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The Reconceptualization of Valentine's Day in the United States: Valentine's Day as a Phenomenon of Popular Culture

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In the 1840s, Valentine's Day in the United States was rejuvenated, almost reinvented. It transitioned from being an often forgotten Old World saint's day to an immensely popular, unofficial American holiday. This successful transformation of Valentine's Day is demonstrated through its increasing popularity with each passing year, as Valentine's Day is now one of the three greatest gift-shopping days of the current era. Thus, the reconceptualization of Valentine's Day in the United States in the 1840s demonstrates the extent to which an emergent consumer culture shaped a historical ritual, thereby creating a popular cultural phenomenon. The popularization of Valentine's Day is illustrated through the power of advertising, the commodification of the valentine and the way Valentine's Day has become a holiday celebrated by most of society.

Valentine's Day has a variety of historical origins, each one believed to play a part in the development of the holiday. One such origin, which took place in pagan Rome, highlighted two well-known gods: Lupercus, who protected lambs from wolves, and Juno, who watched over wives. By combining the responsibilities of each deity, the Romans matched up eligible men and women for marriage, as if to remind young men to view women as potential marriage partners instead of prey (Zmirak 2005, 47). After Constantine legalized Christianity, the church named the holiday after a bishop who, according to legends, played matchmaker to young Christians (Zmirak 2005, 47). An additional origin of Valentine's Day can be traced back to Chaucer's time, as the poet connected the origins of the holiday to the mating habits of birds, suggesting that on the 14th of February, "every foul cometh ther to choose his mate" (Zmirak 2005, 47). The origin of Valentine's Day can also be seen as far back as Roman times when love matches were made during a mid-February fertility festival (Page and Tate 2005, L7). Additionally, when Pope Gelasius officially declared February 14th as St. Valentine's Day in the fifth century, according to legends, "St. Valentine secretly married young couples against the orders of the emperor who had banned marriage because he believed single men made better soldiers" (Page and Tate 2005, L7). In all probability, there are most likely many additional origins of Valentine's Day that aided in the establishment of the holiday. However, as diverse and numerous as these origins of Valentine's Day may be, it was the 1840s emerging consumer culture in the United States which ensured the survival of the holiday by making it an icon of popular culture.

The transformation of Valentine's Day from a historical ritual to a major popular cultural event in America occurred because of extremely influential advertising, the commercialization of the valentine and the aspiration to make Valentine's Day open to all of society. John Storey (1993) describes popular culture as being "culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people" (7), "mass culture" (10) and "culture which originates from 'the people'" (12).

The immense popularity of Valentine's Day and its mass-produced commodities fit perfectly into the definitions of popular culture as provided by Storey (1993). Also, the fact that merchants created "juvenile valentines" in order to include children in the holiday demonstrates the extent to which the holiday was marketed as being representative of the entire population (Schmidt 1993, 229). Moreover, the production of valentines in the 1840s illustrates the extent to which Valentine's Day originated from amongst 'the people'. In this regard, despite the fact that Valentine's Day commodities were mass-produced, "a store-bought missive often remained a distinctly recognizable product of someone's labour… it displayed a quality of original, personal workmanship," (Geiger 2007, 184) thereby making valentines products created by the people, for the people. Thus, Valentine's Day can be classified as popular culture due to its status as an unofficial holiday in which many people participate, primarily due to the popularity of commercial items being representative 'of the people' and made 'by the people'.

The popularization of Valentine's Day in the United States is due in part to the immense power held by advertising companies in the 1840s. Before 1840, St. Valentine's Day was largely forgotten in the United States and, like various other saints' days that appeared on medieval calendars, seemed doomed to become obsolete (Schmidt 1993, 213). However, the popularity of the holiday increased dramatically in the 1840s, as advertising companies and media outlets spoke with excitement about the newly recognized holiday of Valentine's Day. In particular, the Public Leger, an American newspaper, praised this restoration by stating that people needed "more soul-play and less head-work" and more opportunities that allowed for an "abandon of feeling," and a revitalized St. Valentine's Day was exactly the cure (Schmidt 1993, 214). Thus, advertising utilized the far-reaching power of new media outlets to create consumer demand among an increasingly mobile, consumptive and market-oriented middle class, thereby creating a new way of celebrating February 14th (Geiger 2007, 51).

The reconceptualization of Valentine's Day in the United States was also due to the commodification of the valentine. Americans originally looked to England for inspiration but in the 1840s, the exchange of valentines became established as a lasting American holiday custom (Schmidt 1993, 214). This new ritual was built on the understanding of the valentine as a commodity, as the refashioning of this holiday included a shift in the meaning of the word "valentine." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the word "valentine" meant a person or a relationship. However, in the nineteenth century, the word came to mean an object of exchange. Thus, in the 1840s in the United States, "a valentine had become a commercial product, a piece of merchandise marketed and

consumed," ultimately aiding in the popularization of Valentine's Day (Schmidt 1993, 215).

Likewise, marketing also expanded the range of people included in the Valentine's Day transactions of the 1840s. Even though the holiday historically involved primarily young men and women, the range of individuals included in the celebration of Valentine's Day was expanded in the United States to any and all ages through aggressive marketing techniques directed at both the young and old, consequently increasing the amount of Valentine's Day consumers. Marketing also aided in increasing the popularity of Valentine's Day in the United States by expanding the duration of the festival (Schmidt 1993, 227). As advertisements for valentines stretched from mid January to late February, merchants were increasingly able to "dramatiz[e] the new holiday goods as objects of allure, taste, romance, fantasy, and magic" (Schmidt 1993, 224) by highlighting the wealth and excess made possible by a period of economic growth (Geiger 2007, 83). By capitalizing on an emerging consumer culture, American advertising in the 1840s was instrumental in popularizing Valentine's Day in the United States.

Furthermore, by the 1840s in the United States, valentines became an important commercial endeavour as printing and manufacturing methods advanced, consequently demonstrating the increase in popularity of Valentine's Day. Indeed, the popularity of valentines in "negotiat[ing] awkward social relationships and minimiz[ing] the social risks of rejection" was undeniable, as "producers sold more than three million [valentines] in the United States in 1847" (Herrick 1998, 36). Moreover, the gradual transition to commercially produced valentines was also due to the appearance of the "valentine's writers" (Weinrott 1974, 160). Valentine's Day writers provided amorous forms of expression for those who lacked the ability or desire to come up with their own loving sentiments. These personal, romantic writings of the 'valentine's writers' were widely popular and assisted in the mass popularity of Valentine's Day. As a result of the popularity of Valentine's Day writers and the commodified valentine, by the end of the 1840s, Valentine's Day was clearly established as an unofficial American holiday (Weinrott 1974, 160).

Lastly, the 1840s emerging consumer culture of the United States also influenced the reshaping of Valentine's Day into a mass popular culture phenomenon by enticing merchants and advertisers to expand the range of the holiday to all of society, with the goal of acquiring a larger consumer base. Historically, Valentine's Day in England thrived at an aristocratic level and due to elaborate traditions of consumption, Valentine's Day exhibited "styles and furnishings that were emulated, in turn, by the emergent middle classes-

merchants, tradesmen and professionals" (Schmidt 1993, 212). Through the increasing number of middle-class individuals in England, refined customs of gift exchange would eventually become popularized and would inspire the wider circulation of greetings, love poems and other commodities associated with Valentine's Day in the United States (Schmidt 1993, 212). Thus, even though the origin of Valentine's Day in England had historical connections to the upper class, as witnessed in England, the inspiration for increasing the popularity of Valentine's Day in the United States came from emphasizing middle-class values such as "romantic love, sentimentalism, and fashion" (Schmidt 1993, 209).

Furthermore, one of the ways in which middle class values manifested themselves into the production of Valentine's Day commodities, consequently heightening the popularity of Valentine's Day itself, was through the involvement of Valentine's Day card writers. Through the production of valentines, Valentine's Day writers addressed issues of self-expression, originality and authenticity, and therefore, created an abundance of verses to suit every class and reach every age (Schmidt 1993, 221). Likewise, even though shopping increasingly became viewed as a female preoccupation, Valentine's Day card merchants sought to attract as many customers as they could, regardless of their sex (Geiger 2007, 84). Moreover, valentine cards were also marketed to wealthy individuals of the upper class as merchants presented lavishly expensive valentines in order to raise the standard of fashion and elegance (Schmidt 1993, 229). Thus, through extending the range of Valentine's Day consumers to include all of society, American merchants in the 1840s allowed for an emergent consumer culture to shape a growing popular cultural phenomenon.

Ultimately, the reconfiguration of Valentine's Day in the 1840s in the United States is an early example of how an emergent consumer culture transformed a traditional holiday. In this regard, the reshaping of the popular ritual into a phenomenon of popular culture demonstrates a growing consumer culture's power in affecting the methods of advertising companies. The consumer culture's participation in the commodification of the valentine was demonstrated through their purchasing power, the expertise of Valentine's Day writers, and the ultimate expansion of Valentine's Day to reach all of society.

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