

Greeting Cards as Data on Social Processes

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The choices that individuals make when purchasing greeting cards influence what designs and sentiments are subsequently available. This suggests that the nature of the available greeting cards can be used as an archival data source to gauge social attitudes and interpersonal communicative processes. A study is presented to illustrate a method in which greeting cards are used to examine how parents communicate with their children on special occasions. The advantages and disadvantages of the approach are discussed.

“Greeting cards are a measure of society, a gauge of the times [Public Relations, Hallmark Cards, Inc., 1977].”

The exchange of greeting cards in our society represents a unique interpersonal communication process that occurs on special occasions. It provides a previously unexplored archive for investigators studying theoretical and practical aspects of social processes. The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate the use of greeting cards, specifically, birthday cards for sons and daughters, as an archival data base for research on social processes.

The Nature of the Archive

Although sending written expressions of affection on special occasions is an old custom, it was not until England adopted the Uniform Postage Act in 1840 that mail service was made available to everyone, and greeting cards became a custom for people of all socioeconomic classes. In current times, the National Association of Greeting Card Publishers has estimated that approximately six billion greeting

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cards or about 30 cards per person are sent annually in America. In marketing research, most greeting card publishers assess public reaction to different matches of designs and sentiments. These verbal measures are then used with behavioral (sales) data to determine what greeting cards are available to consumers. Thus, although at any one time consumers may have access to cards that do or do not capture the exact design and sentiment that they wish to express, the consumers are likely to purchase those that best approximate their desired communication, and the cards that dominate a merchandiser's stock are likely to represent the consumers' desires.¹

In the present study, birthday cards designed for sons and daughters by a well-known publisher of greeting cards were selected at random. Each card was prepared in such a manner that design and sentiment could be judged independently. An illustrative content analysis focusing on the parent-child communicative process was then performed.

METHOD

The units of observation in this study were 48 birthday cards for children, half of which were designed for sons and half for daughters. The greeting cards were selected randomly from the shelves of a thriving greeting card shop in a large midwestern city. The sentiment (i.e., message content) of each card was transcribed on a 4" × 6" (10.16 × 15.24 cm) index card. Gender-identifying terminology was replaced with nonsexist language. The sentiments on the cards were then masked, leaving the design (e.g., colors, pictures). Two judges then rated the 48 sentiments and 48 designs separately.² Ratings were made using seven-point semantic-differential scales. Evaluation was assessed by averaging the ratings of good-bad, kind-cruel, pleasant-pleasant, and valuable-worthless. Potency was assessed by averaging the ratings of strong-weak, hard-soft, sharp-dull, and large-small. Activity was determined by averaging the ratings of excitable-calm, quick-slow, active-passive, and heavy-light. In addition, each card was rated on seven-point scales with the following anchors: serious-humorous, nonintimate-intimate, feminine-masculine, dark-bright, low achievement-high achievement orientation, hostile-friendly, and meaningless-meaningful.

¹One might argue that a merchandiser's stock would be replete with cards that do not sell. However, some large greeting card publishers have restocking programs, which circumvents this bias in the archive.

²The order of the anchors for all scales was determined randomly. In addition, one judge rated sentiments, then designs, whereas the other judge rated designs, then sentiments. Analyses including judgments as a factor indicated few significant effects, none of which alter significantly the results reported in the text. Hence, this factor is not discussed further.

RESULTS

A two-way (Sex of Recipient Type of Material) multivariate analysis of variance with the 10 ratings serving as dependent variables yielded highly significant effects for Sex of Recipient, $F(10, 135) = 15.56, p < .001$, and Type of Material, $F(10, 135) = 3.69, p < .001$, and a significant Sex of Recipient Type of Material interaction, $F(10, 135) = 7.27, p < .001$. The cell means for each measure are displayed in Table 1.

Univariate analyses of variance suggested several interesting hypotheses about the manner in which parents communicate with sons and daughters on special occasions. The birthday cards for sons were judged as being darker, $F(1, 144) = 5.24, p < .03$, slightly less positive, $F(1, 144) = 3.44, p < .07$, significantly more feminine, $F(1, 144) = 139.32, p < .001$, and slightly less achievement oriented, $F(1, 144) = 3.32, p = .07$ than the cards for daughters. The surprising rating of birthday cards for sons as being less masculine overall than those for daughters was qualified by a Sex of Recipient Type of Material interaction, $F(1, 144) = 61.51, p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 1, the designs of birthday cards for sons were rated as being more masculine than those for daughters; the institutionalized sentiments that were expressed to sons on special occasions, however, were rated as more feminine than those expressed to daughters.

The ANOVAs indicated also that the ratings of designs and sentiments were closely matched even though they had been rated independently. No univariate ANOVA was statistically significant.

TABLE 1
Birthday Cards for Children: The Effects of Sex of Recipient and Type of Material

	Design		Sentiment	
	Son	Daughter	Son	Daughter
Evaluation	5.30	5.50	4.63	5.20
Activity	4.11	4.02	3.92	4.15
Potency	3.99	3.48	3.50	3.79
Brightness	5.03	5.69	4.97	4.74
Masculinity	3.34	2.69	4.04	5.72
Intimacy	4.83	1.86	3.84	3.59
Humor	3.66	3.84	3.79	3.91
Achievement	4.19	4.21	4.40	4.73
Friendly	5.40	5.29	5.24	5.20
Meaningful	4.40	4.39	4.53	4.55

Note: All ratings were made on seven-point semantic-differential scales. The higher the number in the table, the greater the perceived attribute.

Finally, a Sex of Recipient Type of Material interaction was obtained on ratings of brightness. The designs of birthday cards for daughters were rated as being brighter than those for sons, whereas the sentiments of cards for sons were judged as brighter than those for daughters, $F(1, 144) = 5.49, p < .03$.

DISCUSSION

Suggestive results were obtained regarding the conditions under which parents may transmit gender-relevant and adrogenous information to their children (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Analyses revealed that popular birthday cards for sons have more masculine designs, but also contain more feminine or adrogenous sentiments, than popular birthday cards for daughters (see Table 1). One might hypothesize from this data that transmitting feminine or adrogenous information to sons in our society is more likely when the sentiment is masked by a masculine cover and opportuned by a special occasion (cf. Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Consistent with this reasoning, the designs of cards for sons were darker, whereas the sentiments were judged to be brighter than those for daughters.³

The advantage of archival research of this type is that hypotheses can be generated that have high external validity. Archival research is best suited for generating hypotheses with strong external validity and for testing the external validity of existing, experimentally supported hypotheses. The clear disadvantage of this approach is its internal validity. For instance, although the preceding theorizing is consistent with the present data, cross-validation using another sample of greeting cards would be desirable. In addition, uncontrolled variables in archival research such as this pose serious limitations when attempting to test hypotheses about social processes. Careful inspection of the etiology of an archive can eliminate some of the alternative interpretations that plague a researcher using this methodology and facilitate the development of fruitful hypotheses. The notion that parents may communicate more feminine sentiments to sons than daughters through birthday cards under the guise of a more masculine design, for instance, might be thought to reflect *selective deposit* (e.g., a store owner's idiosyncratic preference) or *selective survival* (e.g., others were sold out). These biases are unlikely in the present study, as we understood that the cards on the bins represented a decisional process based on sales data rather than the owner's idiosyncratic preference, and that the cards from which we randomly sampled fairly represented the popular birthday cards for sons and daughters (shipment of cards had been received and stocked shortly preceding our sampling).

³Within-cell correlations indicated that brightness was directly correlated with the extent to which the card had a positive tone ($r = +.24$) and was friendly ($r = +.49$), whereas brightness was inversely correlated with the adjudged masculinity of the card ($r = -.24$). This pattern of within-cell correlations is in accord with the hypothesis suggested in the text.

In sum, archival data can be used to generate hypotheses with assurance that an effect, if supported by subsequent experimentation, has high external validity. The hypotheses might involve identifying social conditions under which certain phenomena occur, changes in a phenomenon over time, or the incidence of the phenomenon in various locations and populations. The present study illustrates the first two uses of a heretofore overlooked social archive, greeting cards.

REFERENCES

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