

Escalated Expectations and Expanded Gender Roles:  
Womens' Gift-Giving Rituals and Resistance for Valentine's Day Events

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“Valentine’s Day is far too materialistically driven. I think that the focus needs to be on spending time together, not money on each other!” [Female, Single]. As this informant strongly feels, Valentine’s Day is a marketed holiday event that should be about spending time, not money. Instead, many of the day’s events entail a focus on gift-exchange rituals and often lavish evenings or weekends away. Gift-exchange rituals during special occasions and holidays are reflective of the marketplace and gender roles with close tie-ins with contemporary society, culture, and relationships. Holiday events such as Christmas (e.g., Belk 1987) and Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) offer an important lens to understand consumer behavior. Those studies provide us knowledge on rituals, materialism, and social/romantic interactions. An important event for personal relationships, retailing, and marketing, and one that has received relatively little prior research attention, is Valentine’s Day. Valentine’s Day, for one, is a consumption context that hosts a vast potential for contributing knowledge on consumer rituals, gift-exchange, motivations, and gender roles.

In this chapter, I focus on womens’ gift-exchange, namely gift-giving, in the romantic context of a holiday event--Valentine’s Day. It is an especially valuable context for studying consumption phenomena for several reasons. For one, it is a holiday where gender roles are highlighted along with womens’ ritual performance common to many holidays and special events in the U.S. For instance, the allure of the white wedding draws many women (and their finances) to help direct, plan, stage and enact a lavish wedding (Otnes and Pleck 2003). Second, such social exchange rituals are embedded in romantic discourse of dating and marriage—an aspect of consumption that

may shape much marketplace behavior and one that lends itself to much knowledge seeking. Third, the religious connotation of Valentine's Day is minimized in the modern marketplace. Where other U.S. gift-laden holidays (e.g., Christmas, Easter) may involve a cultural divide between secular and religious themes, Valentine's Day is more neutral. Despite these attributes, this event remains relatively under-explored as a consumption context.

Collectively, U.S. retail sales totaled \$16.9 billion for 2011 (National Retail Federation 2011)—granting this event a substantial economic significance. Based on an ongoing survey of Valentine's Day intentions and practices from the National Retail Federation, most (58 percent) consumers in the U.S. plan on celebrating Valentine's Day and spending an average of \$116.00. Gift-giving among love interests remains the prominent market exchange ritual. This year in 2011, couples will spend on average of \$69.00 of that \$116.00 on gifts for their significant other or spouse. The National Retail Federation's ongoing study of Valentine's Day also provides evidence that U.S. consumers share common gift traditions; these include cards (52%), candy (48%), flowers (34%), jewelry (17%), and clothing (14%). Other traditions are experiential. For instance, many share an evening out (35%). These traditional gifts and experiences are marketed as a social exchange to foster togetherness, love, and romance; however, commercial, economic, and psychological aspects are at work.

Because this day is largely considered a female day in the U.S., and women are a growing subset of gift-givers (compared to their more traditional role of gift recipients), my chapter focuses on womens' gift-exchange rituals. Otnes et al. (1994) contributed insights on male behavior and perceptions of Valentine's Day, and this chapter will serve as a way to illuminate the differences between the genders and the times in these areas. Where Ruth et al. (1999) focus on the gift-recipient's perceptions of the existing relationship, the gift, the ritual context, and emotional

reactions converge to impact relationship realignment, here, I also include a focus on the gift-giving experiences. Further, I seek to expand insights on social exchange theory into the Valentine's Day holiday context by addressing two research questions:

1. What are women's defining gender roles and key motivations to participate in gift-exchange for Valentine's Day?
2. What aspects of the holiday's traditions do women resist and why?

To address these questions, I employ complementary qualitative methods. This manuscript is organized as follows. First, I provide an overview of the economic implications of Valentine events. Then, I discuss the contextual and conceptual foundations namely in the areas of rituals, gifts, materialism, culture, roles, and self-gifts. Then, I provide the methods and data analysis. Next, I present findings to the research questions. I then deploy the findings to extend social exchange theory in the areas of rituals and gift-exchange. Gift exchange is also a social exchange, so social exchange theory is deployed as it pertains to three theories of gift exchange after the findings to help explain the findings for the two research questions. Finally, I discuss implications for theory and practice, limitations, and avenues for future scholarly research.

## **CONTEXTUAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **RITUALS**

Valentine's Day is an event laden with rituals. Defined, a ritual is an "expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (Rook 1985, p. 252). Rituals are scripted and performed formally, seriously, and with inner-intensity (Rook 1985). The transformative, symbolic effects of rituals are bracketed

from mundane life (Stanfield, Tetreault and Kleine 1990). Rituals are akin to maintaining and modifying systems of society, knowledge, and nature (Stanfield et al. 1990). Rituals are enacted in events marking or a change of status (e.g., marriage) or a transition through cycles (e.g., Valentine's Day each year) (Stanfield et al. 1990). A ritual coagulates content and structural components of both everyday and extraordinary experiences; here, I focus on the extraordinary experience that recurs annually in February.

People are guided by rituals, tied by cultural ideology, which may be seen in expressions of either praise or discontent. Each holiday market has distinct rituals; for instance sharing a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving, gathering around a Christmas tree to exchange gifts, or trick-or-treating on Halloween. On Valentine's Day, rituals are often embedded in romantic discourse and include card and gift-giving exchanges that are market prescribed (Close and Zinkhan 2005). These rituals may be resisted in the marketplace, leading to market resistance (Close and Zinkhan 2007; 2009). Valentine's Day has also served as a context to develop knowledge on theories of the social component of gift exchange (Otnes, Lowry and Kim 1993) buyer behavior and purchase intention (Netemeyer, Andrews, and Durvasula 1993), male behavior (Otnes, Ruth, and Milborne 1994; Polonsky et al. 2001), and power (Rugimbana et al. 2003). The female mindset, perceived gender-roles, and any related resistance has yet to be understood.

#### GIFTS AND OBLIGATION, ALTRUISM, ROMANTIC LOVE

Valentine's has a distinct romantic discourse. Based on interviews with college-aged males in Australia, Polonsky et al. (2001) find three motives that drive gift-giving—obligation, altruism, and romantic love. Interestingly, obligation is the strongest motive and, among young

Australian men, even dominates the love-based motivations. The most salient motivation for gift-giving on Valentine's Day is related to the length of the relationship; obligation lessens and altruism and love develop over the course of the relationship (Polonsky et al. 2001).

Gift-giving is an expression of agapic love (Belk 1993). Agapic expressiveness is necessary for understanding gift-giving and perhaps for understanding consumer behavior in general (Belk 1993). Although most Valentine's Day promotion emphasizes romantic love, there are different types of love. First, romantic love entails affiliation, dependency, physical attraction, exclusiveness, and idealization (Critelli, Myers, and Loos 1986). However, conjugal love between friends—especially women—may also be a growing part of this holiday. Conjugal love is associated with strong trust, friendship, acceptance, respect, sharing, intimate knowledge, and sacrifice (Critelli et al. 1986). On the one hand, love can be genuine love, which is an expression of optimal functioning surrounded by intimacy without roles or masks (Fromm 1956). On the other hand, Valentine's Day may arouse pseudo love—characterized by passiveness and neurotic dependency (e.g., the need to be in a romantic relationship on Valentine's Day). Genuine love is not created nor sustained because of externalities (e.g., rituals or market-suggested scripts) (Fromm 1956). That said, genuine love cannot be created nor sustained with materialistic gestures.

## CULTURE AND GIFT-GIVING

In some cultures, families, and family-like contexts, reciprocity is discouraged, and there is less of a need to build relationships through gift-giving. For instance, consumer behavior for Valentine's Day in Israel (Dalakas and Shoham 2010) has strong gender role viewpoints in the

country that are at times reinforced through the holiday. In Asian cultures, family, self-measure and self-fulfillment are key aspects of gift-giving (Joy 2001). Further, reciprocity is not expected and is somewhat discouraged (Joy 2001). For Valentine's Day in many Asian cultures, the gift-giving is only done by women (a separate holiday, White Day reverses the gender roles). Yet, in the U.S., Valentine's Day is a female-oriented day, where the woman is generally courted and showered with attention and gifts. Specifically, Japan (see Minowa, Khomenko, and Belk 2011) has witnessed social changes in gift-giving rituals for this event. Various levels of intimacy in gift relationships manifest via cultural rules such as reciprocity, sentiment, and face (Joy 2001). This culture is further reinforced by mass-media, which depicts ads of happy women receiving roses and jewelry.

## ROLES AND HOLIDAY GIFT-GIVING

Valentine's Day is a holiday that may differ from or reverse the critical female gift-giving and ritual performance responsibility that is common to most other holidays. Overall, while holiday shopping may be a "labor of love" to some, it is widely construed as a female gender role (Fischer and Arnold 1990). For instance, during Christmas, women are more involved than men in shopping and gift-giving rituals (Fischer and Arnold 1990). Men are likely to be more involved if they hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes (Fischer and Arnold 1990).

Besides gender roles, other roles influence holiday gift-giving. Using interpretive techniques, Otnes et al. (1994) find meaning underlying Christmas shoppers' casting of gift-recipients as easy or difficult to shop for. Gift-givers seek to express social roles through the gift exchange. Specifically, there are six key roles that gift-givers express to different recipients; they

assume roles of the: pleaser, provider, compensator, socializer, acknowledger, and the avoider. These roles are assumed alone or in combination of another (Otnes et al. 1994).

## METHODS

I employed complementary qualitative methods in order to get a deep understanding of this emotionally charged topic. For an exploratory understanding, I conducted a focus group with six college-aged women. The focus group enabled me to see any social dynamic. As it was exploratory, here, I focus on the womens' diary and online analysis. Table 1 summarizes the methods, sample sizes, informants, and focus.

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## RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANTS

I recruited informants to the offline study in two ways. One, via newspaper ads in the main newspaper in a mid-sized southeastern town. Other informants were recruited in one of three undergraduate courses in exchange for extra credit. The online data was collected from various online diary websites and thus no recruitment was involved.

Considering each data collection method, informants ranged in age from 18 to 62; however, the vast majority are college-aged. In addition, I document the informant's romantic relationship status. I left the romantic relationship as an open-ended question, and most informants wrote in single, dating, dating exclusively, married, or divorced. Most discussed or wrote about a person of the opposite sex, and because of privacy reasons, I left it up to the informant if they volunteered to specify a homosexual relationship.

## DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

*Diaries.* One hundred forty-nine informants wrote diary entries during the few days before and after Valentine's Day. This less-intrusive method lends to richer data, and, due to the intimate nature, informants may feel more comfortable writing about their romantic-related rituals (or lack thereof) (versus discussing them with a researcher). Informants wrote about their attitudes and documented their experiences with the holiday—both positive and negative. They were asked to include the following topics in their entries: holiday culture, gender roles, commercial aspects, and enjoyment factor. To gather a sense of whether or not their attitudes and behaviors are specific to Valentine's Day, I then asked informants to write how their attitudes and behaviors compare to other holidays. For this data collection method, the majority of the data is from the student sample, and the age ranged from 18-67 (median=24). A relatively even distribution of men and women (slightly more females) participated; however, the females tended to write more. Because the women are of interest for this chapter, I focus on the women's' perceptions here.

*Online Postings.* To reach a broader sample (in terms of age and geography), I collected online diary-type entries or postings on various websites. I searched for e-diary entries or electronic postings on days before, on, and immediately after the holiday (to be consistent with the offline method). While online posters often do not give their name, they often share a screen-name. Their sex, age-range, and relationship status are often embedded in their stories, and I report such if this information is available. This method especially provided rich, less-censored sentiments and emotionally-charged experiences. Importantly, those who share their experiences online do so from



their inner desire and passion. Because the focus of this aspect of the data collection is not to study a specific site's online community, this method is not considered a netnography (Kozinetz 2002). Rather, the purpose here is to supplement and enrich the offline method, and to add breadth to the sample and to overcome any social-desirability bias in a more-traditional approach.

## ANALYSIS AND THEME DEVELOPMENT

Data were analyzed and interpreted according to the protocol for phenomenology suggested by Moustakas (1994). Moving back and forth between the individual entries and transcripts and the entire set of data, I identified significant meaning statements from the informants' lived experiences. These statements were combined into meaning units (Creswell, 1998) with an accompanying description and identifying quotes to allow for elaboration of each unit. Finally, the researchers developed an interpretive description for each meaning unit as it related to the specific research questions and the overall story of Valentine's Day rituals. I iteratively analyzed the data based on the objectives, theories, and themes identified in the literature. Via axial, open, and selective coding, I grouped similar findings and observations into categories of meaning. This contributed towards revealing emergent patterns (Wolcott 1990). In the process, new themes became apparent. The authors reviewed each other's data interpretations until saturation.

*Validity and Reliability.* I used suggested approaches (Spiggle 1994) to aim for validity and reliability. I used multiple methods to depict an overall, holistic understanding of the objectives as suggested by Creswell (1998). I triangulated the data in several ways to gain a full

phenomenological understanding (Moustakas 1994). For instance, I collected data in electronic environments in addition to the offline environment. I considered multiple theories along with the findings. I bracketed introspective notes. I followed up with informants and presented to seminars, scholars in multiple disciplines, and executives in related industries for feedback.

## **FINDINGS**

I return to the research questions (recall: What are womens' defining gender roles/key motivations to participate in gift-exchange for Valentine's Day? and What aspects of the holiday's traditions do women resist and why?) In the next section, I discuss how these findings can extend aspects of Social Exchange Theory in the context of gift-exchange. Overall, some key findings/themes are shown as they compare to males' perception of Valentine's Day from a prior study by Otnes, Ruth, and Pleck (1994) in Table 2. The main themes of interest relating to the research questions are discussed in detail: 1) womens' defining gender roles to participate in gift-exchange, and 2) womens' resisted aspects of gift exchange in the context of Valentine's Day.

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## **GENDER ROLES AND GIFT EXCHANGE**

*Development of Gender Roles.* Valentine's Day, like other holidays, is governed by gender roles (Fischer and Arnold 1990) that may motivate behavior during this annual event. Where informants reference Superbowl Sunday as "a man's day", many women discussed Valentine's

Day as their day—a female day. Gender roles build from a lifetime of experiences surrounding the holiday. Informants reference childhood as a time that primes their gender role this holiday:

The Valentine's that I was aiming for yesterday was inspired by being around the Olsen<sup>1</sup> house when I was younger. So, I put up a couple streamers and bought six balloons for the kids. They loved it. We talked about Valentine's Day all day. I did not accomplish everything that I was going for, but I did bake a cake from scratch. I feel like I missed the lover part—I did not do a card and I fell asleep on the couch. I will make up for it in the next couple of days. But, I did cook dinner and he was happy with that. His card to me was precious. I really have some making up to do. [F, Married, Online]

Her female gender role for this event is broad—from recognizing the kids with balloons for the holiday, decorating the home, to baking, to cooking dinner, to sex. Still, it is interesting that even though she baked a cake (from scratch), she appears to feel some guilt about skipping out on the traditional romantic ritual of giving her husband a card and falling asleep on the couch—perhaps in lieu of giving her husband sex or the expected lovemaking among couples for Valentine's Day. Despite all that she did do, she still feels like she has to make it up to her husband. Recall, traditionally, this is the woman's day to be courted. This finding suggests that for some women, there is a perceived obligation to return the favor after being recognized and thanked on this female day. How could these perceived gender roles develop?

During childhood, traditions of card, candy, and exchange of affection are often gender-neutral and egalitarian; both young boys and girls celebrate the holiday (minus the romantic rituals) and expect to receive recognition from their peers (Close and Zinkhan 2007; 2009). Note that young children recognize their peers of the same sex and of the opposite sex during traditional

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childhood Valentine exchange. These behaviors learned and rituals established at an early age appear to contribute to girls'/womens' perceived gender roles of recognizing both men and women alike. The informant cited above feels it her role to recognize her children. Such is in stark contrast to most heterosexual men, who do not traditionally exchange cards or gifts with other men (Close and Zinkhan 2007; 2009). Thus, perceived roles change from the boyhood egalitarian Valentine exchange to the perceived roles that many men have for this holiday. Women, however, appear to maintain the gender role of recognizing loved ones, beyond romantic partners, on Valentine's Day regardless of gender. Women receive cards and send small gifts to girlfriends, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and to a lesser extent, colleagues and neighbors. These gender-based expectations and behaviors evolve over the course of a lifetime, and roles develop along with the person as she matures into womanhood and motherhood.

*Co-existing and updating gender roles.* Yet, many women look forward to a day to both give and receive special attention. Women perceive that their gender roles are synergistic with the males as they perceive males have a role to "woo" or romance with gifts and women have the role to reciprocate:

Males are expected to give their partner gifts and presents because they don't want to get in trouble. This is instead of because they want to give the gifts or because they love the person. Women love the idea of romance so they usually have high expectations and give good gifts to their partner in return. The idea of the holiday traditions is great—take a day to celebrate your love with the person that you are with. But, unfortunately, this has become the idea that you have to spend a lot of money and give gifts or look like you really don't care about the person. [F, 23, Engaged, Diary].

So, she feels the need to also give gifts so it does not appear that she does not care about her boyfriend. She feels the need to spend money to help establish her relationship. She notes the traditional male gift-giver role in the U.S., but she and other women still share the role of the gift-giver. While men overwhelmingly do spend more for this day (National Retail Federation 2011), I find over the multi-year inquiry that women are spending significant time, thought, and money for this event. This leads to co-creation and updating of gender roles. For women, these roles are expanding. Women are both princesses and workers for Valentine's Day.

*Escalating Lavishness.* Due in part to the co-existing of the gender roles as gift-givers, I find that gifts and the lavishness is escalating among some women who celebrate the holiday. Instead of one person planning and giving, both members of an exchange dyad perceive their role as a giver. As a way for both to give lavishly, some women share extraordinary lavishness that expands Valentine's Day into "Valentine's Weekend". For example, one newly-engaged woman documents her quite lavish weekend:

My fiancé and I knew that we would not be able to spend much time together on Valentine's Day, so we decided to have a "Valentine's Day Weekend". So, on Friday we rented sappy movies and cooked dinner together. Then, on Saturday we went out to dinner. On Sunday, we made some chocolate fondue with fruit. Every day, he gave me a small gift. On Friday, he gave me a gift certificate to go get my nails done. On Saturday, he gave me a candle specially made with a picture of us on it as well as a poem. On Sunday, he gave me a heart-shaped fondue pot (complete with the chocolate fondue and fruit that he served). Then on Monday, the 'real' Valentine's Day, he sent me a dozen red roses to my work. He also came and picked me up from work to take me to a nice lunch. [F, 23, Engaged, Diary]

In her story, themes of escalating lavishness are apparent as she receives a gift or experience each day leading up to Valentine's Day, where she received a dozen roses. It is of note that she is engaged without children, so her gender role is not that of a mother like the previous informant. As a fiancée and young woman, she notes her role more exclusively as to be courted in lavishness.

Lavishness is expected to escalate within a "Valentine's Day Weekend" as the previous informant terms it. Furthermore, for some young women who have been in a relatively long-term dating relationship, they expect lavishness to escalate from year-to-year. Some women, as this woman below, perceive the male's gender role is to plan or create a day that is more lavish each year:

Each Valentine's Day I can't wait to see what fun/exciting thing Terrance<sup>1</sup> has in store for us. We have been together 4.5 years and this will be our 5th V-day. He has outdone himself every year. [F, 23, Dating, Diary]

The escalating lavishness causes excitement, as she looks forward to Valentine's Day each year in part because her boyfriend has outdone himself each of the four plus years of their courtship. She appears to take on more of a "princess role", as she does not mention what she does for her boyfriend—or anyone else. It may be due to her age and lack of other prominent roles (e.g., as a mother, a colleague). While this young woman takes on more of the "princess role" to be courted singlehandedly at this stage of her life for the event, other women do not like the gendering of the holiday and how women are catered to. For the single woman quoted below, she believes that the holiday is not supposed to be gendered:

I don't celebrate Valentine's Day. I realize that it is a holiday and it is meant to be celebrated. It was not meant to be gendered, but society has turned it that way. If someone

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout for informant anonymity. When available, I note gender, age or romantic status.

opts not to celebrate or doesn't like the holiday, then that is their own decision. Women shouldn't be catered to. [F, 21, Single, Diary]

Because of her belief that Valentine's Day should not be gendered and that women should not be catered to, she opts out of celebrating the day. This is especially interesting in light of how marketing and advertising often positions Valentine's Day as the one day that highlights and embraces femininity and womanhood. As she evidences, perhaps not all women embrace the day as they feel like society has unnecessarily gendered this holiday. While she resists on a gender viewpoint, other women find the event fosters closeness and/or intimacy.

*To Develop Closeness and Intimacy.* Where males feel the purpose of Valentine's Day is to show care and affection (Otnes et al. 1994), women perceive another of their roles is to develop closeness or intimacy. Women use gifts, both material and sexual to show that they care about the recipient and to foster feelings of intimacy. Further, their gift and the gesture itself is thought to share their emotions, such as love as a way to create a bond. However, other women do not expect that the gift itself communicates their feelings, as a married woman notes:

I went out to dinner with my husband...again. We also went to a movie. We took in some dancing at the restaurant. Most people are set in their ways of giving... For some people outside of a steady relationship, it may be a gender-neutral holiday. I think that Valentine's Day simply offers a day to express love to a special someone. [F, 44, Married, Diary].

This woman, like others, gives in part to instill closeness, but also in part because her rituals have become habitual. Note that she went out to dinner...again. In what sounds like a nice gesture and evening out, her husband has become set in his ways of recognizing the holiday. She seems to get

past the routine, and understand that the meaning of the holiday is to show love and affection. Her gender role is that of a wife and to enact a romantic evening and share a two-way expression of love. While such gender-roles are embraced, other aspects of the holiday lend towards resistance.

#### WOMENS' RESISTED ASPECTS OF GIFT-EXCHANGE FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

The second research question focuses more on the dark side—womens' resisted aspects of gift-exchange for the event. I find that there are more women than one may expect who resist some aspects of gift-exchange for Valentine's Day. The main themes are exclusion, commercialization of love and romance, materialism, and obligation.

*Exclusion.* If Valentine's Day is a party, many women, especially single women, feel uninvited or uninvited themselves intentionally. In turn, some ritualistically give an anti-celebration:

We have had this great Anti-VD party every year. This is the 6th one (entitled '666' of course). I have been responsible for the more bizarre decorations. This year, I am skewering a fluffy white VD bear with a sword and splaying it generously with fake blood.

What a good time... [F, Single, Online]

Yet, people in a relationship were single at some point, and they can remember years when they felt left out. Thus, both single and attached informants resist the exclusion that this holiday brings:

When I am in a relationship, I like Valentine's Day. When I'm not in a relationship, I don't like the holiday because I feel left out. I am the only single in my group. [F, 21, Single, Diary]



While she feels exclusion because she is the only single girl among her girlfriends, another young woman goes as far as to suggest she may become depressed if she were to be single during the event.

This year, I like Valentine's Day, mostly because I am attached. I am sure, especially being a girl, that I would not enjoy it as much if I were single. I might even get depressed if I did not have anyone during Valentine's Day. [F, 21, Dating, Diary]

Both women agree that relationship status influences their experiences. Informants who are in a non-traditional relationship or separated do not feel included to a certain extent, while singles tend to feel the most excluded. This single informant feels excluded, and she creates a time to compare herself to others:

I hate Valentine's Day! It's that one day of the year that singles out the single. The ones who have someone to be with have nothing to worry about—they just curl up with their loved one and feed each other chocolates. Or, say someone broke up with you on V-Day and you haven't gotten over it. Maybe your true love died and you guys always spent Valentine's together, and you have to spend it alone. Or, maybe you have to watch all the beautiful people going out and having a good time thinking no one will ever love you, or you will never have anyone to cuddle with. It is a horrible holiday if you have no one to be with. Now, more than ever you are realizing that, because now it's not just that you are alone, it's that you are alone on Valentine's Day! [F, Single, Online]

She then explains her habit of breaking up with her each of her boyfriends just before Valentine's Day. Although she does not have to give a gift to someone after a breakup, she does temporarily

wish that she was still in the relationship in order to be included in the day. To confound this, she feels excluded from gift exchange rituals. She does not give gifts to her family because she feels that they already have someone to celebrate the holiday with:

It's been this way for the last three years or more. I break up with my boyfriend just a few months before the BIG love day. Then, I sit and wish I had them to love or to love me. But I do not, and now I know this for sure! I am alone. Right now my sisters are out with someone they love or just like, at *least* a fling. Even my mom has a boyfriend and I do not! And my twin, she has a boy while I do not! [F, Single, Online]

As her passionate story illustrates, exclusion is dynamic. At one time, she gave gifts and felt included. However, following her breakups, she felt isolated and excluded with no partner to spend the holiday with nor exchange gifts or romance with. Following social exchange theory, exclusion, assuming she does not choose exclusion, is associated with power loss (Skvoretz and Willer 1993). Even though she initiated the breakup, she may feel powerless as she sits at home wishing she had someone to love on this day. On one hand, her exclusion may be gratifying and positive (i.e., if it is self-imposed). Note, that she broke up with each of her boyfriends prior to Valentine's Day for the last three years. She may willingly want to stay in and avoid the lovers in the marketplace and turn off the TV, radio, Internet sites and social media pages to surpass the influx of romantic posts and ads that may remind her that she feels romantically isolated. I refer to this exclusion as *internal exclusion*, because it is self-imposed, and can have some empowering attributes.

On the other hand, exclusion may be a confidence-reducing, negative force (i.e., if it is imposed by external forces). I refer to this as *external exclusion*, because one's perceived exclusion is imposed by external forces. For example, she may want to participate in Valentine's Day events,

yet feel excluded because they are for couples. External exclusion may also be when a service-provider books up for the holiday (e.g., denies a couple seating for dinner or a hotel room, denies a woman a spa service). Interestingly, for some resistant consumers, external exclusion could also have positive outcomes (e.g., relief when a being denied dinner reservations on February 14 because they were going out of guilt). Senses of exclusion are tied into the commercialization of love and romance.

*Commercialization of Love and Romance.* I find that many women do not feel it necessary to set aside one prescribed day for love and relationships. Instead, they prefer to express their feelings and give or receive on a day of their own choosing. For instance, some women feel that giving gifts and spending excess money for this holiday is unnecessary to maintain a healthy relationship, as this married woman states.

I have never really understood the point of Valentine's Day. I don't think that I dislike it, it just does not really seem like anything special. I think my husband just considers himself lucky (no gifts!) [F, 38, Married, Diary]

She feels ambivalent about the event. Consumer ambivalence is the: “simultaneous or sequential experience of multiple emotional states, as a result of the interaction between internal factors and external objects, people, institutions, an/or cultural phenomena in market-oriented contexts, that can have direct and/or indirect ramifications on pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase attitudes and behavior” (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997, 82). Her ambivalence lends her to opt out of gift exchange due to not thinking the market-prescribed event is special. A second motivation to opt-out is that she lets her husband off the hook from the traditional male role of gift-giver. While she is ambivalent, other women share that they really do like and appreciate the

*meaning* of the holiday. However, these women react to the marketplace's suggestions of *when* to show their love. As one woman writes, love or intimacy should not be reserved like a dinner reservation.

Yes, they (traditions) are okay, but I feel that we should demonstrate love all year long, not just on one particular day. It might be done out of compulsion, not motivated from the heart. [F, 33, Dating, Diary]

She feels that the holiday compulsion compromises sincerity. Likewise, she and other women do not want an external source to dictate when to exhibit affection. However, some women enact the rituals because they assume that their partner enjoys them or because aspects of materialism are enjoyable.

*Materialism.* Many women feel that the meaning is overshadowed by gifts. Materialism theories provide guidance for understanding gift-giving rituals. Terminal materialism is consumption for the mere sake of consumption (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Extending this, I propose the term “*terminal gift-giving*” to explain the phenomena where a gift is given for the mere sake of it, with little or no thought to any associated deeper meaning (e.g., love). For instance, one gives a box of chocolates simply because of the perceived need to give a gift. The day is great, but the material aspect is not, according to some women. As one woman feels:

The idea of the holiday event is great—take a day to celebrate your love with the person that you are with. But, unfortunately, this has become the idea that you have to spend lots of money and give material gifts or it seems like you just don't care. [F, 23, Diary, Engaged].

Another young woman (coincidentally, also engaged) suggests that retailers should not put such a big focus on Valentine's Day, because it puts a material focus on the day, making her uncomfortable. She explains:

Retailers should continue their daily business that is not strictly focused on Valentine's Day so that it (the shopping experience) is not strictly focused on Valentine's Day materialism.

Then, people who don't like V-Day don't feel pressured to buy the V-Day products [F, Diary, 22, Engaged]

Gift exchange, in some cases, is a means without an end. Many women, especially those in established relationships, agree that time together and shared experiences are more valuable than material gifts (e.g., roses). Yet, still, many women feel obligated to give gifts to their partner for this holiday. Thus, the material exchange is a perceived obligation for some for this event.

*Obligation.* In addition to giving to show care and instill closeness, women also feel obligated to do so to an extent. This finding supports past research (Otnes et al.1994). Informants feel that obligation is to their partner, and that it is encouraged and grown via marketing (e.g., in terms of promotional messages that support specific gifts or activities). Yet, women feel financial obligations for more of the non-tangible or supplementary items—often including a night out, wine, a card, and babysitting service, as these woman in a dating relationship explain:

We feel expected to give our partner gifts and presents because they don't want to get in trouble—instead of because they want to or because they love the person. Women love the

idea of romance, so we usually have high expectations to receive gifts as well. Sometimes, we feel the need to give good gifts in return. [F, 23, Engaged, Diary]

Another woman clarifies her point:

It just seems like if you are dating someone you just have to do something. It is really just like any other day just with a card and a title. Just a day to make people show love that usually do not-- but you should show love every day. [F, 20, Dating, Diary]

This woman does not like to have to do things that “you have to do”. By acknowledging the day as a normal day “with a card and title”, she frees herself from perceived obligations. Instead, she regains power by modifying traditional rituals (e.g., giving a card to her boyfriend on a random day instead of the holiday). Some informants express negative attitudes about traditional gift exchange. Many of these informants are ambivalent to the tradition, and are non-compliant with enacting a market-prescribed exchange during a suggested time. However, some modify the tradition, gaining power in the exchange, and feel content—and even proud they resisted obligation.

Obligation is associated with negative attitudes towards marketers and retailers. During this time, informants feel subordinate in the exchange (i.e., less powerful than marketers or retailers). This state may be intensified by the “planned procrastination” common to holiday shopping. I define planned procrastination as: having a plan to wait until the last moment to perform an action; having intentions to put it off. Some informants plan to wait until the last minute to make a dinner reservation, find a babysitter, or pick up wine and a heart-shaped box of chocolates. Sometimes, waiting until the last minute to fulfill perceived obligations intensify at the last moment. This intensity sparks guilt while supply at retailers lessens, and subsequently leads the

consumer to intensified spending. It may be in the retailers' best interests to remind consumers of their upcoming "obligations"; yet in the consumers' best interest to resist the ads if they are prone to plan procrastination or have anxiety. While anxiety and higher expenditures feed the resistance cycle, women often feel obligated to enact their multi-faceted roles.

## RESISTANCE BEHAVIORS

In figure 1, I clarify womens' resistance behaviors across two dimensions: a) overt versus covert and b) financially versus non-financially motivated.

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Insert figure 1 here  
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This classification brings up some interesting points. It shows that most womens' resistance behaviors are both overt and non-financially motivated. Some behaviors have potential financial implications, but the primary motivations are not financial. For these behaviors, resistance is not primarily due to the monetary expenses associated with the holiday. Many informants do not mind spending the money; however, they resist the obligations associated with how they should celebrate the day and when to spend.

Overt resistance behaviors are not secret or disguised. Often, overt resistance includes sharing and spreading resistance attitudes with others. Examples of word-of-mouth resistance include posting to anti-holiday websites or re-labeling the holiday (e.g., V.D.--otherwise short for venereal disease, Singles Awareness Day-SAD) when speaking with others—especially other resistant individuals. Some women are so resistant that they go out of their way to sabotage

others' enjoyment. For example, one woman ate the chocolates and pulled apart the roses that were sent to her roommate. She felt empowered (but guilty) about her act of resistance.

Other times, resistance behaviors are covert (e.g., staying in and ignoring the holiday) and may be disguised as apathy or laziness. Some women have tenacious attitudes against traditions, but they quietly choose to ignore the day and surrounding hype. While staying in could be one way to save money, most of the financially-motivated, covert behaviors include avoiding giving traditional gifts. While some women enjoy a more simplified version (e.g., cooking at home), they nonetheless find themselves resisting some aspect of prescribed behaviors. Within the realm of Valentine's Day, a segment of consumers challenge prescribed traditions. Some consumers take direct action to change the way the market traditions are "celebrated" and practiced. Other consumers resist pre-packaged solutions that marketers have developed. Specific situational factors, socio-cultural factors, and common conditions influence these evolving behaviors. I find that Valentine's Day arouses strong attitudes from women, which may trigger market resistance. Resistance is a part of larger power struggles among business, culture, and consumers.



## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY

### EXCHANGE AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

*Key exchange concepts and assumptions.* Exchange theory entails four key concepts, each with assumptions (Molm, 2001). One, exchange entails actors. Exchange actors are individuals or groups. Two, exchange entails resources, or the currency of exchange. When given to the recipient, this exchange resource is termed as a cost; when received, it is termed an outcome. Exchange resources are either intangible or tangible, and may be gifts—of focus here. A third component of exchange theory are exchange structures—dependent relationships that support the exchange. Last, exchange processes are the interactions necessary to conduct an exchange. Exchange processes are negotiated or reciprocal, and may lead to an exchange relationship incurring a series of exchanges among actors (Molm 2001).

*Social exchange theory.* Rooted in exchange theory, social exchange theory (Emerson 1976; Thibault and Kelly 1952) more specifically guides these research questions. Social exchange theory differs from classical microeconomic theories of exchange in that microeconomic theories assume that exchanges take place between strangers, while social exchange theory assumes longer-term relationships are of interest (Molm 2001). Social exchange theory states that the exchange of social and material resources (e.g., gifts) is a fundamental form of human interaction (Emerson 1976). Social exchange theory also holds that power relationships guide interaction patterns among people. In turn, any imbalance of power results in efforts to achieve balance in exchange relations (Emerson 1976). I find this in the example of women giving gifts, even to themselves, on a day where traditionally women are the gift recipient. Such resorts balance to the gift ritual.

The roots of social exchange expand the assumptions of utilitarian economics to include the cultural and structural aspects of anthropology, behavioral psychology, and sociology (Molm 2001). An underlying assumption of social exchange theory is that people seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs; they then base the chances of developing a relationship with someone (e.g., the gift-recipient) on the perceived possible outcomes (Emerson 1976). When these outcomes are perceived to be greater, people tend to give more and foster a closer relationship with another person (Thibault and Kelly 1952). Other assumptions are that people act in their own interest (Thibault and Kelly 1952) and they seek to extract a profit from interactions (Emerson 1976). Such is interesting to consider in the context of love-based relationships that we have seen.

The assumption that people seek profit and avoid loss with each interaction in life is consistent with psychology studies (e.g., Freud) that show that people tend to avoid pain and seek pleasure. In considering social exchange theory from a psychology perspective, people re-enact fears or childhood with each new life situation (e.g., first date after a divorce). Biological desires and the potential for fears are innate from birth, and develop (and are developed by) experiences. Specific biological desires include the needs to: admire and be admired, have independence, power, aggressiveness/vengeance, safety, and comfort. Specific biological fears include: abandonment/exclusion, attack, and power loss. These fears may bring a tendency for an anxious or fearful person to revert to earlier stages of life (e.g., childhood, singlehood). Despite any temporary reversion, people desire to mature, become a whole adult and lead a full life—often with a romantic partner. Such may explain some of the findings of exclusion.

## GIFTS AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE

I find that gifts are largely a social exchange in the context of Valentine's Day. Despite being criticized as a concept outside the Kotlerian sphere of marketing theory (Firat 1984, Hirschman 1986, Belk and Coon 1993), the marketing as an exchange analogy remains the crux of the gifting literature in marketing. People have a fundamental impulse to display, share, and bestow via gift-exchange (Malinowski 1961). Following Weiner (1992), gift-exchange is a search of permanence in a social world that is constantly changing. Mauss (1924) views gift-giving as a moral obligation and prototypical contract; however, there is semiotic significance of gift-exchange behaviors (Joy 2001)—especially during holidays or special events. I consider the findings in light of three perspectives on gift exchange for a holistic understanding.

Brought into the context of female's Valentine exchange, I suggest another dimension: "gifting as solidification." The findings here strongly show that females give gifts to solidify their gender roles in the relationship or family, as well as to solidify the state of their romantic relationship. In other cases, the resistance to give a gift or partake in gift exchange is an attempt to solidify the strength of one's relationship or marriage to show that material possession exchange is not needed.

## **DISCUSSION**

Valentine's Day is a holiday and an event that may appear light spirited for females; yet, the emotions revealed online and offline and consumer behavior decisions for many females in the U.S. can be quite complex. My multi-method research uncovers themes that contribute to an understanding of female consumer behavior, expanded gender roles, and gift exchange rituals in the context of Valentine's Day. Extending prior conceptual discussions, findings suggest that females have escalating expectations (from themselves as well as loved ones). Despite this being a

day where some women feel that they are a queen for a day, other females share some less-desirable feelings and emotions related to Valentine's Day events. Some, even women happily in a romantic relationship, feel a degree of exclusion on the holiday. Other women feel the holiday is laden with materialism and terminal gift syndrome, obligations, and a surprisingly low need of enacting traditional Valentine exchange traditions. Women perceive a broader gender role that transcends that of just recognizing their romantic interest. Women feel responsibility and obligation to recognize their female loved ones: mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, girlfriends (especially single girlfriends), and even their pets. Women have often been givers—even on this day traditionally for women to receive. The day has broadened for women and there is a shift in the sphere of exchange and consumption from the traditional marketplace to the virtual marketplace and/or the home. Women rely on the Internet and online platforms to discuss their roles, and to help carry out their roles (e.g., via e-tail purchases and by sending virtual Valentine's). Such escalation of the day and related gender roles may lead to market ambivalence or resistance.

Examples of perceived gender roles include the female as giving intimately and as a more active gift-giver—to a love interest and beyond on Valentine's Day. For instance, while women spend significantly less money than males on average (National Retail Federation 2011), they spend time and effort to be sexual and intimate or by physically creating objects (e.g., a virtual valentine; a homemade certificate for a back rub). Many women think through this day, stress over this day, and have anxiety about the holiday's events. Often, women see their role as to overcome mass-commercialized love and romance and find something more meaningful—such as a family bond. In part to perhaps revalue the role of the woman as a sexual being on this holiday, some women convert the holiday from a celebration of sexual intimacy to a celebration of familial love.

By re-aligning gender roles on this holiday and giving more, these women seek more meaning and enjoyment—as expected by social exchange theory.

It is also of note that some women have a desire for revenge—to balance out past suffering or exclusion by allowing others to similarly suffer or be excluded. Most women have felt excluded, lonely, or abandoned on a special day such as Valentine’s Day, and perhaps this is one reason for participating in more inclusionary (i.e., for those in a romantic relationship) holiday rituals as an adult. In this sense, acting as the dominant person (e.g., gift-giver) in an exchange dyad is a way to instill emotional security and power. Most informants, however, are simply ambivalent to their gender roles for this holiday event.

#### AMBIVALENCE TO MARKET TRADITIONS

Ambivalence refers to uncertainty, hesitancy, or indecisiveness as to which course or tradition to follow. Resistance entails a feeling of ambivalence, which often includes opposing attitudes that coexist (Arkowitz 2002). Interestingly, I find that consumers have opposing attitudes and behaviors that coexist. While their attitudes are often either anti-tradition (e.g., “boycott the card market!”) or pro-tradition (“I welcome the card exchange traditions”), sometimes their behaviors are in opposition to these attitudes. For example, some consumers say they love the holiday and its traditions. However, they make sure to avoid mass-marketed products and the traditional marketplace. Some consumers loathe the holiday and its traditions. Nonetheless, they purchase heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, lingerie, and expensive restaurant meals on February 14<sup>th</sup>. Some informants act on their resistant attitudes. It is a day where many feel that commercialism nullifies sincere romance.

Informants experience opposing attitudes and behaviors during this holiday in other ways. Some consumers dislike aspects of the holiday (e.g., perceived obligation, exclusion, unfulfilled expectations). With respect to cognition, some consumers are not certain about the meaning of the holiday's traditions, or they do not believe in the authenticity of the holiday. As shown previously, some believe that Hallmark invented the holiday for profit-seeking purposes.

Despite their attitudinal resistance, many consumers behaviorally conform to some aspects of the holiday traditions. I offer several explanations why negative attitudes surrounding the holiday traditions often coexist with conforming to these traditions. First, some women feel strongly that their significant other expects the traditional exchanges—namely sex. They feel that their loved ones will be let down if they do not receive said intimacy along with a Hallmark card, chocolates, roses, a night out, and lingerie. Second, there may be an underlying insecurity that store-bought, mass-marketed products are superior to any idea or gift that is created by an individual. A third explanation is that some women believe that they are alone in their resistance surrounding the traditional exchanges, so they experience considerable pressure to conform—intimately or via market-constructed norms. Fourth, some women feel that more work is involved with resisting traditions—so it is easier to give in and buy the traditional items and act out traditional experiences in the marketplace and home. Overall, this mismatch of attitudes and behaviors creates ambivalence.

That said, power (the power to resist or indulge) is an essential aspect of social exchange theory. Many times, a power imbalance leads the lesser-empowered party to resist. Informants view marketing, retailing, culture, and society as dominant parties during this holiday. Such may further perpetuate feelings of ambivalence. Obligation is another source of consumer subordination

during this holiday. Recall, many informants purchase and exchange gifts, in part, because their partner (or other dominant powers such as the marketplace) deem it necessary.

Perceived obligation may negatively transfer to marketers, advertisers and retailers who promote and sell such obliged gifts. Consumers' feelings of subordination are intense within a short time period. This experience is heightened due to planned procrastinations.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most informants focused on heterosexual relationships. One direction for future research is to examine, in detail, other kinds of relationships. Other limitations include restricted demographic focus. For example, children were not directly included in this study. Children are an important group for future studies on resistance to marketed events and early memories.

My framework serves as a base for scholars to continue making theoretical contributions. I suggest extensions in two areas: cross-cultural and marketing communications. Cross-cultural differences in gender roles are a key difference in the celebration of this holiday across the globe. Thompson and Arsel (2004) explain some American consumers' anti-corporate experiences of globalization. On the one hand, traditional American practices (associated with Valentine's Day) are becoming further commercialized and exported. On the other hand, there are movements in some cultures to block the spread of an American-style Valentine's Day. Key questions for scholarly research include: a) What is the meaning behind gift exchanges in other cultures? b) What are their gender roles associated with the holiday? c) To what extent are these global consumption rituals adopted or resisted? Why? Addressing such questions to continue this research can help scholars and theorists understand consumer behavior for special events that are

market-driven and becoming more global, such as Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day is a consumption context that hosts a vast potential for contributing knowledge on consumer rituals, gift-exchange, motivations, and gender roles, as evidenced by the female focus here.



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Table 2: Methods

<b>Method (Sample size)</b>	<b>Informants</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Focus Group (n=6)	-College students -Females -Age 18-22 -In a dating relationship	Exploratory To gain a social perspective
Diaries (n=149)	-Males & Females -Ages 18-47 -Various Relationship Status	Cultural rituals, gender roles, enjoyment factor, retail associations & comparison to other holidays
Online Diaries/Postings* (n=47)	-Posters to e-diaries & boards during Valentine's Day	Naturalistic consumer thought of holiday meaning & materialism

\* Web posting date documented, sources include: diaryland.com, opendiary.com, my-diary.org, diarist.net, mydeardiary.com

Table 2:  
Key Findings: Male and Female Perception of Valentine's Day

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Males' Perception of Valentine's Day (Otnes, Ruth, &amp; Milbourne 1994)</i>	<i>Females' Perception of Valentine's Day (Close, in print)</i>
<b>Perceived Purpose of Holiday Event</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To show care/affection</li> <li>• Obligation</li> <li>• Response to a commercial holiday</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To show care/affection</li> <li>• To be recognized in all roles in their life (as mother, girlfriend, wife)</li> <li>• Social exchange</li> <li>• To develop closeness and intimacy</li> <li>• Commercialization of love and romance</li> </ul>
<b>Likeable Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gift receipt (tangible and intangible)</li> <li>• Self gifts</li> <li>• Sex/intimacy</li> <li>• Socializing with other single friends</li> <li>• Affective state</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Queen for a day"</li> <li>• Virtual Valentine's to other females</li> <li>• Continuation of the childlike behaviors of candy and card exchange</li> <li>• Opportunity to recognize other females</li> </ul>
<b>Disliked Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of significant other (i.e., inability to participate)</li> <li>• Lack of gift/attention from significant other</li> <li>• Pressure of giving</li> <li>• Costs of gift-giving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role Exhaustion</li> <li>• Pressure of sex</li> <li>• Mass-marketization</li> <li>• Escalating expectations</li> <li>• Exclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Purpose of Gifts/Cards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show caring for significant other</li> <li>• Show love/affection</li> <li>• Fulfill obligation</li> <li>• Altruism</li> <li>• Express feelings</li> <li>• Function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show caring for many loved ones (romantic and other)</li> <li>• Terminal gift syndrome may result from gift exchange for the sake of it</li> <li>• To "make up" for perceived shortcomings</li> </ul>
<b>Reason for Non-Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of romantic partner</li> <li>• Lack of adequate resources</li> <li>• Too commercial of a holiday</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exclusion (perceived)</li> <li>• Ambivalence</li> <li>• Market Resistance</li> </ul>

Figure 1:  
Females' Covert and Overt Market Resistance Due To Perceived Exclusion,  
Commercialization of Romance, Materialism, and/or Obligation

