

# Promoting love can punish sales

March 12 2014

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Valentine's Day has come and gone. But those images of romance are still everywhere : a happy couple holding hands in an eharmony ad, two lovebirds sharing a tender kiss in a Nikon camera commercial.

Advertising filled with romantic images, featuring "happy togetherness" in magazines and stores as well as on television and websites might resonate with you if you have a special someone. But if you're single, a new study shows you're not buying.

New research from consumer psychologist Lisa Cavanaugh, assistant professor at the USC Marshall School of Business, reveals how the prevalent marketing practice of highlighting relationships in advertising and promotions can have substantial negative consequences for sales and [consumers'](#) willingness to indulge themselves. Cavanaugh's research is presented in "Because I (Don't) Deserve It: How Relationship Reminders and Deservingness Influence Consumer Indulgence," forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

Marketers regularly remind consumers of valued social relationships—romantic couples, close friends and family—in order to influence choice and consumption. Cavanaugh's research explores an understudied influence—relationship reminders—and identifies a novel factor—perceived deservingness—that predicts consumers' propensity to indulge.

She found that reminding consumers of relationships they don't have reduces their perceptions of deservingness and triggers them to restrict

their own indulgent consumption. That means they spend less money, choose lower-end brands of products and opt for lower-calorie foods. Those effects may be particularly profound during certain times of year, such as holidays and wedding season, when the portrayal of relationships is especially prominent in advertisements.

"Marketers may need to rethink the prevalent practice of using images of idealized relationships to sell everything from cookies to cameras," Cavanaugh said, "because many consumers don't have those relationships. By reminding people of relationships they don't have, marketers inadvertently make consumers feel undeserving—less worthy of treating and rewarding themselves."

This lack of perceived deservingness causes consumers to restrict their own indulgence across a wide range of products. Cavanaugh's studies show that reminding consumers of relationships they don't have, whether through a promotional email, an advertisement or a conversation in a retail store, changes which brands they buy. The effect on indulgence is not simply restricted to the brand or product advertised.

"Perceived deservingness carries over to affect subsequent choices across multiple product categories, everything from the foods you choose to the amount of money you're willing to spend on clothing, accessories and even personal care products across retailers," Cavanaugh said.

With the number of marriages at a historical low (6.8 marriages per thousand between 2009 and 2011) and less than half of all adults consumers nationwide being single, do marketers need to be checking the relationship status of their customers on Facebook? Should companies like J.Crew think twice before sending January email blasts to women titled "Just got engaged?" and "Said yes?"

"By reminding consumers of relationships they do not have, marketers may not be simply mis-targeting but also self-handicapping," Cavanaugh said. "Marketers may think of these relationship reminders as aspirational, that is, suggesting that their brand or product will be able to help you achieve the type of life you've always wanted. But in fact, the reactions of consumers I've observed in my research tell a very different story—relationship reminders often cause consumers to feel undeserving and restrict indulgence. Singles need to get some love from marketers, too."

In seven experiments, Cavanaugh used different study designs and types of relationship reminders (advertisements, greeting cards, magazine articles and scenarios), measured multiple indulgent choices (personal care products, clothing and accessories) and tested the hypotheses with student and adult populations. Her findings demonstrate the robustness of the effect of deservingness on indulgence.

In one study conducted during the week before Valentine's Day, each consumer viewed electronic greeting cards that emphasized one of two close relationship types, either romantic or platonic. Next, the participants were presented with a shopping task, choosing from economy, mid-range or higher-end brands of lip balm, shampoo, hand cream and fragrance. Finally, they indicated their current relationship status.

The results surprisingly revealed that reminders of romantic relationships caused single consumers to choose fewer high-end [personal care products](#) than their coupled counterparts. But the implications reach beyond the romantic relationship. When single consumers were reminded of close platonic relationships, they indulged as much as coupled individuals because singles have that type of valued relationship.

Widespread images in popular culture indicate singles are supposed to

console themselves with consumption. Who can forget the scenes from movies like "Bridget Jones' Diary" and "Sex and the City," that show sad singles like Bridget Jones polishing off an entire quart of ice cream or Carrie Bradshaw drowning her single gal sorrows with some NYC retail therapy? It seems like singles should indulge more, right? Cavanaugh says not necessarily.

"That misconception is what makes these findings so fascinating," Cavanaugh said. "This evidence regarding perceived deservingness as a driver of indulgence runs counter to what existing theories and pop culture might predict about the salience of social relationships and indulgence. It is commonly assumed that when people lack valued relationships, they will feel lonely or sad and indulge more, through shopping or eating. My theory and findings based on deservingness suggest a very different pattern of behavior: Individuals choose in ways consistent with their perceptions of deservingness."

Cavanaugh noted the importance of distinguishing between how people feel (affective reactions) and how they feel about themselves (deservingness). Previous studies have focused on the former. "While perceiving oneself as less deserving may sometimes be accompanied by negative feelings, it is the perceptions of deservingness but not feelings or mood that most accurately predict whether indulgence occurs," she explained.

In her report, Cavanaugh made some specific recommendations for how marketers could improve their impact with advertising and product placement as well as direct marketing. When promoting indulgent products, marketers need to pay attention to the context of their advertising and product placement in television shows and movies. Specifically, Cavanaugh said, marketers of indulgent products may try to skew their marketing and may fare better by placing ads or products in shows or episodes focused on more general platonic relationships

(friendships, neighbors or co-workers) that consumers are likely to have rather than exclusive pair relationships (romantic couples or best friends) that they may not have.

However if marketers know a consumer's [relationship status](#), direct marketers could consider systematically varying the image (romantic couple vs. platonic others) used on a catalog cover or in a promotional email that encourages them to click through to shop and treat themselves, Cavanaugh suggested. The study should also provide a cautionary lesson to sales representatives who call consumers about promotional upgrades. Telemarketers should be careful about making assumptions or using relationship-related language or references to a spouse or kids that may remind consumers of relationships they lack.

"Given the prominent role that deservingness and relationships play in consumer choice," Cavanaugh concluded, "continued research on relationships and perceived deservingness would benefit both consumers and marketers alike."

Provided by USC Marshall School of Business

Citation: Promoting love can punish sales (2014, March 12) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-sales.html>

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