

Dal News

Commitment, commerce and Valentine's Day

February's day of love is big business

Katie McDonald - February 7, 2012



It happens every year! (Daniel Moyle photo, used under CC license from Flickr)

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There are those who bask in the idea of exchanging cards and gifts with the ones they love on Valentine's Day. And then there are others who shudder at the thought of chocolate-covered strawberries and red carnations.

But like it or not, February 14 rolls around every year and begs the question: is Valentine's Day a reason to celebrate love or just a superficial holiday feeding the pockets of greedy corporations?

What's in a gift?

Marina Adshade, assistant professor in the Department of Economics, teaches the widely popular class, "Economics of Sex and Love" and says Valentine's Day, like many other holidays, has expanded beyond its original philosophy. Parents are buying gifts for their children, daughters are buying gifts for their mothers, and the men are no longer writing sonnets or hitching up the horses for an afternoon buggy ride.

"Valentine's Day is a coordinated gift-giving effort," she explains. "Corporations love this because there's a certain level of competitiveness and 'Keeping up with the Joneses' that make people feel the need to spend more."

Dr. Adshade says people may not realize it, but they're silently sizing themselves up against their peers when it

comes to gifts – whether it's dinner, a chocolate delicacy, or a diamond.

“People are naturally competitive, and corporations and advertisers know this,” she explains. “Plus we're just consuming more of everything now. The traditional card doesn't suffice.”

Baby, what's your sign

Valentine's Day gifts can also be used as a signal that a person is serious about a relationship, explains Dr. Adshade.

“A cheap gift, in terms of expense or time spent putting it together, sends the receiver a signal that the sender isn't that serious about their relationship,” she says. “So even someone who really doesn't care for the holiday might be unhappy when they receive either no gift or a cheap gift.

“This isn't because they really care about the value of the gift but because it conveys to them information about the intent of the person they are dating.”

The commercialization of Valentine's Day, according to Dr. Adshade, is tapping into this idea that if someone really cares about staying in a relationship, they need to signal that intention to the other person by spending money on a gift.

Great expectations

Sean Mackinnon, a PhD student in the Department of Psychology, studies perfectionism in romantic relationships. He says that if people feel like they're being held to excessively high standards by society of their partner, they may become resentful.

“There is a dark side to Valentine's Day,” he says. “Many people feel obligated to do something nice for their partner on Valentine's Day; in other words, they feel as though they are being forced to express love to live up to societal standards.”

Whether a person feels compelled to show affection on Valentine's Day or whether they're using it as an opportunity to express their genuine affection depends on the quality of the relationship, Mr. MacKinnon says.

“Strong, high-quality relationships are unlikely to be hurt by Valentine's Day, but the flaws in more fragile relationships may become all the more apparent when the pressure is on,” he explains.

That being said, Mr. MacKinnon acknowledges that February 14 means different things to different people and in some circumstances can be very positive.

“Expressing love and appreciation for another person is a valuable, relationship-enhancing quality, regardless of what day it is performed.”

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