

“Sending my wishes to you”: The practice and pragmatics of greeting card exchange in American society

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1. Introduction¹

In the era of e-mail, Skype, and Facebook, it seems as if people are drifting away from the more traditional style of interpersonal communication such as letter writing in paper-on-ink format. Yet, “greeting cards” or what are sometimes called “studio cards” sold in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, remain a popular tool of personal communication wherein people purchase pre-printed messages to send their sentiments to their friends and family.

With the emergence of electronic-cards in the 1990s, one has a choice of sending messaged cards online instantly free of charge. Still, the popularity of paper greeting cards seems to stay relatively intact. The U.S. greeting card industry has remained a relatively stable market with sales growth of 8.7% between 1999 and 2004. According to a 2009 market study, young adults aged 25 to 34 in the United States were the highest consumer group, spending on average \$85 per year on greeting cards. Being part of the “Facebook generation,” these young people were reported to rely on electronic social media² to send out annual greeting cards such as Christmas cards to their friends and families. Nevertheless, they used paper greeting cards to communicate emotions to friends and relatives on other occasions, commemorating personal events as well as particular sentiments³.

A simple question may be raised here. How and why do these paper greeting cards stay popular means of interpersonal communication in the days of digital communication? In this short study, I attempt to address this question by describing the practice and pragmatics of greeting card exchange in the United States as a unique interactive process. Referring to past studies on greeting cards and using greeting card samples collected for this study, I describe the indexical value of the situated practice of sending greeting cards as an act of emotional labor in constituting interpersonal relationships. I also examine the pragmatic functions of greeting card exchange in which social relationships are marked repeatedly and virtual interaction takes place between the sender/receiver of the card.

2. Greeting cards in American society

Greeting cards originated in Europe and North America from the custom of sending handmade

Valentines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These paper Valentines included romantic verses and were exchanged between lovers as Valentine gifts. Around 1820, a collection of short love poems known as valentine writers started to circulate in the Northeast areas of the United States, from which people copied verses to send to others. By the 1840s, German and English chromolithographers developed techniques to mass-produce colored postcards primarily on Christmas and Valentine themes, and it soon became an American habit to send manufactured correspondence with printed verses on holiday occasions.

The popularity of these cards, in one aspect, has been a reflection of the increasing mobility of Americans and their need to stay in touch with far-flung friends and relatives⁴. Manufactured greeting cards also catered to the needs of the changing life styles of the American people. According to Ellen Stern, author of *The very Best from Hallmark*, no one had time to write long, personal letters, but postcards lacked the “from-me-to-you” sentiment of a letter. The greeting card was designed to fill this void (1988: 7). Entering the twentieth century, American manufacturers overtook their European counterparts, with the top three companies in the industry, Hallmark Inc., American Greetings, and Gibson Greetings founded between 1907 and 1914. By this time, the format of greeting cards had been established—a folded piece of paper with pictures on the front and verses inside with a size-matched envelope. With the slowly increasing number of holidays such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Halloween and so on, the custom to send greeting cards to friends and family has become an integral part of American society; maintaining relationships, commemorating life events (graduations, weddings, birthdays, etc.), as well as expressing and defining experiences such as longing and loving.

Historically, American greeting cards, as represented by Hallmark have reflected changing American values as well as aesthetic preferences. Greeting card companies have also responded to public sentiments to commemorate events and to express feelings. For instance, special Mother’s Day cards were made for women who had lost their sons in action during World War II. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Hallmark put out a line of post-crisis products with “support and encouragement,” “hope and cope,” as well as “patriotic” themes within weeks of the incident (Jackson 2005: 14-15). Indeed, sales of greeting cards increased after September 11, as people tend to send more greeting cards to keep in touch during times of distress. As Jackson reported, “greeting cards constitute a socially acceptable and tangible way to express emotion and concern to selected individuals, helping to ritualize the grieving process” (ibid: 13).

Evolving social values can be also traced through changing product lines that the card “artists” produced to meet the need of the market. Responding to growing American cynicism in the late 70s and early 80s, Hallmark created its alternative humor card line called “Shoebox Greetings”

in 1986, with 10 writers and 18 artists working on the products as of 2010. Paying attention to the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in the United States and elsewhere, Hallmark started their "Mahogany" line to cater particularly to their African-American audiences in 1987. The Hispanic market in the United States were recognized with a brand for Spanish language line called "Sinceramente" launched in 2003. Hallmark also featured a line called "Tree of Life" with messages in Hebrew and Jewish symbols to celebrate Jewish holidays such as Passover and Hanukkah. Since 2007, the "Encouragement" or "Recovery" line has catered to cancer patients, former addicts, divorced individuals, dieters and so on, reflecting an American obsession with the therapeutic power of voicing and sharing trauma of all kinds (Jaffe 1999: 125).

Today, there are nearly 2,000 greeting card publishers in the United States alone, ranging from major corporations to small family-run business⁵. Approximately seven billion paper cards are sold annually⁶. On average, 35 cards are purchased every year per household and roughly half are seasonal, while the remaining half are for everyday situations⁷. In price range, cards can cost from \$2 to \$4 and it appears as if there is a card for every relationship, every occasion, every ethnicity, every age group, and every interest group from political parties to alternative life-styles.

3. Studies on greeting cards

While stationary products in general are not usual topics of research, greeting cards have attracted academic attention in the United States, evidence of the fact that greeting cards are an integral part of American life and culture. Previous studies on greeting cards in sociology, popular culture, and communication studies have examined greeting cards mainly from the following two, intertwining perspectives; i.e., greeting cards as a gendered genre and greeting cards as a commodification of emotions.

The exchange of greeting cards has been recognized as a women's genre of practice as more than 80% of those who purchase greeting cards are estimated to be women. In the fields of sociology and social psychology, greeting card communication has been viewed as part of a feminized habitus of kinship maintenance. Di Leonardo (1987), for instance, used the term "kinwork" to describe the labor that women invested in holiday celebrations and greeting card exchange. In her study, greeting card exchange is considered not as part of leisure but as a central practice of labor in the production and reproduction of kinship relationships. In another study, Schrift (1994) conducted an analysis of images and texts printed on the greeting cards to describe how women are represented, especially in the actual cards that they sent to each other. Schrift pointed out that humor cards in particular portrayed women as either objects of sexual desire or as objects of horror, reflecting a certain ideology of women's position in the United

States as their images have been consumed and reproduced through the purchasing of greeting cards.

The latter line of study has its focus on the “industrialized sentiments” that are mass-produced by card manufacturers. Papson (1987) criticized the commercialized and rationalized form of greeting card discourse as well as the corporate invasion into the everyday, private lives of American people. Papson stated that to communicate through greeting cards is to speak through bureaucratic language of spectacle and exaggeration, and for that reason, greeting card communication objectified and fictionalized interpersonal communication (1987: 100). While aligning with Papson’s argument to a certain extent, Jaffe (1999) perceived greeting cards to be occupying an ambiguous status for being both “commodity *and* gift” as well as both “personal *and* impersonal” in nature. Jaffe argued that this ambivalence lies at the heart of the communicative potential of greeting cards, and she stresses the function of commodities and gifts to “symbolically” create and display social identities as well as relationships. Providing an overview of the evolution of the greeting card industry in America, Shank (2004) examined the structures of feelings produced through greeting cards, as well as how the power of economic organizations influenced the ways in which people experience emotions such as love and social connectedness. Finally, taking Hallmark Inc. as an object of study, West (2004) conducted the most extensive research on American greeting card usage, examining how greeting cards are incorporated into personal and private communication while being mass-produced and commercial at the same time.

In the following section, I pursue Jaffe’s lines of argument that greeting card exchange symbolically creates and displays social identities as well as relationships. Using samples of actual greeting cards⁸, I describe the practice of greeting card exchange by examining the ways in which cards are selected, personalized, and sent/received, and finally displayed in semi-public for symbolic interaction.

4. The practice and pragmatics of greeting card exchange

4.1. Selecting the card

Unlike computer-mediated communication in which the message senders simply get online to send a message, the act of exchanging paper greeting cards typically starts with purchasing the card. In American society, greeting cards can be purchased at supermarkets, drug stores, and other large and small retail stores or at specialty shops such as the Hallmark stores found in shopping malls and arcades⁹. These stores usually have greeting card sections wherein an entire isle or a corner of a store is designated as the “card section,” occupied with racks filled with greeting cards (Figure 1). These card racks are typically labeled and categorized by holidays and

events (birthdays, graduations, Halloween, etc.), by relationships ('from daughter to mother', 'lover to lover', 'student to teacher', etc.), or by other occasions of sentimental moments ('Thank you', 'Sorry for not writing', 'Just to say hi', etc.). There may also be card sections with the mixture of these above categories such as 'Happy birthday to a nephew' card or 'I miss you, my friend' card, etc. These main categories may be also subcategorized from serious to humorous, religious to non-religious, generic to ethnic, and card buyers usually end up spending a considerable time at the store, as he/she picks up a card of interest, opens and studies its contents, one card at a time¹⁰.

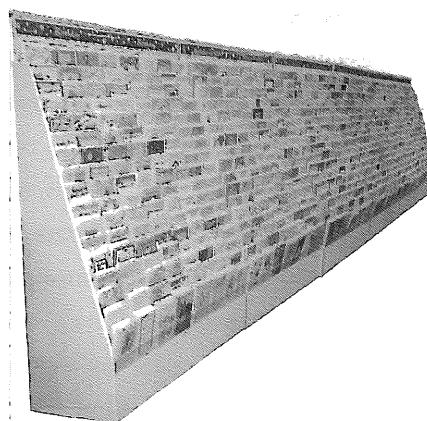


Figure 1. Greeting card racks

Greeting cards are appreciated precisely because of this presumed time and effort that have been put into choosing the card that is supposed to be "perfect" or "just right" for the occasion and the relationship. Unlike the practice of writing original messages, whether on paper or online, the buyer is physically faced with hundreds and thousands of cards from which he or she is to select the one and only message fit for an intended receiver. While selecting the card, the potential buyers of greeting cards are engaged in dialogic interaction with the card content as well as the intended receiver. For this reason, greeting cards symbolically function as the token of one's feelings, even when the receivers do not actually like the card they receive, as they know the sender has thought of them and took the effort to pick out and send the cards.

To take an example, the card shown in Figure 2 (the cover-side on the left and the inside-page on the right) is designed as a birthday card for fathers. On its front-page, the message is written in particularly large bold, print-style font: "Dad-- I know you'll like this card..." Opening the card, the message continues, "It has the biggest type I could find. Happy Birthday!" This message is accompanied with an illustration of a bear (depicted as a father as it wears a tie), holding his glasses as he attempts to read the card that he has received. The image makes fun of the decline of vision which comes along with aging, associating "birthday" with the negative aspects of aging. Yet, at the same time, the phrase, "It has the biggest type I could find" functions to index the time that the card sender has spent in looking for this specific card. As indexed in the text of this card itself, the time and energy spent in finding a specific card adds tangible value to these paper greeting cards as consumers recognize the process of card selection as the symbolic process of "I was thinking of you."

In her study comparing “digital sentiment” as represented by e-card to paper greeting cards, West also states that paper greeting cards index the bodily effort and time of the sender in picking it out and mailing it, while e-greetings seem to function less successfully as this kind of sign, with less emotional value attached (2002: 322).

4.2. Marking social relationships

When selecting certain cards, one may do so by choosing the card by occasion, relationship, or for other sentimental reasons as mentioned above. Occasions such as “happy birthday” and “congratulations” or sentimental feelings such as “I miss you” and “I’m sorry” function as typical reasons for sending greeting cards. Interestingly, relationship such as “grandmother,” “son” or “boss” also function as significant greeting cards categories as many of the cards are designed according to specific relationships. In many of the greeting cards, the front of the card is used as a space to simply declare the sender-receiver relationship, with phrases such as “From Your Daughter,” “For a Special Couple,” “For you, son,” “You’re a One-of-a Kind Teacher.” Thus, the practice of sending greeting cards becomes a declaration and a manifestation of the social relationship between the sender and the receiver. Some of the cards simply print the kinship terms such as “Mother” or “Sister-in-Law” on the front side of the card to accompany some sentimental verses regarding these kin categories in the inside. Under this kinship category of cards, it is not only the individual quality but the social roles as “mothers,” “daughters,” “husbands,” “wives,” “uncle,” and “niece” that are enacted and maintained through the card exchange.

Another feature of the cards is the general emphasis on the uniqueness of the card receivers, as encoded in such adjectives as “special,” “great,” “wonderful” or “dear.” These phrases highlight the particular relationship between the sender-receiver to be unique and unlike any other. As we see in the phrases such as “*To a special friend,*” “*You’re a special Nephew and great to be with too,*” or “*You’re a One-of-a Kind Teacher,*” these references to individual uniqueness often appear in combination with kinship/relationship terms. For example, an anniversary card addressed, “For a Special Couple” with a drawing of a charming couple, features a rhyming verse inside: “This anniversary will be / your nicest by far... // If it is half as nice / as the two of you are!” A Halloween card with comical drawings of pumpkins

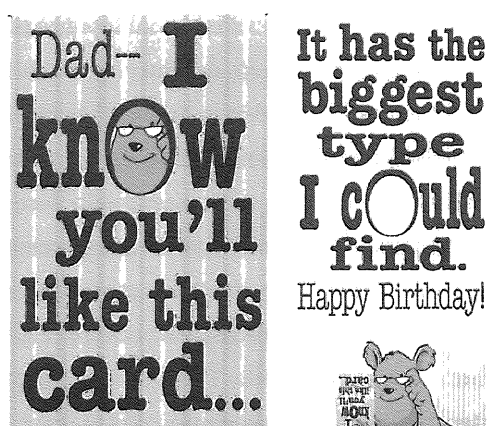


Figure 2. Father's Birthday Card A
(Front-page; left, Inside-page; right)

and ghosts on the front-side is accompanied with the phrase, "For Someone Fun at Halloween" "Witches are cool, / so are ghosts, / Mummies can be, too..." The phrase continues to the inside, "But none of them // is even close / To being as cool as you!" to compliment on the 'fun' and 'cool' characteristics of the card receiver.¹¹

In providing a metalingual analysis of the American concept of "communication" in interpersonal relationships, Katriel and Philipsen (2007: 91) pointed out that being "supportive" and acknowledging and/or providing "positive self-images" of the other is not only a right but an obligation. In his study of the verbal interaction between the host, guests, and audiences on American television talk shows, Carbaugh also described the "collective celebration of the unique self" to be one of the pragmatic dimensions of appropriate interpersonal communication (1996: 136). As evident from the use of adjectives describing the card receivers, we see that not only kinship relations but also the uniqueness and positive images of the other are indexed and embodied in the card exchange. Thus, while the cards themselves may be mass produced, the relationship between the sender and receiver is symbolically marked as being unique and personal. Obviously, the sense of self and its inter-relational significance is not a given, but socially constructed through various interactional and discursive practices. The pre-written texts of greeting cards serve to produce and confirm inter-relational significance over and over again as cards get exchanged.

Another point of interest in the text of the cards is the abundant usage of the second person pronoun "you" as well as the first person pronoun "I." For example, in a 'daughter-to-father' birthday card on fragile paper with a gold print handwritten-style font, the following verse highlights the use of "you": "Because you listened to me, / I grew up knowing / that my words mattered. // Because you let me / speak my mind, / I learned to speak up / for myself. // Because you talked to me / and were truly interested / in what I had to say, / I gained confidence / to go out in the world. // I owe you so much, Dad. / HAPPY BIRTHDAY." Another card stating, "Happy Birthday To You / Cousin" on the front side features the following message in the inside: "I want to send you lots of love / For your birthday / So I'm giving you this card / to send some love your way / You're always fun to be around / And you make me laugh too / So that is why I'm sending / This special card to you // Happy Birthday." Pointing to the use of 'you', Papson states that the greeting card is like advertisements "with pronouns creating a sense of the personal within the context of the general" (1987: 104).

The text of these cards expresses intimacy in the "me-to-you" format as the receiver will evoke the sender as the "writer" of the message, with the heavy usage of shifter pronouns "you" and "I" as well as "this." The usage of these shifters forces the card receivers to slide into the particular moments of their own relationships with the senders. The discursive intimacy

expressed in the card texts functions to create a sense of specificity, especially when inserted with handwritten notes and inscriptions for emphasis, proper nouns such as first names and so on, as we see in the next section.

4.3. Personalizing the card

Once selected, paper greeting cards go under the process of completion with the “personalization” act by the sender. While there are criticisms of mass-produced greeting cards to be impersonal and tacky, a generic card is transformed into a “me-to-you” personal message after the sender has addressed and signed the card. Figure 3 shows an inside page of a Valentine’s card designed to be sent from grandparents to a grandson. On the front of the card is a painting of a red flower, which is accompanied with the script, “For My GRANDSON.” Inside reads the verse, “There aren’t enough / wonderful things to say / about a grandson like you - / not enough words to express / how much I love you. / On Valentine’s Day, / I want you to know / you’re always close to my heart”. As we see in Figure 3, the sender of this card has added the card receiver’s name (Dear XXX) right above the printed verse, and also added the signature, “Love, Grandma XXX” at the end of the verse. This act of addressing and signing the card functions to create the illusion that the sentimental verse created by the “writers” at Hallmark is the original work of the sender. Additionally, we can see that there are handwritten underline marks on the pre-printed sentiments, emphasizing the specific words of the verse. In Figure 3, words such as “grandson like you” or “much I love you” are emphasized by underlining, which leaves an evidential trace that the sender has read the verse, and reflected upon its content as her own words and feelings. Therefore, even though these verses are originally created by the card writers, the card is read by the receiver as if the message has been personally sent from the sender to the receiver. We could see that while the card is mass-produced for thousands of consumers to use for its own particular occasion, the writing of personal names and inscriptions functions to personalize the product¹².

4.4. Displaying the cards

Greeting cards also possess tangible value as they can be read and re-read, kept as keepsakes or as heirlooms, as well as displayed in a semi-public manner. Unlike computer-mediated greetings, the physical/material aspects

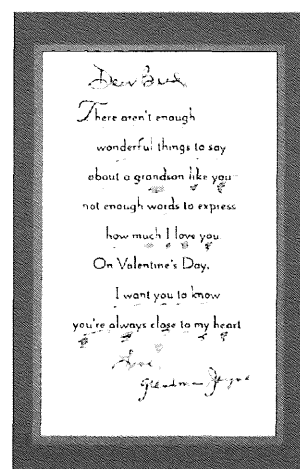


Figure 3.
Card with inscriptions

of paper greeting cards are appreciated not only as they index the time and labor put in by the sender but also because greeting cards are touchable and displayable and thus they serve to connect the sender and the receiver over space and time. This happens in particular, when the card is received and then opened to be read at get-togethers such as birthday parties and wedding showers. Paper greeting cards with their folded format become particularly effective in crossing time and space, as the tangibility of the card allows the sender and the receiver to share the same response to the content of the specific card—the sender upon selecting the card and the receiver upon receiving the same card. This is particularly so with the case of funny or humor cards, that by the act of sending the card, one is also sending a meta-message that the sender knows that the receiver would find the same card to be funny. Thus, the exchange of the card becomes an act of confirmation that the sender-receiver of the card share the same taste and outlook. Likewise, Jaffe explains that the tangibility of the card creates over time and space, a “shared event through which a relationship is understood and enjoyed” (1999: 136).

For instance, the next sample (Figure 4) has an illustration of an injured patient lying on a hospital bed, looking miserable. Above the card reads the message, “Get Well Soon,” which is a typical phrase of sympathy for those sick and troubled. However, once the card is opened to review the inside, the message continues in small weary-looking font, which reads, “Before you become a financial burden on the entire family.” In the case of this card, the simple act of opening of the card functions to turn the supportive meaning of words of encouragement

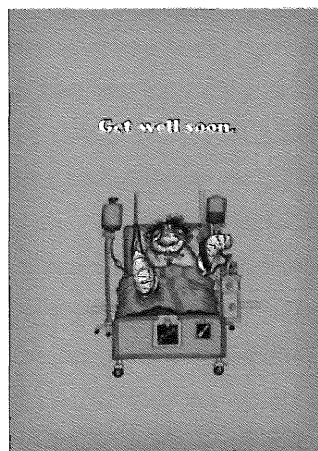


Figure 4. Get well card

into a humorous reverse message of command and pressuring, partly making light of the difficult health insurance situation in the U.S.

In this next sample of a Father’s day card (Figure 5), the front side of the card depicts a photo of President Obama, posing in the Oval Office. The message, “Happy Father’s Day & all the Best!!” is printed in handwriting-style font with a “signature” of President Obama printed beneath the message. Inside the card, a message in stern and business-like Times New Roman font appears, contrasting to the handwriting-style font that indexes ‘casualness’ and ‘closeness’

to the message context. The message reads, “Thought this would really look good on your table.” As in the previous example (Figure 4), this specific card also makes use of the front side of the card to set the stage/plot and the inside to provide the punch-line of the message to create a humorous effect. At the same time, the text written in the inside of the card presupposes that the card will be displayed in public for other people to view.

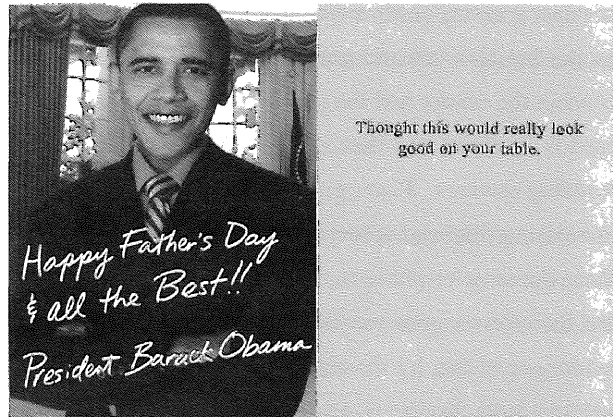


Figure 5. Father's day card B
(Front-page; left, Inside-page; right)

When greeting cards are received and read, they are usually not put away or hidden in drawers but rather get displayed at home or at work, just like family photographs tend to be displayed in these semi-public arenas of American households and workplaces. In the case of the Obama card, this specific message points to the fact that there is a presupposition that the card receiver (the father in this case) will display the card on his desk for his friends, family, or colleague to see and admire.

Likewise, while greeting cards are meant to be sent from “me” to “you” as a personal message, the tangibility and physical formats allow them to possess a semi-public nature. Greeting cards may be opened and read in front of other people just as presents are opened and displayed in the eyes of families and guests. In this perspective, greeting cards are treated as gifts with a semi-public nature dialogically marking the social relationship between the sender/receiver and their taste in a semi-public arena.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of the practice of greeting card exchange in the United States started with the initial inquiry for the reasons why mass-produced paper greeting cards remain a popular means of personal communication. In this study, I hoped to bring into view ways in which the physical materiality of paper greeting cards functions to define and maintain social relationships, express values in a symbolic manner. While computer-mediated communication may gain more popularity in the future, the ways in which social relationships and individual identities are crafted in American society may be slow to change, as we have perceived through the practice and pragmatic usage of paper greeting cards. Whether through everyday exchange

of verbal communication or through the exchange of greeting cards, we as agents-in-society, are constantly constituting relationships through communicative practices.

Notes

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² Twitter and My Space are other popular means of social media, along with Facebook in North America.

³ Changing Demographics and Psychographics of the Greeting Card Market Reveals New Opportunities — and Challenges — for Card Makers and Retailers, February, 2010, accessed on November 10, 2010. <<http://www.marketwire.com>>

⁴ Wendy, Wolofson (2002) Greeting cards, St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g1epc/is_tov/ai_2419100542>

⁵ Within the greeting card industry, Hallmark Inc. and American Greeting share over 85% of the market. Being the leader of the industry, Hallmark makes products in more than 30 languages and distributes its products in over 100 countries, according to U.S. Market Study by Maria E. Gonzales, February, 2006; accessed on October 21, 2010. <http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADF764.pdf>

⁶ Research and Markets: U.S. Greeting Card Industry. Business Wire September 1, 2005. Business and Finance; accessed on October 21, 2010. <www.findarticles.com>

⁷ The most popular seasonal card is Christmas, accounting for 61% of all seasonal cards, followed by Valentine’s Day (25%) and Mother’s Day (4%). Birthday cards are the most popular of everyday cards, occupying 60% of its share, with Anniversaries (8%) and Get well/feel better cards (7%) to follow.

⁸ I would like to thank Brad Lucido for providing the author with his personal greeting cards from his friends and in-laws and to Michiyo Letterman for sharing information on American greeting cards.

⁹ Paper greeting cards can be also purchased on-line.

¹⁰ According to the observation conducted by the author at supermarkets and bookstores in Berkeley, California and Austin, Texas, average buyers of the cards would spend five to fifteen minutes or longer in reading and choosing the cards.

¹¹ Slash marks indicate line change as it appears in the original card print. Double slash marks indicate the change of paragraph as it appears in the original card print.

¹² When purchasing/sending greeting cards online at the Hallmark website, for instance, this “personalization” process can be done prior to purchasing the cards by adding a personal message or changing the pre-written message of the card. <<http://www.hallmark.com/online>>

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