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## It is in the Cards: an analysis of greeting card selection through identity and personality

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It is in the cards: an analysis of greeting card selection through identity and  
personality.

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Honors Project

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**Abstract**

In this exploratory study, personal and social identity were analyzed for their effect on how consumers choose greeting cards. Factors, including personality, relationships, and identity will be qualitatively analyzed to understand people's buying habits. Certain factors, including gender, personality, relationships, type of card, and frequency of receiving and giving cards, will be qualitatively analyzed for frequency. The two theories analyzed were the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Identity Theory (IT).

525 college-aged students were surveyed to examine their purchasing habits of greeting cards. The results showed that the identity of the card giver and the identity of the card receiver influenced the card chosen. It also showed that females are the majority of the card purchasers, and that females used cards to further and maintain relationships. Because of convenience sampling, there was a limitation to the number of participants as well as the age group surveyed. Greeting cards are a societal form of self-expression which allows for identity to be relevant.

**Introduction**

Understanding what motivates consumers to purchase products is crucial from a marketing and psychological perspective. This knowledge allows companies to connect with their consumers in order to determine an advertising strategy based on their customers' wants and needs. In this research, the Identity Theory and the Social Identity Theory will be used to analyze how different aspects of identity motivate a consumers' purchase, which will help to improve greeting card companies' comprehension of their consumers, thus influencing the design of their greeting cards.

Identity is a very broad and subjective topic which is important when analyzing society and how we express ourselves. Society identifies with certain signs or symbols which an

individual may express when purchasing products. The signs and symbols with which a person identifies mirrors their societal identity in certain social groups, influencing their purchase habits.

Consumers purchase items with which they identify, eliciting feedback from social interactions. Our identity affects the resources with which we surround ourselves. When a customer finds an object with which he or she identifies, a sense of validation for this identity may occur. "Identity verification", occurs when one's self-identity matches how society identifies them. (Burke and Stets, 2015) This research also influences how we communicate in our relationships.

Personal identity plays into a consumer's behavior which ultimately impacts their shopping decisions. In this research, personal identity is the specific traits or behaviors that make up the core of identity, without the influence of society or a group. In this study, social or group identity is being observed as one's behaviors and the roles one takes on in a group. An example of personal identity in a group could be how they identify with humor. This idea explains why understanding a consumer's personal identity can affect their product choice and their group identity. To connect with others, one wants to place their identity in a product for the receiver to know that the item was specifically from that person. Greeting cards allow for individuals to interact within a social group while expressing their identity.

SIT and IT explain how one's identity can be influenced by society. By understanding their role in society and within a social group, people can self-categorize themselves more easily, picking a product that reflects their personal traits and characteristics. A product that embodies these theories is greeting cards. With my research and experiment, I hope to take a closer look as to how greeting cards can express identity and are thus influenced by these two theories. By analyzing certain aspects of a consumer's identity, a consumer's shopping habits are affected by

change based on their identity. Understanding these concepts helps explain why certain cards are chosen.

This research is an exploratory study of how identity and personality play a role in one's choice of greeting cards. Factors, including personality, relationships, and identity will be qualitatively analyzed to understand how and why people buy things. Gender, type of card, frequency of receiving and giving cards will be qualitatively analyzed, taking into consideration these factors.

The two theories that are being reviewed in this study are the social identity theory as well as the identity theory. These theories examine one's identity in social groups, while the other explains one's own personal identity and in their roles in life.

## **Background**

### **Identity**

A social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). By knowing one's social identity, consumers understand that according to a situation, they can be a family member, a best friend, or a co-worker. They can narrow their place in society to a specific social group. In the identity theory, the person, or "personal" identity is the categorization of the self in a unique entity, distinct from other individuals (Stets and Burke, 2000).

The consequence of self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between self and other group members (Stets and Burke, 2000). Through the differentiation of these two theories, concepts of both are used when put into a social situation, such as giving a card. When consumers categorize themselves in a social situation, they must be considerate of how their personal role is similar which helps keep them in that group.

“Having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility.” (Stets and Burke 2000).

When a person has a particular role, he or she will make sure that their identity is represented in their environment. This identity includes greeting cards, which is a product that is given to someone else and which is a reflection of their identity.

SIT and IT help in determining and reinforcing the results of my study. The key factors upon which I am focusing are social group identity and the personal or person identity. SIT explains how identity stems from one’s personal preferences. I am working to understand if this thought process is similar when the consumer is buying a product for someone other than themselves. The Identity Theory provides some insight as to how one could use this theory on themselves and on other consumers; the SIT doesn’t explain this.

### **Greeting Cards**

Greeting cards have a lot of significance in society. Greeting cards can be used to maintain relationships and can be viewed as an art form or a way of expression. Given only once a year, or every few months, greeting cards allow for one to express their sentiments to another person. Society places values on self-representation and how we express that through symbols on the greeting cards, as well as the greeting cards themselves (Henry, 1947). Throughout the years, greeting cards have evolved from the homemade card to national household companies, such as Hallmark and American Greetings. With the development of new technologies, greeting cards are seeing a shift from paper cards to e-cards. Understanding consumers’ motivation and behavior will provide useful research in finding ways to keep the industry alive. Companies should be focusing on how their consumers identify with their brands and products to ensure

brand loyalty. Consumers purchase from companies that are parallel to their identity and beliefs. If the company's product matches with their identity, they are more inclined to purchase from that company. This idea reflects that consumers in a certain role will manipulate their environment to mirror their identity.

Consumers tend to fall into predetermined categories by merchandisers which enables the merchandisers and consumers to more clearly define their identity. These predetermined categories coincide with categories into which consumers put themselves to find identity. Self-categorization, as it is called, is equally relevant to the formation of one's identity, in which categorization depends upon a named and classified world (Stets and Burke 2000). The consumer will then match these predetermined categories to their own self-identification. Once this definition is clear, it is possible to narrow the way merchandisers target a consumers' shopping experience. Categories may include gender, occasion, etc. A consumer identifies with a brand or a product that reflects their identity and influences their shopping habits. If a consumer is identified as an ecological buyer, then their purchases can reflect that aspect of their makeup by purchasing greeting cards on recycled paper.

## **Methods**

This survey was conducted in order to explore identity in the selection of greeting cards by college-age students. The purpose of the survey was to explore the degree to which personality and identity influence the selection of greeting cards.

## **Participants**

The participants for this survey were college students at Bowling Green State University primarily between the ages of 18 and 23. College students were used due to convenience sampling and who are presently enrolled at BGSU. While the sample population was restricted,

college students do provide an enlightened perspective due to their interesting developmental age. This age group is newly independent from their parents. It is interesting to observe the degree to which parental figures influence their children's purchases. The possible outlier of this survey, which may produce extreme results, is the occasional unconventional ages of some undergraduate students who are older than 18 to 23 years of age. The participants in the survey were recruited via an e-mail invitation, with a link to the survey embedded in the e mail. To enforce a representative sample of the BGSU undergraduate population, a large and random sampling was used. The participants ranged from students who are employed, who are both full or part time students, as well as unemployed students.

### **Materials**

The study consisted of a 10-minute online survey. A copy of the survey may be found in the Appendix. The questions in the survey asked how personality and relationships influence the choice of a greeting card, how often one buys or receives greeting cards, for what occasions does one purchase greeting cards, how one identifies with the cards they have chosen to give, the effect of price on the card, and some basic demographic questions.

The design of this study involves a self-report survey, with questions concerning greeting card habits. The survey consisted of both multiple-choice answers as well as open-ended short answer responses. The questions were of a subjective and objective nature. The objective questions allowed for participants to choose from given answers to get a basic understanding of the concept. Further questions were asked in a subjective manner to elicit more detailed, personal responses. These types of questions allowed for a wide variety of answers from the participants.

### **Procedure**



The procedure of the study was as follows: the participants received the e mail invitation to take part in the study and to complete the 10-minute survey. After a grace period of 7 days to allow for maximum participation, data was collected. The data as well as the survey were made via the Qualtric program. Frequencies were used and checked with chi-square tests to look for statistical differences between the different groups and other variables. Different variables including gender, employment status, and age were analyzed to observe their effect on the frequency and the type of card that the participants tend to purchase.

## **Results**

Data was analyzed with frequencies and chi-squared tests using Qualtrics software.

Gender was coded sequentially: 1=male; 2 =female; 0=other

## **Frequency**

Test were done to gather basic information concerning the frequency in which participants bought cards from a demographic viewpoint. Employment status was asked and coded sequentially (0=unemployed, 1=employed part time, 2=employed full time) (total=524: unemployed=148, employed part time=339, employed full time=37). Race was another factor that was tested for both frequency and its significance. Race was coded sequentially (0=White, 1=African American, 2=American Indian or Alaska Native, 3=Asian, 4=Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 5=From multiple races, 6=other) (total=523: white=457, African American=25, American indian or Alaska Native=2, Asian=7, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander=2, from multiple races=15, other=15). Age was tested for frequency as well as its significance, and was coded sequentially. (0=18-20, 1=21-29, 2=30-39, 3=40-49, 4=50-59, 5=60 or older) (total=525: 18-20=298, 21-29=204, 30-39=8, 40-49=3, 50-59=8, 60 or older=4). Occasions for giving cards were also tested for frequencies and significance and was also coded sequentially (0=birthday,

1=holiday, 2=major life event, 3=other) (birthday=295, holiday=92, major life event= 48, other=90). This analysis gave an overview of the population that was sampled and demonstrated how results might be skewed one way or another due to the population sampled. Table 1 describes the race of the participants, the age groups of the participants, as well as the occasion for which greeting cards are bought.

[Insert Table 1]

### **Occasions**

Participants were asked for information to identify the occasions for which they purchased greeting cards. The first question was quantitative, with the choices coded sequentially. As can be seen in Table 1, there is a wide variety of occasions from which the participants chose. The second question regarding occasion was a subjective qualitative one, asking for what other occasions, besides the ones mentioned above, would someone purchase a greeting card for someone. As shown in table 3, there were several different answers that each gender chose, including birthdays, get wells, and “just thinking of you”.

### **Male Consumers vs. Female Consumers vs. Others**

Chi-square tests and frequencies were done with a number of factors in order to gain a wide perspective by gender as to the purchase of greeting cards. In the sample of participants (n= 524: male= 119; female=390 other=15), the results were skewed more towards females. The chi-square test between gender and frequency of giving cards was tested and frequency was coded (monthly=0; few times a month=1; yearly=2). There were significant results between females and how often one gives cards (p=0.18; monthly=93, few times a year=43, yearly=254). There were also significant results from females from a chi-square test between gender and how often

one receives cards ( $p=.003$ ; monthly=24, every few months=180, yearly=186). As shown in figures 2 and 3, there is a large disparity between the genders.

[Insert Figure 1 and 2]

### **Personal identity in relationships**

Personality is a part of our identity that influences everything from our shopping habits to our relationships. In this study, personal identity was taken into account to examine the types of greeting cards college students purchase. Personal indicators of cards were coded (0=funny; 1=sentimental; 2=simple; 3=flashy) and these categories were used to find how the subjects portrayed their personalities in cards. The most frequently bought cards were “funny” cards, and this choice played a significant role in the quantitative reasoning as to which cards were chosen.(funny=222; sentimental=129; simple=139; flashy=9) A chi-square test was done on gender and category of card chosen, which produced less significant results. ( $p=.078$ ). As you can see from Table 1, an overwhelming number of females purchased “funny” cards. Qualitative results from the survey provided support for these quantitative results. Between the two genders, personal identity played a big role in the choice of cards. One white male agreed that personal identity played a role but added “I think masculinity has a large role”. Some of the responses to this question were in reference to personal identity as well as the relationship with the person to whom the card was being sent, which, when combined, made a more significant impact. Another question the participants were asked was how one’s important relationships affected the type of card chosen. The majority of the responses from both male and female participants stated that relationships do matter. This question enabled the participants to elaborate on how those relationships affect their choice of card. Many participants expressed that greeting cards for family differed from greeting cards for friends. One male participant expressed “I change up how I communicate with the person depending on who they are”. Many participants also expressed

how they normally purchase one category of card (funny, sentimental, etc.) for friends, but purchase a different category for family.

[Insert Table 2,3]

### **Personality War**

Identity is subjective and has several different facets that are perceived differently by each consumer. When purchasing a card, the question that comes to mind would be the following: with which personality traits do the consumer want to identify in the card? These responses are qualitative and taken from the questionnaire. The participants were asked how their own personality traits or the personality traits of the receiver play into their purchase decisions. Responses were color coded to indicate whether their responses were the following: their own personality, the personality of the card recipient, or both.

The types of cards were coded as follows: homemade cards=0, store bought paper cards=1, online E cards=2, other=3. The chi square test was used to measure the significance between the type of card and gender. Significant results were found between females and types of cards (chi-square test  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ ,  $n=390$  homemade cards=66, store bought paper cards=313, online E cards=5, other=6).

### **Discussion**

The present findings in this study suggest that there is a significant relationship between the personal identity, social identity, and relationships when shopping for a greeting card. The qualitative questions in the survey asked how role plays a part in one's choice of greeting cards, if the personality of the recipient or the buyer is taken into consideration.

There was an equal mix between responses for the females who participated in this study, which said that the recipient's personality was considered, or both the recipient and the buyer's

personality were taken into consideration. This finding relates back to the social identity theory as well as the identity theory; once a consumer associates with an identity, that identity is sought out to be represented in greeting cards. In this situation, the buyer is self-categorizing when purchasing a card. They must choose whether they pick a card that reflects their identity and personality or one that reflects the recipient's identity and personality. The buyer must choose how they want their identity to be exhibited on the card. As shown on Table 3, several responses to this question indicated that the buyer's personal identity and the recipient's personal identity were similar, so both were taken into consideration.

For male recipients, there was a mix of both influences from the three categories of personal identity. Through the social identity theory as well as the identity theory, one understands their identity within a group. This identity might change, based on the group and for whom the consumer is buying. In these situations, one could activate one identity rather than another and think less about the effect this has on others on the group (Stets and Burke 2000). These results from the study demonstrate this theory, that for some people a card is reflective of identity without much thought of the receiver.

The consumer has chosen to identify with the card and to portray that identification to the card recipient. The research supports the idea that identity affects one's choice in greeting cards. It supports the idea that the consumer wants to portray their identity, as well as the recipient's identity. This is the act of maintaining a relationship while expressing self-reflection in society.

Another significant finding was between gender and factors such as the type of card, the giving of cards, and the receiving of cards. This study demonstrates that females are more likely to give and receive cards. As can be seen in Table 3, many female participants' answers to the survey included giving cards to make a person feel loved, to make them feel better, further their

friendship, or to just keep in communication. This finding plays into one's role in a group through the identity theory, in that certain goals are set in these social groups and the individual has accomplished this by purchasing a greeting card (Stets and Burke 2000). As the research shows, females are the larger target market for the greeting card industry. A female in a societal group might feel inclined to give a greeting card to express those emotions mentioned in the previous section.

A series of questions was asked as to the reasoning behind giving a greeting card. Participants answered in a variety of ways, but the underlying message was to communicate a message. Whether for a special occasion or "just because", the act of giving a greeting card brings up the question whether the act of giving a greeting card is a social obligation. As mentioned in the identity theory, one acts according to the identity with which they identify in certain groups (Stets and Burke 2000). This behavior also connects to the social identity theory, as one acts accordingly to societal norms, giving greeting cards on significant dates. A few participants responded that social obligation was the motivation for their card giving. They followed their identity in society of a card-giver and just gave cards, not using the cards to communicate any other identity.

Social obligation was not as big a factor in the choice of card as was thought. The results of the study indicate that card giving is a significant event for which the consumer gives thought and is given with intent.

### **Research Limitations**

While this research was insightful, there were some limitations. The sample size that was measured was limited to college students in a specific geographic area, and predominantly females took the survey. The limitations of the survey play a significant role in the chi-square

tests between gender and other factors. A larger and more diverse sample size would have warranted more accurate and representative results.

### **Further Research**

The research from this study can be used in the future to analyze consumer behavior of greeting cards. More research can be done to further the application of the social identity theory and identity theory from the consumers' perspective. Despite limitations, this survey may be used to analyze consumer behavior in the purchase of greetings cards as to the companies' awareness of how their consumers identify with their company and its products. Greeting cards are an art form that can be used as a form of communication of identity. With the greeting card industry on the decline, what more can be done to keep the customers connected with the product? More research would be helpful to explore how the greeting card industry is changing with the times.

Greeting cards have been a staple in society for centuries as a form of self-expression. They are used for cultivating and continuing relationships. This study indicates that there are factors that affect one's choice in greeting cards. The SIT and the IT explain how societal and personal roles shape one's identity.

Table  
Sample Demographics

Race	Frequency	Age	Frequency	Employment Status	Frequency	Occasion	Frequency
White	457	18-20	298	Unemployed	148	Birthday	298
African American	25	21-29	204	Employed part time	339	Holiday	90
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	30-39	8	Employed full time	37	Major life event	48
Asian	7	40-49	3	Total	524	Other	90
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2	50-59	8			Total	524
From multiple races	15	60 or older	4				
Other	15	Total	525				
Total	523						

Table  
Categorization of last card given

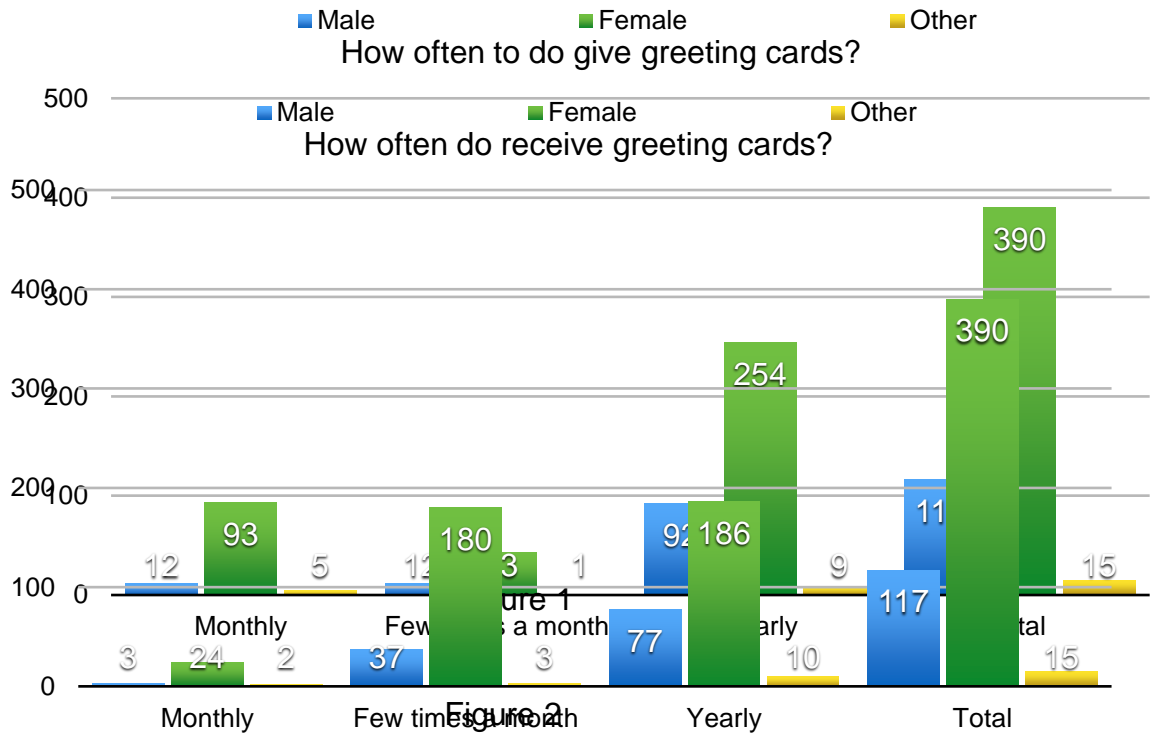
	Male	Female	Other	Total
Funny	56	162	4	222
Sentimental	19	108	2	129
Simple	36	97	6	139
Flashy	2	6	1	9
Other	5	18	2	25
				524



Table 3

Role of Personality

Male	Female	Other
<p>I feel that the card speaks for me and is a reflection of me, so personality plays a large role</p>	<p>The other person's personality plays a larger role, but I still have to like the card in order to buy it.</p>	<p>Their personality through my lens allows me to decide how much I will go into thinking of what will make them laugh or feel appreciated.</p>
<p>It is based off of my connection with the person who is receiving the card</p>	<p>I usually pick something i think the other person would like but keep my personality in mind.</p>	<p>Usually I try to find something that I think the person I'm giving it to will enjoy.</p>
<p>I feel like my personality is a major influence on my card choice</p>	<p>I buy cards that reflect my personality and the relationship I have with the card receiver</p>	<p>Significantly</p>
<p>It plays a significant role. I don't buy a card unless if it's something that accurately reflects how I feel.</p>	<p>I typically make my own cards which is my personality because it is crafty and has more value than one I bought</p>	<p>I'm more likely to choose a card that I like!</p>
<p>I look for images and words that either illustrate my feelings and ideas in ways that I cannot myself or express sentiments that I would also say.</p>	<p>My personality drives the overall style of the card in terms of complexity, and how close I am if to the person if I write an additional message.</p>	



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## Appendix

### Survey

How often do you **receive** greeting cards?

Monthly

Every few months

Yearly

How often do you **give** greeting cards?

Monthly

<https://bgsu.az1.qualtrics.com/Q/EditSection/Blocks/Ajax/GetSurveyPrintPrev>

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Few times a month

Yearly

Generally, how do relationships in your life affect your choice of cards? (e.g., daughter, son, mother)

Anything else to add?

Think about the last greeting card you gave. What type of card was it?

Homemade cards

Store bought paper cards

Online E cards

Other (specify)

The most common reason to give a greeting card is because there is a underlying social obligation (e.g. birthday, holiday). Think about the last greeting card you sent. What other reasons besides social obligation did you send that card?

Think about the last card you gave. To what extent did it reflect your personality versus the personality of the person the card was for?

Generally, how does your personality play a role in your choice of card?

What is your race?

White

African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

From multiple races

Other (please specify)

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

Some college but no degree

Associate degree

Bachelor degree

Graduate degree

Employment status

Unemployed

Employed part time

Employed full time