to be a marketer when you see something so commercialized, isn't it? [F, Posted 2-15-2004]

Another female shares her perception of each gender role during this holiday:

The male is the wooer. The female role is to be wooed. [F, Diary]

Although some females are “wooed”, other females are anything but wooed.

This is a day for a female to have her heart broken or else have an absolutely wonderful day. [F, Diary]

It is apparent that Valentine's Day is a day of extremes—from euphoria to heartbreak.

DISCUSSION

On the surface, Valentine's Day is a simple holiday; nonetheless, there are a wide variety of behaviors, rituals, meanings, and commercial efforts associated with this day. Because this holiday is so rich in consumer meaning, we are just scratching the surface in this study. Valentine's Day rituals are constantly evolving. New traditions are added annually (e.g., e-Valentine's, speed dating).

Marketing expenditures and efforts are large, and often begin months before the holiday. Such marketing efforts often target males as potential buyers, and often make explicit suggestions or guidelines to assist them in the gift giving process. Such marketing efforts are a clever strategy, because (young) males are sometimes fertile ground—and confused about what is expected from them with respect to this holiday.

At the same time, we find evidence of consumer revolt. Many consumers go out of their way to avoid “stereotypical” rituals or the mass-commercialism associated with Valentine's Day. For some, Valentine's is a season to be reminded of one's “single status” or a time of self-reflection and evaluation. For some, this holiday can be a source of obligation, self-loathing, and/or disgust. Distinct rituals are enacted for this situation (e.g., singles nights at clubs; gossiping about couples, girls' night out, self-gifts).

Consistent themes emerge in our research. For instance, we find that males often feel obligated to make significant purchases. Females tend to focus more on grooming rituals and prepare to “be wooed”. Members of both sexes discuss themes of belongingness and romance. Males are inclined to use gifts as a form of nonverbal

communication, whereas females engage in self-gift behaviors. Females spend a considerable amount of time and money in preparation for “the day.”

Limitations of our study include relatively small sample sizes and restricted geographic/demographic focus. Furthermore, most of our informants focused on heterosexual relationships. One direction for future research is to examine, in detail, other kinds of relationships. Another way to expand our focus would be to study Valentine’s rituals in other cultures. For example, in South Korea, the gender roles are often reversed, and the holiday is a time for the female to provide a gift (e.g., and express her “hidden affections”). Culture and practices learned at an early age are large contributors to rituals and meanings associated with a holiday. Nonetheless, these ritual practices change and evolve over the course of a lifetime. In terms of future research, the following three questions are of interest: 1) In elementary school, Valentine’s Day is an egalitarian holiday with equal exchanges of cards and gifts to both sexes. How is it, then, that all of this has changed by the adult years, which now focuses attention on the female?, 2) Why is it that females have such high expectations for this holiday?, and 3) Why is Valentine’s a holiday that seems to befuddle males so much? Females seem to have firm expectations, but males (at all ages) find the “meaning” of the holiday to be elusive.

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