

Mixed Messages: What Do Greeting Cards Really Say?

Lisa Dooley

In this article, Lisa Dooley examines the genre of greeting cards and the outsourcing of self-expression that occurs when someone purchases a card instead of making one. As she explains her coding methodology, Dooley reflects on the choices she made, trying to decipher why she focused on certain observations.

My daughter, Addy, was sitting at the kitchen table working intently on a project. Drawing, taping, cutting, and gluing, she began to fashion a piece of art tasked with carrying an important message on the inner surface of the carefully crafted bifold. A significant amount of time and thought had been put into this creation, this unique artistic rendering, and she presented it to me with great pride upon its completion. Dripping with wet glue, crowded with marker-drawn figures and red cutout hearts, and begging to be displayed in a place of prominence, this handcrafted artifact was an intimate expression of emotion.

As Addy got up from the table, she began to skip in place, barely able to contain herself as she handed me her creation. I closely studied the front cover while she begged me to look inside. As I carefully opened up the bi-folded construction paper, my fingers sticking to the tacky glue on the front, I was greeted with a single phrase, “Happy Birthday!” Written meticulously and spelled with the utmost consideration, the message was simple yet timeless, though the two-word phrase was not of priority to me, the card recipient. It was the care that had been put into making the card that resonated the most.

Addy had thought about her audience, planned the card's design, and written a simple yet concise message all by herself because she thought that the best person to make a "Happy birthday card for Mommy" was her. When asked by her father that morning if she wanted to get ready and go out with him to buy Mommy a birthday card, she immediately protested. Addy emphatically stated, "But I need to make her card because it's from me!" Unwilling to outsource her well-wishes, Addy created this birthday card herself.

The Way They Do the Things They Do

Understanding one's audience, conceptualizing a design, articulating a clear message while still conveying emotion, executing one's artistic vision, expressing sentiment, and successfully conveying a message are all integral parts of this expression-delivery activity system. While transmitting intimate feeling is the purpose of this process, the act of creating handmade greeting cards has fallen by the wayside in our contemporary culture, relegated now to the very young or as an afterthought by those who forgot to purchase a card. But why has this deeply personal act become the responsibility of another, an outsider?

Greeting cards, once created by the giver and symbolic of a very private and personal communicative process, have become mechanized, universalized, and, in turn, impersonal. Instead, expression is outsourced and purchased, reliant upon an "other" to communicate one's sentiments. In fact, self-expression was outsourced more than eight billion times last year in America alone (Dodson and Bells 14). This means that more than eight million times a day (14) an "other" clearly outside of the card giver/card receiver model is tasked with communicating an intimate expression of the card giver to the card receiver.

Don't Give Up Your Power!

A great deal of power is transferred when one relies on an outside source to compose a text that is meant to reflect his/her most intimate feelings and, thus, we enter into a paradox: self-expression is achieved through commercial, mass-produced means. It is within this paradox that greeting cards "threaten the ideology of expressive individualism because they involve people looking to the mass market for the symbolic materials with which to communicate the self, thereby ceding their independence in expression" (West 232).

I pride myself on my ability to express myself fully and effectively, but now, as I think about my own role in this card-giving activity system, I begin to feel more and more uncomfortable. Considering the activity of giving a greeting card as giving up an opportunity for self-expression, I have an

innate desire to research my own actions and to interrogate the reasons, and personal justification, behind the choices that I make.

Now, How Should I Go About This Research?

When beginning this self-reflective analysis, I isolated a few factors to consider: What role do greeting cards play in outsourcing expression? If self-expression is of great importance, then how does price of the card impact the giver as well as the receiver? What are the implications of low-priced cards when a price cannot, ultimately, be placed on communicating emotion? After careful consideration of these guiding questions, I went out into the field (ok . . . Walmart) and analyzed all of the cards available for purchase, excluding holiday cards, in the greeting card aisle. (In other words, I was the awkward woman standing in the aisle for two hours taking pictures of the front, inside, and back of every greeting card available.)

After many confused, sideways glances by my fellow shoppers, I went home to evaluate my findings. I transferred my pictures (232 of them, to be exact) from my iPhone to my Mac and began to sift through them, coding each card as I went. Coding is a method of assigning a code (makes sense, huh?) to data that you have collected in the hopes that trends will emerge. When I code data, I assign letters, phrases, words, and/or numbers to the information that I am analyzing in an attempt to group this information into categories. When I am finished, I look over the data and place the information into groups based on similar codes. It is in this way that I am able to identify similarities amongst my data sets.

First, I thought about the things I wanted to analyze about the cards that I had photographed for study. I knew that the price of the greeting card was important because I was interested in exploring the differences between low-priced cards and their more expensive counterparts. I was also wondering if the amount of writing on the front and inside of the card conveyed value; in other words, do more words/sentences equal more/deeper feeling? And, finally, I was interested in evaluating the format and style of the cards—embellishments, intricate detail, material used, protective coverings, etc.—while I discerned the significance of this information.

So I created a chart, on white lined paper in my college-ruled notebook, marking down the specs for each greeting card (Figure 1). The chart that I constructed included sections for price, greeting card genre, the number of sentences on the front of the card, the number of lines on the front of the card, the word count on the front of the card, the number of sentences on the inside of the card, the number of lines on the inside of the card, the word count on the inside of the card, as well as a description of the card and comments about its format/style.

type	Sentences/lines front	words front	Sentences/lines in	Words in	Comment
regular	1/4	9	2/4	13	tricky - fail
regular	3/3	5	3/3	7	birds - clipart
inter, w/d	2/6	13	1/2	14	flowers on front
design	1/4	8	1/5	18	couple photograph content
design	1/3	3	1/4	19	background of flowers
spatial	1/1	6	1/1	6	flowers (2) leaves (2)
spatial	1/3	3	1/4	14	leaves - full text
spatial	1/2	9	1/1	6	deep, flowers - foreground
spatial	1/4	7	1/4	17	flowers
spatial	1/4	12	1/1	5	mutated background w/ foliage
regular	1/3	11	1/1	5	flowers
ink	1/2	9	4/4	17	modern pattern on front of
ink	1/1	8	1/1	2	flowers, modern, muted
modern	4/19	11	1/5	19	words + background foliage
modern	4/17	102	1/4	41	cutout over top, card on side, printed
modern	6/17	82	2/8	29	background by background + words printed
modern	4/20	74	2/3	15	pathwork like, cutout @ top
modern	5/17	84	1/5	24	trifold, pictures inside + front
modern	1/13	4	2/6	29	trifold, patterns inside + front
modern	3/6	29	1/4	13	iridescent, textured flowers
modern	2/6	11	3/9	28	textured border inside
modern	1/4	9	1/5	16	photograph - well composed, double
modern	3/3	37	2/5	18	double paper inside
modern	1/3	8	2/4	9	image carried through inside
modern	1/1	5	2/10	41	imparting attached, delicate
modern	1/1	1	1/4	9	cutouts, intricate design inside
modern	1/4	7	1/2	7	textured background - folded
modern	4/9	20	3/5	14	glitter embellishments, flower
modern	1/2	7	2/4	14	on sides of inside, border
modern	2/9	31	2/8	40	inside
modern	1/5	17	1/2	8	background attached, photograph
modern	1/4	4	1/4	12	front, attached to inside top
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	from cording, textured, full image
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	filled words, textured / raised
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	inside + out
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	flowers (daisy blossoms) inside +
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	out - glitter
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	flowers - modern - inside or
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	out - glitter
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	embellish w/ jewels plus etc
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	raised dress - ornate embellishes
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	inside border w/ graphic
modern	1/1	3	2/4	27	raised flower, shielded decorative

Figure 1: The chart I made to code the data I was gathering. The data above the line is associated with the low-priced greeting cards, while the data below the line is associated with the high-priced cards.

I analyzed hundreds of greeting cards. When I was done I began to look over my findings, primarily focusing on the cards from a lexical perspective (this means that I focused on the words, the vocabulary used). So what did I find? As illustrated in Figure 2, I discovered that the value cards had significantly fewer lines of text both on the front cover of the card (average of 2.7 lines) as well as on the inside of the card (average of 3.3 lines) as compared to their more expensive counterparts (7.3 lines on the front and 6.1 lines inside). The same was true of the word count of the value cards (average of 5.6 words on the front and 12 words inside) in comparison to the pricier cards (average of 28.8 words on the front and 23.1 words inside).

	outside Sentences/Lines Averages	Words on front Average	inside Sentences/Lines Averages	Words inside Average
High Priced	3.7/7.3	28.8	19/6.1	23.1
Low Priced	1.3/2.7	5.6	1.4/3.3	12

Figure 2: The chart that I made when averaging data from my research.

Think About It . . .

But what does this mean? Does it mean that more expensive cards cost more because they have longer messages? Or that having longer messages means that more thought was put into creating this card? Perhaps it means that a fewer-word-count card means that less care was taken in creating and picking out this card (fewer words to read = less concern for the receiver of the message). Maybe, instead, this all means that the amount of words on/in a card is connected to the depth of the sentiment expressed by the purchaser and that the more deeply the card purchaser feels, the more money that they will spend on a card that contains a longer message.

My theories were numerous, so I figured that I should refer back to the chart that I created as I was coding the greeting cards that I photographed. When I looked at my own evaluation of these cards, I found a positive correlation between the card price and my assessment of “sincere” emotion (you know, heartfelt and believable emotion rather than the generic emotion so often communicated through this genre) as I took notes on the format and style of both high and low price brackets. While my “comment” section contained critical descriptions of low-priced greeting cards such as “cheaply made,” “clip art graphics,” “looks poorly hand drawn,” and “plain white interior,” my comments regarding the more expensive cards included observations such as “embellished,” “contains cut-outs,” “textured,” “colored interior,” “googly eyes,” “foiled lettering,” and “interior graphics/background.” In addition I made observations such as whether or not the card was a bifold or a trifold, finding that all of the value cards for purchase were of the bifold variety whereas the more expensive cards were of both the bifold and trifold variety, and whether the card was covered in plastic (several of the more expensive cards were) as if protecting an investment.

Is This What Really Matters?

Now what does *this* mean? (This question does not refer to the number of folds or the protective covering.) I am questioning why I coded the cards in this

manner. Why does word count, the number of text lines, textured borders, number of folds, and whether or not there is a nonessential covering matter, especially when evaluating the vehicle transporting emotional expression? And, most importantly for myself, why did I decide to focus on these criteria? If my project is all about relinquishing and outsourcing expression, then why aren't I coding for that—how *can I* even evaluate and code for that—as I focus on both real and perceived value instead?

According to Dodson and Bells, “It has been suggested that the card’s price is a sign value mediating the relationship signified by the exchange” (14). In other words, the more money spent on a card, the more valuable the relationship must be. This then begs the question: To what extent do cards function “as a vehicle through which to judge the quality or depth of interpersonal relationships” (14) and whether or not this function is connected to the price or content of the card being gifted?

In a study conducted by Dodson and Bells involving MBA students, researchers found that for some individuals “it was important that a high-quality medium be chosen as the carrier of their message. Because the card is often seen to reflect the giver’s sincerity in acknowledging a relationship with the recipient, the quality of the card was seen to add value to the expressed relationship” (15). This is particularly interesting since quantitative (numerical) value cannot, in any measurable way, be placed upon self-expression and effectively conveying sentiment. What this study is saying is that higher-quality (read: more expensive) cards increase the assumed worth of the sentiment being shared.

Though these mass-produced vehicles of intimate expression are, ultimately, universalized and impersonal, some may argue that a handwritten message inside is the key to reclaiming this genre from the grips of a generic existence. I challenge this rationale, though, and wonder, rather, whether the handwritten note following the mechanically printed message adds personalization and sentiment or, instead, highlights the fact that the act of giving a greeting card is impersonal. Maybe, then, “[t]he act of adding a personal note provides the means for further personalizing a rather generic medium of communication” (16). If this personalization is recognized as necessary, in order to justify the means by which intimate sentiment is expressed, then why rely on an outside source to articulate the initial message being sent?

Rethinking What I Thought I Knew

If this connection between price, word count, and perceived sincerity is legitimate, what about the birthday card that Addy made for me? Does this mean that the free, simple, bi-fold card (containing no words on the front and only two words inside) is less valuable than a more expensive card that

could be purchased in the greeting card aisle at Walmart? This handmade birthday card disrupts my perception. Since I appreciated it more than I would appreciate a card that could have been purchased, my assessment of the greeting cards that I analyzed is debunked.

When I coded for the components that I initially assigned worth to, I was constructing a perception that prized quantitative data, one which assumed that more (words, embellishments, paper folds) translated to greater valuation and increased sincerity and sentiment. After experiencing the significance of heartfelt, hand-drawn, personally created expression of emotion, I recognize how easy it is to fall into the habit of associating price with intrinsic value.

My research, initially, did not include an examination of handmade greeting cards. Originally, I was only interested in the perceived worth of mechanically created cards sold to consumers through mass-market means. I am a researcher, I thought, and my article will be rooted in the research and analysis of for-purchase greeting cards. By illustrating the components of both high- and low-priced cards, I would be able to draw a connection between the implied worth of the message sent in cards of both price points.

Being Wrong Never Felt So Good

I was sure of my purpose, sure of my analysis after reading the cards and coding them for data. It was not until I received the birthday card from my daughter (Figure 3) that I thought about what I really valued: not the glitter or glitz, not the sharpness of the photograph on the front cover, not the word count or the sentence length, not the number of times that the cardstock had been folded. I valued the effort spent on creating the card, the ownership implicit in making it oneself specifically for the intended receiver.

When expression is outsourced, an outsider is relied upon to communicate deep sentiment and intimate emotion. Who is this outsider and how do they know exactly what you want to say? The answer is that they don't. Maybe,



Figure 3: Addy holding the birthday card that she made for me.

after all, it was Addy who had it right all along when she refused to go along with the purchase of my birthday card, when she declined to entrust an outside source with the delivery of her own personal sentiments. After all, my chart didn't have the ability to contain the most important code of all: self-expression.

Works Cited

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Lisa Dooley is currently a PhD student at Illinois State University, specializing in Rhetoric and Composition. She holds a Master's degree in English from Bradley University.